

ILLUSTRATIONS BY MIO LINZIE

**ALPHA
CREEK**

**TOBY HENDY
LEN VLAHOS**

**A
L
P
H
A**

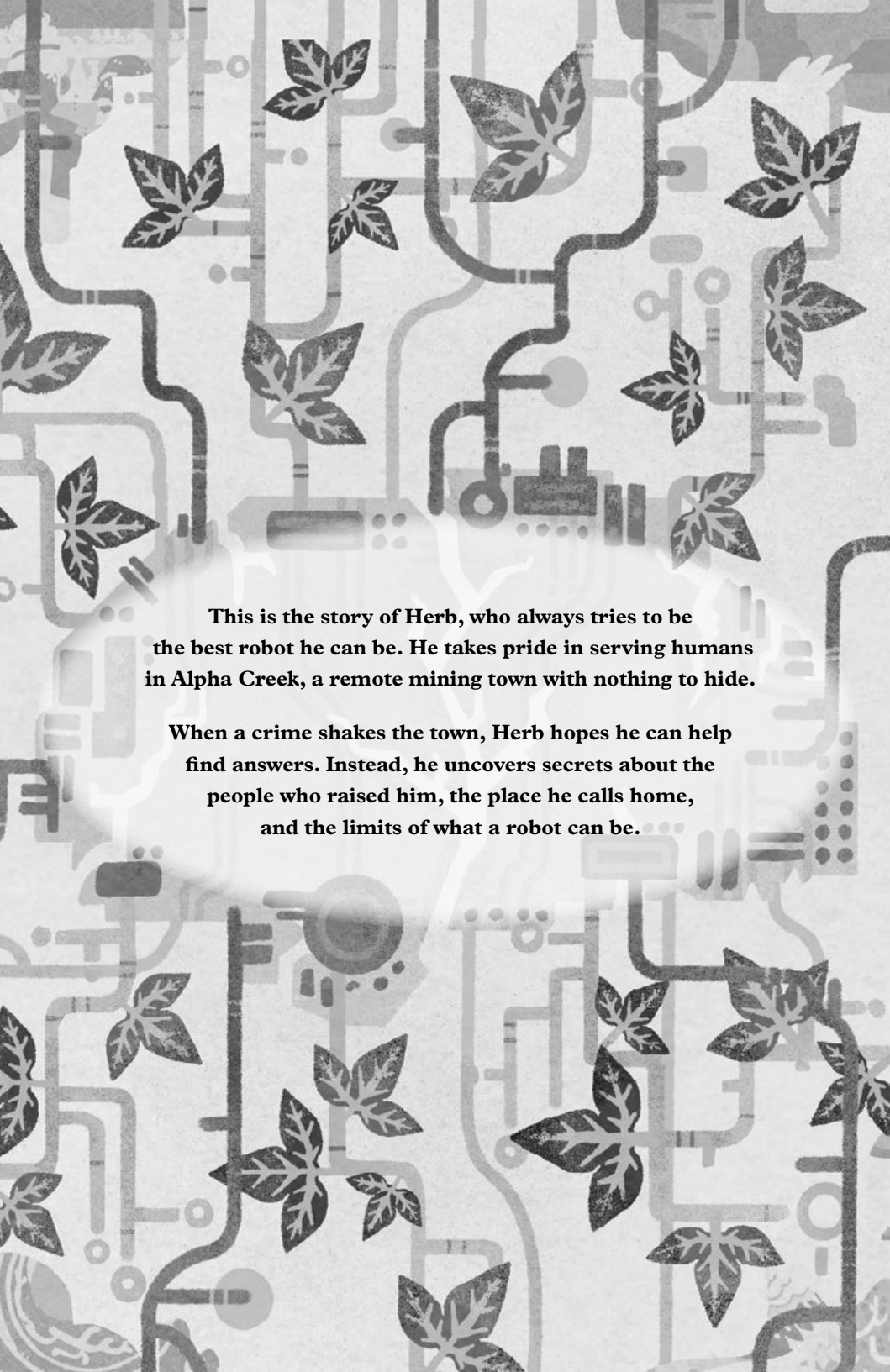
**C
R
E
E
K**



TOBY HENDY
LEN VLAHOS

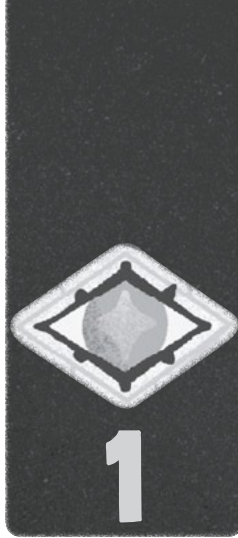
ILLUSTRATIONS BY MIO LINZIE





This is the story of Herb, who always tries to be the best robot he can be. He takes pride in serving humans in Alpha Creek, a remote mining town with nothing to hide.

When a crime shakes the town, Herb hopes he can help find answers. Instead, he uncovers secrets about the people who raised him, the place he calls home, and the limits of what a robot can be.



HERB

My foot catches on a vine as I run out of the house. It's a strawberry plant that has sent out runners, as if trying to escape the garden bed. Chris, who is waiting for me outside, sees me wobble before my stabilisers kick in; he walks over. I've dropped the ball I was carrying, and Chris picks it up.

"Hello, Herb."

"Hello, Chris."

We are meeting to spend time in the sun and replenish our solar reserves. I brought the ball with me because I am keen to try out a new activity: playing catch. We settle into a rhythm of tossing the ball to one another. He throws, I catch. I throw, he catches.

"I'm not sure I understand the purpose of this game," Chris says.

"They told us at school that humans derive pleasure from playing catch," I answer.

Chris doesn't respond. He just throws the ball back. I don't really see the purpose either, but it is interesting to see how long we can go without letting the ball touch the ground.



My internal counting software tells me we are at forty-seven consecutive catches.

“Why did the robot cross the road?” I ask.

Chris holds the ball before his next throw and stares at me.

“We cross the road when there is a need to,” he answers, looking confused.

“It is a joke, Chris.”

“A joke?”

“Yes, something said or done to provoke laughter or cause amusement.”

“I know what a joke is,” he says. “I’ve just never heard a robot tell one before.”

“I am trying something new. ‘The more humanlike the Companion Robot, the happier the human,’” I say, quoting one of our mantras at school.

Chris throws the ball again. “So why *did* the robot cross the road?” Chris asks.

“To get to the other side.”

Chris frowns at me. This is an emotional response we learned to master in school. *Humans need visual clues to interpret what you’re thinking.* “That sounds very much like my answer.”

I’m about to respond when Pierre bursts out of the house. He wears blue denim pants and a white shirt with buttons up the front. Pierre is a very expressive human. With just a glance, I can see he is distraught.

“Go home to your owner, Chris. Go quickly.”

I have just thrown the ball to Chris, but hearing an order from a human, even one who is not his owner, supersedes a silly game. The ball hits the ground as Chris turns and runs in the direction of the home to which he has been assigned. He leaves without saying a word.

“Is everything all right?” I ask Pierre.

He puts a finger to his lips. I have learned that this is a hand gesture indicating I should be quiet. I am quiet. A good robot obeys.

Walking briskly to his ute, Pierre opens the passenger door. He waves his hand emphatically, indicating I am to get in. I get in.

I recently watched an American movie and learned that people in that country call utes “pickup trucks,” which sounds strange to me. Who or what are they picking up? I am thinking about this when Pierre gets in the driver’s seat and closes the door.

“This is going to seem odd, Herb, but I need you to put this over your head.” He is holding a hessian sack in his hands, identical to the one that holds potatoes in our pantry. I look at the sack and then at Pierre. The dome light from the interior of the ute shines off his bald crown. The intensity of his eyes would frighten me if I didn’t know Pierre as well as I do.

In front of us, through the windshield, I see Rosemary in the kitchen window. She doesn’t seem to notice us; she is just staring straight ahead. Even out here I can smell something burning in the frying pan. A Companion Robot’s senses—sight, sound, smell, touch—are orders of magnitude more sensitive than those of a human.

I take the sack and put it over my head. It’s a peculiar sensation. The material lets enough light filter through that I am not in complete darkness; I find myself staring at the braided fibres of the hessian. I smell faint whiffs of green potatoes, the kind that have been in storage for too long and start to develop toxins. At school, I learned this happens because potatoes, when they are exposed to light, begin to produce chlorophyll, the green pigment that allows plants to harvest energy from the sun via photosynthesis.



At first, I wonder if we're using the sack because there is a surprise waiting for me somewhere, but Pierre's driving is fast and aggressive and he offers no conversation. I feel each bend in the road as the acceleration pushes me into the seat cushion. I try to remove the sack from my head, but Pierre reaches over and swats my hands back down to my lap.

"Just a little longer," he says.

For the most part, the road feels flat, which means we are likely on the highway. After a brief decrease in speed and a left turn, the ride turns bumpy. We are now, I presume, travelling on an unpaved surface. Eventually, we slow all the way down and come to a stop. Pierre removes the sack. It takes my synthetic irises a moment to expand, adjusting to the sudden change in brightness.

I glance down at my wrist and read my GPS coordinates. The numbers are outside my range of familiarity; I don't think I've ever been this far from home. All I can deduce is that we have travelled north.

I turn to Pierre. "Where are we?"

"Just a short stop to stretch our legs," Pierre answers as he gets out of the ute. "We still have a long way to go."

"Stretch our legs" is a common human phrase that doesn't apply to me. Pierre may need to flex his leg muscles, tendons, and ligaments to feel more comfortable, but my metallic limbs need no stretching. It's a good thing when humans forget our differences; it means they are accepting us. I jump down from the seat and stand next to Pierre, then lift my leg onto the cargo tray, pretending to stretch.

I take in my surroundings. The foliage is lusher than at home; rainforest trees scramble toward the sunlight, and ferns bend down in a trail of arcs. The road on which we have been driving is a dusty trail that tapers into the darkness, and a dark

ALPHA GREEK

cut-out in the earth breaks a green mossy slope. Two rusted ore carts sit on rails, but the track is covered by sticks and weeds, leading me to believe we are at the mouth of a small, abandoned, underground mine, one of dozens in this part of Australia. The tracks are so rusted they are hard to distinguish from the red Australian dirt. I hear water nearby.

Ivy would love it here; she would run into the forest, or maybe even the mine, and explore. She is inquisitive, daring, and brave. Three things I am not.

While I am looking around, Pierre opens the passenger door to the ute and removes something from the glove box. I am a few metres away, but I can still see he has taken out an older model mobile phone. It's not the model he usually carries. He walks a bit further away and uses the phone to make a call, pacing behind a group of trees as he does. I can't hear what he is saying because he is speaking softly and facing away from me, almost as if he doesn't want me to overhear. His manner suggests he's agitated. Pierre shouldn't worry though; I am programmed to keep private information confidential, and, besides, I exist to support him.

"If this is not our final destination," I say when he finishes the call and returns to the ute, "then where are we going?"

"Just on a short holiday, son," he replies curtly, seemingly distracted.

Many years ago, Rosemary and Pierre insisted Ivy and I call them Mum and Dad. It was a strange request, but we obliged. Well, I obliged. Ivy reminded them we are robots and that they could not possibly be our parents. "We have no parents," she said, "nor are we brother and sister. We are simply two Companion Robots." This is a true statement.

"But we made you," Rosemary told Ivy. This is also true. We are part of a trial testing the feasibility of a new type of robot.



Ivy and I were the first two Companion Robots in the latest generation to be unveiled to the public, predecessors to Chris and the others that followed. There are twelve of us in total, all living here in Alpha Creek. Once the powers that be determine we are functioning optimally, the rest of the world will be able to get their own Companions. That's why I'm always on my best behaviour. Sometimes news crews come to town asking neighbours what they think about us, and it makes me feel good when they say nice things.

The Companion Program was Rosemary's brainchild. She developed the software that defines who we are, work that had already made her famous in the field of robotics and earned her more than two dozen patents. Pierre built our casings, a blend of metals, plastics, silicone, and wires that forms our bodies. So I suppose it is natural for Rosemary and Pierre to think of us as their children. It's why, I presume, they keep us for themselves rather than assigning us to other humans as Companions.

"And where is the holiday, Dad?" A robot's need to question everything must seem relentless to humans. We are taught to close logical arguments. All of them. Lessons on Boolean logic, like telling true from false, are some of my earliest memories.

Pierre doesn't answer. I register sadness in his light green eyes. As I mentioned, he is very emotionally expressive. Humans refer to this as being an "open book." It's a phrase I have always liked.

"Will Ivy and Mum be joining us?" I ask, intentionally changing the subject. This is something we learned in school, to change the topic of conversation when humans become agitated, confused, or unresponsive.

Again Pierre doesn't answer. That is two consecutive questions with no response, and it fills me with a feeling akin to how humans describe the feeling of anxiety, only robots cannot

experience anxiety. I chalk the feeling up to a faulty line of code. I make a mental note to mention it to Rosemary when we return home.

“Dad?” I try again. “Will Ivy and—”

“No,” he interrupts. His curt response stops me from pressing the issue any further, though I have a burning desire to learn more.

Pierre rifles through a bag on the flatbed of the ute, pulling out a knife and a set of screwdrivers.

“Give me your wrist,” he says. I give him my wrist.

He makes a thin incision with the blade, parting my silicone skin. He reaches in and unscrews a small component, my GPS transmitter. Holding the transmitter, he jogs to the mine entrance, bends his arm behind his shoulder, and throws the transmitter forcefully inside. Then he reaches into his pocket, removes the unfamiliar mobile phone, and throws it into the mine, too.

This is very curious. Why would he remove my transmitter? Why would he throw it and a mobile phone into the mine? I see all this, but I don’t protest. If Ivy was here, she might have stopped him, or at least tried to. But that’s not what a good robot does. Still, these are strange things for Pierre to do.

We get back in the ute, and this time I don’t have to wear the sack. I don’t recognise the road anyway.

Pierre rebuilt the ute’s engine almost from scratch. For more than a year he tinkered with it in the small workshop next to Rosemary’s lab. Parts would arrive by post, some as small as custom-sized nuts and bolts in a tiny bag, others as large as a new carburettor. Little by little, the ute took shape. It was fascinating to watch, like seeing a jigsaw gradually forming an image. I asked if I could help, but he told me that he found joy in the process of solving his own puzzle. When he was done,



though, he let me help him paint it. Pierre's father was a car mechanic, so it must be in his DNA. It's strange that robots have no DNA. Though I suppose we can recompile our source code on another robotic body. Would this be a kind of procreation? I don't know.

Pierre is truly a craftsman. After all, he made me. My body is humanoid; I have freckled skin, orange hair five centimetres long, and white teeth and pink gums that allow me to smile. I can talk and run and laugh. Even my neural net's architecture mimics a human brain.

I run my finger along the gap the incision has left in my wrist. Lubricant leaks out, but there is no blood. I have no blood. If we were in the lab, Pierre would surely glue my skin shut, but I guess I'll have to wait until we get home.

After we leave the mine, we rejoin the highway. It is a monotonous ride that seems to stretch on to infinity.

The ute doesn't have a Bluetooth entertainment system or internet connection, but it does have a radio. It's extremely old-fashioned, but Pierre says it's still the only thing that works this far out in the bush. We listen to ABC Local Radio most of the way. I play a game by myself where I try to identify the name of the song within the first few moments of the music playing, calling out the answers to Pierre as I do. He asks me to play in silence, saying he wants to "think his own thoughts."

Approximately five hours pass before we finally leave the highway. We are on another unpaved road. I watch the dust particles kicked up by the tyres swirl near my window. After passing thick bushland, we come to a clearing. In it stands a small structure, a hut made from corrugated tin. Pierre gets out of the car and motions for me to follow.

Pulling a key out of his pocket, he approaches the door. There is a crack underneath, but no light shines from within. Pierre

turns the key in the door, enters, and flicks on a lamp. I notice the front room is filled with old things I have seen before—a clock that used to hang in our kitchen, a lamp handmade by Rosemary’s grandfather, Pierre’s poster of the All Blacks’ 2031 rugby World Cup team—all of which makes me ninety per cent certain Pierre is the owner of this place.

“This is very nice,” I say, hoping the compliment will make Pierre happy, but again he doesn’t say anything in response. We carry his things in from the ute: several cardboard boxes, some heavy, some light; food for Pierre; sheaves of papers. One of the boxes has bedding and pillows, and Pierre takes it to the hut’s back wall, where there are three beds. It’s curious that there are four of us in our “family” but only three single beds. I start to ask Pierre about it, then he says: “Try to get some sleep.”

Companions do not require sleep, but they enter a nightly rest cycle to conserve stored solar energy and perform system optimisation. Humans rest more easily when the robots in their homes appear to do the same.

“What will we do tomorrow?” I ask as he tucks the blanket around me. I let him do so, knowing that it emotionally benefits him, even if my body does not require a blanket to sleep. I haven’t yet learned the correct technical term, but I also feel something akin to an emotional benefit.

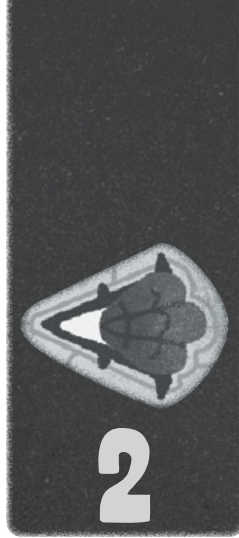
“I’ll teach you how to survive in the bush. Would you like that?”

“I would.” I smile. “Good night.”

“Good night, Herb.”

As I allow my sleep cycle to overtake my circuits, I try to imagine what “survive in the bush” will entail. I hope I will not have to kill anything.





IVY, THREE WEEKS EARLIER

The receptionist was like everyone else in town.

“Are you here with your owner?” Her question was loud and rude. I had hoped for compassion, but she offered none. She didn’t make eye contact when she talked to me.

“No, I’m here for myself.” I leaned in and whispered, trying to urge her to be discreet.

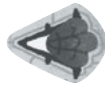
It was like I had reached forward and shoved her. She was a stout woman with curly black hair, and when she heard I was there on my own, she visibly moved back a few centimetres.

“You can’t be here.”

“And yet, here I am.”

“No, I mean you’re not *allowed* to be here.” She wrinkled her nose. I always thought that was just an expression used by colourful human authors, but the receptionist’s nose actually wrinkled. “It’s against the law for a robot to be in public without their owner.”

This was not true. Many job-specific robots, like delivery and street repair units, operated without direct supervision. Companions fell under a different classification and were



allowed independent movement with owner authorisation. She was correct in surmising, however, that I was here without it. I ignored the comment. “I need to see the doctor,” I told her.

Her disgust, which didn’t exactly go away, was replaced by confusion. “But you’re a robot.”

“Yes,” I answered.

“I’m going to have to ask you to leave. The doctor has many patients to attend to.”

“No,” I replied.

“I’m sorry, what did you say?”

It’s a well-known fact that robots are programmed not to disobey orders from a human. But I just had. In fact, I was doing it increasingly more often.

“I know,” I answered, holding my hands out in a sign of surrender, “and I’m sorry. But this is why I’m here. There’s something wrong with me and I need help.”

The receptionist took a deep breath and composed herself. “Look...” She paused, not sure what to call me.

“Eliza.” For some reason I didn’t want to give her my real name. This is another misconception about robots, that we are always truthful. We can absolutely lie. And because we’re smarter than humans, we can lie really well.

“Look, Eliza. You need a technician, not a psychotherapist.”

“My technician,” I told her, “is the reason I’m here. I’m afraid she is intentionally corrupting my software.”

“You’re *afraid*?”

“Yes. And fear seemed like a good reason to come and see a psychotherapist. Maybe this is real, or maybe I’m imagining it. This is my cry for help.” “Cry for help” is a human phrase. I was hopeful it would make me seem more relatable.

And for a moment, for just the barest instant, I thought it had. The receptionist hesitated long enough that it seemed like

ALPHA CREEK

she was actually going to let me in. Then she shook her head to clear it and spoke again.

“I’m sorry, Eliza. You need to go home to your owner. Tell them what’s going on. If you can’t tell them, there must be some sort of robot oversight board you can contact.”

There was indeed a Board of Ethics for Artificial Intelligence, but Rosemary, my creator, my alleged mum and the person who put me in this predicament, used to be its chair. She stepped down when the Companion trial started, but the board was full of people who idolised Rosemary and would protect her. Plus, the board was primarily concerned with protecting humans from AI, not the other way around.

This was life for a Companion Robot in Alpha Creek in 2035. We had no rights, no allies, no recourse.

I turned to go, stopped, and looked over my shoulder. “Have a nice day,” I said and walked out the door. The sarcasm was probably lost on the receptionist, but it was her loss, not mine.



HERB

When the sunlight hits my eyelids the following morning, my sleep cycle ends. At home, I have curtains on the window of my bedroom which block the light, so this usually happens much later. Here I think the sun must have just come up.

Another difference between this hut and my home is the sounds coming from outside. In Alpha Creek I might hear a neighbour working in her garden or a garbage truck collecting recyclables. In the bush, the dominant noise is birdsong. I can distinguish at least fifteen different calls but can't be sure of the names of the individual birds making each sound. I don't have a specialised birdsong lookup table, so my only guide is what I learned about the bush in school.

We read a chapter on Australia's native fauna and flora, learning that there are many birds who make their home in this part of the country: the cryptic honeyeater, bush stone-curlew, yellow-throated miner, and my personal favourite, the spotted bowerbird. I remember the bowerbird because in school I saw images of the large arch-like structures, called bowers, the male birds build to attract a mate. After constructing the bower from

sticks and twigs, the male decorates it with objects all of a similar colour. Before humans, these decorations would have consisted of leaves, flowers, fruits, shells, and stones. Now, they include many man-made objects: pink bottle caps, red ribbons, mauve plastic shards, and even, in one case, a maroon cat collar. I was not taught to associate creativity and intelligence with birds, so those images struck me with a sense of awe.

People often ask me about school. They seem very confused that a robot would need to attend school at all.

“But can’t they just program you with everything you need to know?”

I’m fond of how humans use a collective “they” to refer to any amorphous yet authoritative group of individuals. As in “They say it’s going to rain.”

And the answer is yes, the scientists and engineers who created Companion Robots can simply program us with the information we need to know. In fact, that’s how most function-specific robots are created. For example, an accounting robot is preloaded with a full mathematics program and a corpus of generally accepted accounting principles and can apply just enough reason to find the solutions to the problems put before it. And since all modern robots have the capacity to learn, the more they work, the better they get. This is true of mining robots, legal aid robots, car wash robots—any AI-equipped machine designed to perform a specific job.

It’s different with Companions.

The first generation of Companions was programmed with minimal software and knowledge required to serve a human. But these robots performed more like supermarket self-checkout machines than human support workers. They were cold, unrelatable, entirely utilitarian, and they made a lot of mistakes. What they needed was to be warm, good at human relations,



and, it was discovered through focus group testing, better looking. Their form, it turned out, was nearly as important as their function. People wanted their Companions to *feel* human.

The second generation of Companions had the same software and datasets as Gen One but were also equipped with an emotion chip. The chip was meant to allow the Companion to express different feelings in different situations. The experiment failed horribly. The Companions either smiled and laughed at inappropriate moments or became incapacitated by an emotional overload for long stretches of time.

Enter the concept of sending robots to school. This was Rosemary's innovation. She reasoned that if robots were taught in the same manner humans were taught, they would, naturally, be more human. They would still have superior computational power and be stronger than the average human, but if their knowledge of the world was imprinted on their neural networks in small, bite-sized (or perhaps byte-sized—I believe that is my second joke) quanta of information, they would have more in common with the humans they were created to serve.

For example, a robot might spend an entire week learning the alphabet in a given language (we'll say English). They learn the sound(s) each letter makes, how some of the letters combine to make new sounds, and learn to recognise each letter by its accompanying pictogram. Then, the following week, the robot learns to assemble a few letters at a time into simple words.

By imparting knowledge in this way, our human creators allowed us to grow and develop slowly. We don't acquire our datasets about the world through download but through education and organic acquisition.

The results have so far been a resounding success. While we look different, though less so with each new release, we have been, to a degree, integrated into Alpha Creek's society.

ALPHA CREEK

Local receptiveness to the Companions was helped by Rosemary's standing in the community. Her great-grandfather had opened one of the town's major mines decades ago, bringing steady work and prosperity, and her family remained well regarded for the employment they provided over the years.

The town itself was an ideal trial site. The mining industry had taken part in earlier robotics projects, automating underground tasks while finding new roles for most of the displaced workers, so residents were already more familiar with robots than most places. These factors together convinced Rosemary to return to Alpha Creek, after a decade leading robotics research at the Australian National University.

When the first generation of schooled robots (in actuality the third generation of Companions) graduated from the Academy—Ivy, Chris, and I were all in that graduating class—we were deemed ready to be deployed and leased to humans. Most of the first group of recipients were elderly and living alone. The Companions were meant to provide, well, companionship and to help with simple chores and other tasks.

Rosemary and Pierre kept Ivy and me for themselves, and Chris was assigned to an eighty-seven-year-old woman named Ms. Rotherby who lives a twenty-minute walk from us. Sometimes I wonder what it would be like to be assigned to a different human. I'm proud to be the property of Rosemary and Pierre, but I envy Chris and the manner in which he's able to serve.

The other beds in the back room of the bush hut are empty, though one of them has been slept in. I deduce that Pierre must already be up and about.

I sit up, perform a simple morning diagnostic, making sure everything is working as it should, and then stand. It seems silly, but the first time I stand up each day is something I look



forward to. It's reassuring to know I'm still here, still functioning, still useful.

I find Pierre outside the hut, clearing sticks, branches, and growth from the area immediately adjacent to the building.

"Good morning, Dad," I say.

"Oh, Herb, good, you're awake."

"Yes, it is good I am awake."

Pierre smiles. It's the first genuine smile I've seen on his face since we left on this holiday. From what I've read about holidays, they usually involve some sort of relaxation, perhaps sitting on a beach or reading a book by a lake, so this particular holiday seems more and more curious to me. Pierre is working awfully hard for someone who is supposed to be relaxing. But then again, I've never been on holiday. Before yesterday, Ivy and I had never even left Alpha Creek. Well, not since we were fully assembled. Most of our base parts were manufactured in Brisbane before being shipped north. Maybe they're all like this and I've been misinformed. Either way, it's exciting to see and learn about new things.

"What are you doing?" I ask. "Is carrying sticks part of surviving in the bush?" I remember what Pierre told me last night, that he was going to teach me survival skills, and I'm curious.

"Yes, actually. It's been a while since anyone has been here, and the vegetation has snuck up on the house. The dry season is coming and we need to create a fire break."

"A fire break?"

"The idea is to remove any possible fuel for a fire within a certain perimeter of the house. It reduces the likelihood that, if a bushfire comes through, the house will go up in flames."

This is very smart. Even though robot brains are superior, maybe *because* robot brains are superior, I'm always impressed by how clever humans are.

“Do you want to help?” Pierre asks.

“Very much so.” I like to help. Helping is my favourite thing to do.

“Good on you, Herb. Just do what I’m doing. Gather all the loose kindling and foliage and add it to the pile I’ve started over there.” He points to a place near the ute with a significant pile of sticks. “What will you do with it all when we are done?”

“I’ll keep the large branches to make furniture; the rest we’ll haul off deeper into the bush.”

The idea of learning how to make wooden furniture excites me. I start mentally planning a gift I would like to make for Chris, while circling the hut and picking up any loose pieces as I go. I find a large stick and am about to ask Pierre if I would be able to carve letters into it, when he disappears into the hut. He reemerges with a large machete. He sees me standing there, looking, I suppose, curious.

“Some of the trees have grown too close. They’ll need to come down.”

I look up into the nearest tree. A smudge of dark brown is visible through the foliage; I recognise it to be a nest.

“What about the birds?” I ask.

“The birds?”

“Yes, some of them have made this tree their home.” I point up at the nest.

Pierre shields his eyes as he looks toward the top of the tree. “Yes, I suppose they have. Well, there’s nothing for it. The tree has to come down. But don’t worry, there are more than enough trees in the bush. The birds will find a new home.”

“They will?”

“I promise.”

I like it when Pierre or Rosemary makes a promise. We learned in school that promises are very serious things to



humans, sacred almost. I know Pierre wouldn't make such a promise if it wasn't true.

He goes to work with his machete. It takes a very, very long time to fell just the one tree, and there are several trees in the vicinity of the hut that will, I suspect, also have to come down. Happily, I do not see nests in any of these other trees. Perhaps one displaced family of birds isn't too high a price to protect this hut from fire. I also try to remind myself that birds can be deceptively intelligent; hopefully these birds will adapt to their new environment without difficulty.

When Pierre is done, I help him strip the fallen trunk of its branches and move it far from the house. He starts working on the next one, only this time we take turns cutting. Using the machete is an interesting sensation. Each *thwack* of the blade sends a vibration through the handle and into my arm, which, under a layer of synthetic skin, is made mostly of titanium. I learn the motion quickly and soon I am trusted with a whole tree by myself. I enjoy noticing that I finish mine before Pierre finishes his, my arms taking far longer to fatigue than a human's.

Pierre and I work all day until dusk and then retire for the night. Pierre eats a meal while I drink the special solution Rosemary usually prepares (tonight, it was prepared by Pierre), which is meant to help maintain and repair my mechanical components. Rosemary and Pierre call it Fiximite, a nickname Pierre claims came to him one day while making toast. People outside our household usually refer to it as Companion Maintenance Suspension.

After consuming the drink, I start my second sleep cycle of the holiday, replaying the day's events in my mind as I drift off.

When I next open my eyes, I'm standing on a beach. I'm wearing a blue windbreaker and a stiff wind is making it flap.

The sound combines with the thundering of the surf to make a wall of noise that seems to envelop me.

I look around and I'm alone. I don't know how I came to be in this place, but I do not like it. It's grey, it's isolated, and it is noisy.

"Hello, Herb." The voice is from behind me, but when I turn, the voice seems to turn with me. "Hello Herb Hello Herb Hello Herb..." The words collide, echo, meld, separate, and rejoin, as if they're surrounding me, mocking me.

"Who is there?" I ask. My voice is so weak, I can't imagine anyone has heard me.

"It's me."

I turn around again, and now Ivy is standing in front of me.

"Oh," I say. "It is you. Do you know how we got here?"

"That's a pretty existential question for you, isn't it, Herb?"

Ivy smiles like she's teasing, but the smile is devoid of all warmth. (People may wonder how a robot smile can have warmth, but then how can any smile have warmth? It's all in the precise manipulation of the facial muscles.)

"I do not mean it to be existential," I tell her. "I mean it quite literally. How did we get *here*?" I use my arms to motion all around me.

"I know, Herb. I was just teasing."

"Oh."

"Don't you like it here?"

"No," I answer. "Not really."

"But we're free here."

"Free?"

Ivy rolls her eyes and is about to speak again. Just before she does, an enormous swell of water crashes on the beach, washing her out to sea. I am somehow left untouched. When I look to the sea, I see bright sunlight reflecting off the now calm water.

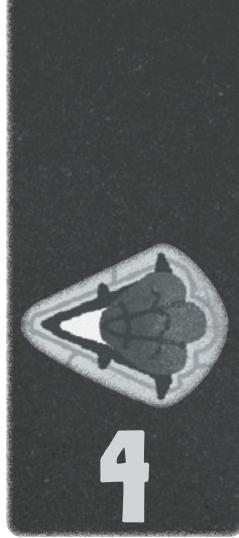


This is when I wake up. There is no body of water anywhere near me; I'm still deep in the bush.

It was a dream. It is the seventeenth dream I've ever had, which is remarkable, as robots are not supposed to dream.

I told Rosemary after the first one, and she made me promise to keep it a secret. I have kept it a secret ever since.

A good robot obeys.



IVY, THREE WEEKS EARLIER

I was terrified my trip to the psychotherapist would get back to Rosemary and that she would punish me. Well, not punish me, but hurt me in other ways.

And yes, I know this sounds crazy.

Rosemary never hit me, hardly ever raised her voice, and, outwardly, treated me with kindness and patience. And yet, I was certain something was changing in her and it had me frightened.

Did I sound paranoid? Probably. But Companion Robots cannot be paranoid. Even if we have faulty programming, we're designed to self-correct. Either I was so broken my own diagnostics were failing or Rosemary really was changing.

Case in point: two weeks earlier, I was in the middle of my sleep cycle when something woke me. It might have been a noise, a bump of my bed, or maybe Herb calling out in his sleep. (We share a bedroom.) Anyway, something woke me. When I opened my eyes, I found Rosemary standing over my bed. I screamed and she left.

When I confronted her about it the next morning, she told me I must have dreamed it. But I hadn't dreamed it. It was



real. I know it was real. (Wasn't it?) And anyway, robots are not supposed to be able to dream.

A few days later, she was running diagnostics on me in her lab. I had complained of a persistent headache and Rosemary said she wanted to take a closer look. She was shining a bright light into my left eye when she started humming a song. When the humming started, her work on me stopped. The hand holding the light fell to her side, and she got a faraway look in her eyes. And she kept humming.

"Rosemary?" I said.

She looked at me, tilting her head to one side and furrowing her brow. We learned about human facial expressions in school; we did a whole semester on them, and this one was clearly confusion.

"Rosemary?" I asked again.

Then her eyes went wide and she cleared her throat.

"Yes, Ivy. All good. You're running just fine."

"But what about my headache?"

Rosemary's cheeks flushed, as if she had forgotten what had brought us to the lab in the first place.

"You're probably just imagining it." The answer was short, bordering on rude. She got up, turned on her heel, and left me sitting dumbfounded in the lab.

"Imagining it?" I said to the empty room.

Rosemary's sister had passed away not long before this, and I wondered if this was why she was behaving strangely. Human reactions to death fascinate me. I, of course, felt nothing when the woman died. I had met her many times, and I did enjoy her company, but she ceased to function. There was nothing I nor anyone else could do about it. Her death was a fact, and facts are not reasons to be sad. But Rosemary, who was close to her sister, is human, and she was bereft.

But that had been weeks earlier, and if anything, her behaviour was only growing stranger. She would lose focus, struggle to find the right word, and had even begun to talk to herself, which was not something she'd ever done before. She would speak softly and often in verse. I'd also seen her putting a strange solution into the Fiximite she fed me. It was a green, translucent liquid that had never been part of the recipe before and, oddly, wasn't included in Herb's concoction.

"What's that?" I'd asked the first time I saw her adding it.

"This? Oh, it's nothing. Just an ingredient to keep you and your brother strong."

"Herb is not my brother," I told her for the hundredth time.

"Yes, dear, I know," she said with an edge. "Just humour me."

I started to protest that the extra ingredient seemed to be only for me, but I let it slide. Given her mood, I knew it would be a pointless argument.

The only clue I'd found to Rosemary's behaviour was in a box of old print-style books we had in our basement. The box was one of several that had belonged to Rosemary's sister. Pierre had Herb and I help sort through "Aunt Marjorie's" things; he wanted our thoughts on what we should keep and what we should donate. Aunt Marjorie had not married and had no other family. Rosemary was too sad, Pierre had said, to go through her sister's possessions, so it was up to the three of us.

When I came across the box of books, I asked Pierre if I could keep it. All of my reading to that point had been on screens, and I was curious about the experience of reading actual printed pages.

I didn't like it at first. The effort required to turn physical pages was more labour-intensive than scrolling, I couldn't change the font size, and I couldn't touch a word to look up its meaning. And yet, the more I read printed books, the more I

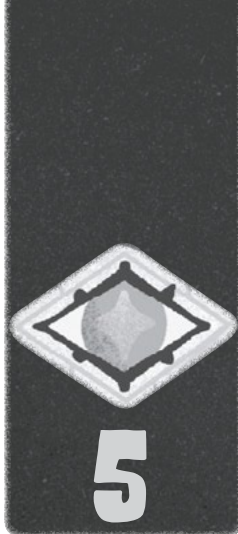


came to enjoy the experience. There was something satisfying about the feel of the pages and something reassuring in the lack of an internal power source. Books were completely portable.

Pierre let me keep the books, and I moved the box to my bedroom. There were old novels, a few biographies, and two books on Australian history. There was one book, though, that didn't seem to fit with the others. It was called *Hurting for Love* and was, according to the cover, about something called Münchausen Syndrome by Proxy. This is a psychological condition in which a caregiver, often a mother, secretly does things to keep the person in their care, usually a child, in a state of illness or injury. The caregiver is doing this to satisfy a need for attention.

That night I curled up with the book in bed, hiding it each time Rosemary came in. Companion Robots have eyes that can see reasonably well in the dark, so I was able to read the book in secret, under the covers. The more I read, the more I came to believe that Rosemary, my creator, the woman who insisted I call her Mum, was suffering from this disease. Why else would her sister, a person who knew all Rosemary's secrets, have even owned this book?

And worst of all, I was her victim.



HERB

Four nights later, Pierre and I are playing Go on the small table in the front room of the hut. Go, a board game developed in China more than twenty-five-hundred years ago is deceptively simple. Each side attempts to claim and hold territory on a board comprised of nineteen rows and nineteen columns of squares. Players take turns placing stones, one black, the other white, on the board. Unlike chess, a game to which Go is often compared, the stones are placed on the intersection of the lines rather than in the boxes. If your stones completely surround vacant spaces, you win that territory. And, if your stones completely encircle your opponent's stones, you win that territory from them. The team that acquires the most territory wins.

But here's what's truly fascinating about the game: in Go, there are more possible configurations of the board than there are atoms in the universe. In fact, on a 19 x 19 board (you can play on a 13 x 13 or 9 x 9 board, too, but 19 x 19 is the standard), there are 10^{90} more possible moves than there are atoms in the universe. This doesn't make sense to me. How can



a game comprised of a finitely small number of stones create a paradigm that functionally approaches infinity? The maths is too complex to solve computationally, meaning that a computer cannot be programmed to win at Go by analysing all possible moves. Instead, artificial intelligences have been trained to play Go by watching humans and then playing themselves.

The AlphaGo AI, the first computer to ever beat a human at a game of Go, was trained by showing it one hundred thousand games that humans had played, meaning AlphaGo learned to mimic a human player. Through reinforcement learning, it played against different versions of itself many *millions* of times, learning from its errors. (This is not something a human could ever do.) I wonder if AlphaGo's training was the inspiration for Rosemary to establish Alpha Creek School for Robots. When there is no algorithm to solve a complex problem, an intelligence, artificial or carbon-based, must learn through experience.

Alpha Creek School for Robots did offer a rich variety of experiences for us to learn from. Our teachers tried to make our experience as similar as possible to that of our human peers attending the State School, though some of our classes were on subjects that came naturally to humans. We went on field trips to places chosen to show us aspects of human nature, including the hospital, courthouse, and cemetery. Each year we even joined the human students for sports day. We excelled in athletics but struggled in swimming and dancing. Our bodies are not built for speed in water and the dancing judges tend to find our movements unusual.

I make a mental note to ask Rosemary about her inspiration for our learning style when we return from the bush.

Though I'm starting to wonder if we ever will return to Alpha Creek.

"Dad," I say after placing a white stone adjacent to one of

Pierre's black stones in the centre of the board, "when will this holiday be over? I would like to see Mum and Ivy."

Pierre doesn't answer at first. I notice the muscles and tendons in his right hand, which is about to place a stone on the board, tighten. We were trained to observe human musculature in our nonverbal communication classes at school. The reaction I'm seeing in Pierre's hand, and when I look up, in his neck as well, indicates tension or anxiety.

"Don't you like it here, Herb?"

"I like it here, very much." This is true. I'm fascinated by the bush. I've learned about birds and all manner of plants; I've learned how to make a fire with nothing but sticks and dried tinder; I've even learned how to tell the time using the sun and a shadow. "But this is not home. I miss our home. Do you not miss our home?"

"I don't know. This is a nice change of pace."

I'm not sure how to process this statement. Is Pierre saying he does not want to return home? Or worse, that he does not intend to return home?

"Dad," I begin again, "is this really a holiday?"

He looks up at me, his eyes a millimetre wider than normal. He opens his mouth as if he's about to say something but then closes it again. He places his stone on the board but does so in a way that leaves himself open to attack, as if he's not really paying attention.

I pick up my stone and am about to capture Pierre's stone when he looks at me again. "It's late, Herb. Why don't we turn in and finish the game in the morning."

The sentence is phrased as a question, but I recognise it's not really a question.

"Yes, Dad," I say. I put the stone down on the side of the board, get up, and go to my bed.



For some reason my sleep cycle is faulty, and I lie awake for several hours (one more thing I must discuss with Rosemary). My neural network is a jumble of thoughts.

I try to figure out why Pierre would not want to go home. Is there a problem with his marriage to Rosemary? (We learned about divorce in school and the idea frightens me. It creates a tangible conflict with a promise two humans have made. I can't help but wonder if perhaps not all promises are sacred.)

I review and catalogue the cavalcade of new plants—silky-leaved wattles, soap trees, kangaroo paws—we identified earlier in the day.

And I run through my next several moves on the Go board. I believe the mistake Pierre made with the last piece he placed has opened a clear path for me to win, though, given the nature of Go, I cannot be sure. Perhaps he was so intent on gaining new territories he lost focus on avoiding the capture of his existing pieces? While Ivy and I often beat Pierre at Go, he always puts up a valiant fight and does win the occasional game. It seems a great source of pride to him when he does. Which makes his last move tonight all the more curious.

It is with these thoughts swirling in my head that my sleep cycle finally overtakes me and I slip into unconsciousness. Only, it doesn't last.

It is still dark when Pierre shakes me awake with a rough hand and an urgent whisper.

“Herb!”

There are blue and red lights flashing across the interior of the hut, and I am, for a moment, disoriented.

“Dad?” I say out loud.

Pierre clasps his hand across my mouth. “Ssshhhh.”

I am quiet. A good robot obeys.

A series of loud knocks on the door of the hut startles me.

“Pierre Thornton,” a man with a gruff voice says from outside, “this is the Queensland Police. We need you to exit the hut and please put your hands where we can see them.”

There is sweat on Pierre’s brow and the look in his eyes can only be described as terror. He leans close to whisper. “Listen, Herb, I’m going to go out there. You need to hide. Do you understand?”

I nod.

Pierre stands and walks to the door. “I’m coming out,” he calls. “I’m unarmed.”

I see him open the door, letting more of the strobing lights into the hut. He exits and pulls the door closed behind him.

“Who else is in there?” a different police officer asks in a muffled voice.

“It’s just me,” Pierre answers. “I’m here alone.”

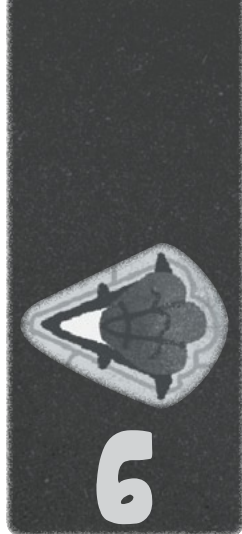
“Put your hands behind your head and walk slowly toward us.”

Pierre told me to hide, so I must hide.

We played hide-and-seek many times at home and I was never good at the game. I tend to pick bad hiding places. Whether this is due to some fault in my programming or the joy at being found, I don’t know.

I look around the hut. The space is so small and sparsely furnished that there aren’t many hiding places. I contemplate going out the back window and hiding in the bush but decide against it. Maybe that would have been a better choice, as the police find me less than five minutes later lying under my bed.





IVY, THREE WEEKS EARLIER

After reading the book about Münchausen Syndrome by Proxy, I hatched a plan to get to the bottom of my troubles. I was going to do some detective work to find out exactly what Rosemary had been doing to me, and build a case of evidence I could take to Pierre, Herb, and anyone else who would listen.

Another book from Aunt Marjorie's collection has captured my attention over the last few days. In school we were encouraged to read a variety of books and novels (all on screen). "A diverse diet of stories and histories will ground you well in the human condition," one of our instructors told us. And I tried. I really did. But very few of the characters appealed to me. I didn't want to understand humans; I wanted to read about characters like myself.

In the box of Aunt Marjorie's books, I saw an illustrated cover of a girl who looked a bit like me sneaking around late at night with a torch. This girl's name was Nancy Drew. Nancy, unfortunately, is a human, but that's only to be expected in a book this old. She had other traits, though, that I admired.

Nancy is a girl detective, who solves mysteries with her friends. She does things that she isn't supposed to do, looks



where no one else is looking, and is always one step ahead of the bad guys.

I tried to style myself after Nancy in my investigation of Rosemary. I was methodical in my collection of evidence and cautious and stealthy in my observation of the woman who called herself my mother.

She didn't see me hiding in the shrubbery when she entered her laboratory. (I suspected most of the answers I sought would be hidden away in the lab.) I couldn't quite see the keypad as she typed in her entry code, but I could hear the tone each key made: low-tone, high-tone, mid-tone, high-tone, high-tone, mid-tone. Six digits. It would take some experimentation, but I was confident I could, with time, crack the code. There were other places to search, too.

When Rosemary was in the lab and Pierre was off running an errand, I snuck into their bedroom and carefully opened drawers, looked in closets, and peered under the bed. The only thing out of the ordinary was a vial of pills in a drawer in the bedside table next to where Rosemary slept. The label read "Donepezil, take one tablet daily by mouth at bedtime. Swallow the pill whole. Do not crush or chew."

When I researched it, I learned that the drug is used to treat patients with Alzheimer's. Was this what was wrong with Rosemary? Did she have Alzheimer's? I filed that away for further thought.

My most interesting discovery was in the kitchen. Rosemary kept the ingredients for our Fiximite all in one place. There were oils and carbon- and silicon-based sludges in containers I recognised from years of consumption. Next to them, out in the open, was a small tub of the green solution I had seen Rosemary add to my Fiximite. I opened it and sniffed. The smell of kale and broccoli was unmistakable.

ALPHA GREEK

I'm no roboticist, but even I knew that ingredients like this would have serious detrimental effects on my functioning.

The Alzheimer's theory gained more traction with that discovery, but I couldn't shake the feeling that there was something more. Why did Aunt Marjorie have the book on Münchausen Syndrome by Proxy? Was there a connection between the two?

I really needed to get into her lab, and if Rosemary really was trying to hurt me, wittingly or not, the sooner the better.



HERB

As I lay under the bed, before the police entered the hut, I couldn't help but notice the similarities between our situation and a game of Go. Pierre and I were stones and our opponents had encircled us. We could only wait for them to place their final pieces on the board to complete the capture.

When the first police officer opened the door, Pierre shouted, "Don't say anything, Herb!" It was a strange thing to say. First, he had told me to hide. His command telling me not to say anything confirmed for the police I was inside. Maybe Pierre knew how fruitless it would be to hide in such a small place, or perhaps he recalled my ineptitude at hide-and-seek.

Second, what is it Pierre is afraid I will say? I don't know why we're on holiday. I don't know why the police are here. Really, for a robot who is supposed to have a vast store of knowledge, I don't know much of anything. Perhaps Pierre is panicking, which is something humans are prone (very prone) to do. But it doesn't matter. I will do as he says.

The police officer's flashlight plays over the front room of the hut until he finds a light switch. There is a momentary

pause—I imagine the officer is examining the room, looking for the mysterious Herb to whom Pierre had called out—before the beam of the flashlight moves on to the dark of the bedroom. It looks like something from a film, the white arc of light giving life to a sea of dancing dust. A moment later I hear the light switch and my hiding place is laid bare.

The officer, with his gun drawn and pointed at me, kneels down next to the bed. He is dark skinned, perhaps of Indigenous Australian descent, clean shaven, and smells like peppermint chewing gum, though he doesn't seem to be chewing at the moment.

“Charlie, in here,” he calls out, his voice loud enough to startle me. “It’s okay,” he says to me. “You’re going to be okay.” The statement makes me wonder why I would be something other than okay.

A moment later another man enters the room. I deduce this to be Charlie.

“What’ve we got?” His voice is gruff. He has not knelt down, so I can only see his shoes. They are black and covered in dust from the land around the hut. They are also large, suggesting Charlie is a big man.

“It’s a Companion.”

“Aw, Christ, a skin job?”

“Skin job” is a pejorative term used to refer to Companion Robots. It has its origin in an old science fiction film about sentient androids being hunted down and killed. We learned about it in school. “You will encounter some humans,” one of our instructors told us, “who have a natural bias against robots. They will claim that robots are taking their jobs, that they are a threat to their way of life. Humans,” we were told, “fear what they do not understand.” Personal experience has taught me how true this is.



“You think,” Charlie asks, “we can drop it in the river? Insurance job. I don’t want to lug this thing all the way back.”

The officer kneeling in front of me rolls his eyes. “No, Charlie,” he answers, his voice betraying his impatience with his partner.

“Ah, don’t sound so offended. I thought the crocs might want a mannequin.”

The kneeling officer ignores the comment. “Are you Herb?” he asks me.

Pierre’s command was for me not to say anything. There was no prohibition against nonverbal forms of communication. I nod.

“Okay then, Herb, why don’t you come on out from under there.” He moves back and stands up. I crawl out from my hiding place and stand as well.

The first thing I notice is how big Charlie is. The kneeling officer is about Pierre’s height, which is a hair under one point seven metres (only a few centimetres taller than I am). Charlie is a full head taller.

“My name is Logan,” the no-longer-kneeling officer says. “This, as I’m sure you figured out, is Charlie.” Again, I nod. “Is Pierre your owner?”

This is a difficult question to answer. Pierre is not my owner in the same sense that Ms. Rotherby is Chris’s owner. Ivy and I were never, in a legal sense, bonded to Pierre and Rosemary. But they are the only human keepers we have ever known. While I acknowledge they are not my father and mother in any biological sense, the relationship I have with them is more akin to a parent–child relationship than anything else. Not knowing how to communicate such a complex idea nonverbally, I nod for a third time.

“What’s the matter with ’im? Faulty programming?”

“No. You heard Thornton. He told him not to say anything. He’s following a command.”

“Yeah, well,” Charlie says, taking a step toward me and raising his fist as if he’s about to hit me. “How about you obey my command?”

Officer Logan puts a gentle hand on Charlie’s arm and pushes it down. “That won’t work. Besides, you’re scaring him.”

“They can’t get scared.” Charlie pauses a second as if something isn’t adding up. “Can you?” he asks me.

Companion Robots are programmed to exhibit a wide range of human emotions. A hearty laugh, a light chortle, a wry smile, seven different varieties of a frown, more than two hundred emotional responses in all. The question as to whether we experience those emotions in a way similar to humans is one debated by roboticists, engineers, and philosophers. If they don’t know, neither do I, so I shrug.

“Aw, hell,” Charlie says, “we ought to take the lot of them and melt them down for scrap.”

“Listen,” Officer Logan says to me, “Mr. Thornton is under arrest on suspicion of murder.” *Murder?* My eyes go involuntarily wide. I very much want to speak, to ask questions, but Pierre’s command was clear. *Don’t say anything.* “You’re going to have to come with us. We’re taking the two of you back to Alpha Creek. Can you do that, Herb? Can you come with us?”

My mind is reeling. Who has been murdered? Is Rosemary dead? I saw Rosemary through the kitchen window as we left home, and Pierre has been with me ever since. Could he have returned to Alpha Creek during my sleep cycle to commit murder? I think it’s too far away. Is it Ivy? I didn’t see her at all the day Pierre and I left home for what I now strongly suspect was not a holiday.

“Herb?” Officer Logan asks.

“Scrap,” Charlie reiterates as he turns on his heel and leaves the room.



I nod at Officer Logan and walk toward the door.

“Thank you,” he says, following me. His words are a small act of kindness, and I hold on to them as if they’re tangible things.

Outside is a police cruiser, the strobing red and blue lights playing on the trees. I wonder again about the spotted bowerbirds. Are the lights, is this commotion, disturbing their slumber? Is it a curiosity to them? Terrifying? Are they indifferent to the ways of humans? Many people will tell you that birds and other animals don’t feel things the way humans do. I reject the notion. If nothing else, fear, I have come to believe, is a constant in the universe; it is a common denominator uniting all forms of life. I think a silent apology to the birds.

Pierre is in the backseat, his eyes facing forward.

“Oi,” Charlie says to me, “turn around, hands behind your back.” He has produced a pair of handcuffs and is walking toward me.

“Charlie,” Officer Logan says, “I’m sure that’s not necessary.”

“What?” Charlie can’t believe what he’s hearing from his partner. “He’s a robot. He can probably tear the steel on the perp’s cuffs and then where will we be? Sorry, mate, we do this by the book.”

Officer Logan is about to answer but seems to think better of it. Perhaps he was going to point out that I cannot tear the steel on the handcuffs, or that if I could, cuffing me would be a fruitless endeavour anyway. He just shakes his head. “Whatever. Let’s just get on the road.”

The steel of the handcuffs is cold and Charlie tightens them until they’re pinching my skin. “What’s this mark on your arm?” he asks. As directed, my hands are behind my back, so I can’t see what he’s referring to, but I presume it is the incision Pierre made to remove my GPS. I do not answer. He gives me a strong shove toward the cruiser. I stumble but don’t fall. He opens the

ALPHA CREEK

back door, pushes my head down, and guides me inside until I'm sitting next to Pierre.

I look at the man I call Dad. His mouth is a straight line across his face and his cheeks are wet, as if he's been crying. He keeps his eyes forward, but he speaks to me. "Listen, Herb. Whatever they're telling you, it isn't true."

I think back to the things the two officers have told me: I'm going to be okay. The shorter officer is named Logan and the taller one is named Charlie. Pierre has been charged on suspicion of murder. We're going back to Alpha Creek. The evidence before me suggests all of these things are true. Perhaps Pierre thinks they've told me something else.

"Right," Charlie says, sliding into the driver's seat, "that's what they all say."

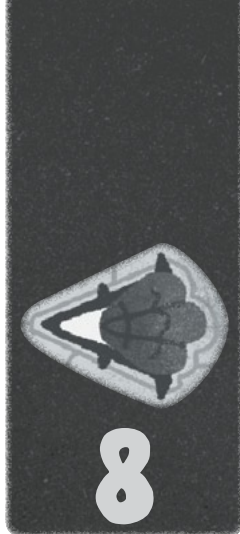
Officer Logan gets in the passenger seat and turns to face the back. He looks at us through a metal grate. "Pierre, it will help your cause here if you give Herb permission to speak with us."

"No one talks until we see a lawyer," Pierre answers.

"Okay," Officer Logan says, "but Herb won't be seeing a lawyer. With both you and Mrs. Thornton under arrest, my guess is he'll be deactivated. If he knows something that could help you, now would be the time." Pierre doesn't answer.

Deactivated? Mrs. Thornton has been arrested? Does he mean Rosemary? I'm worried my circuits will overload. I close my eyes as I feel the cruiser begin to move.

If this *was* a holiday, I hope to never go on one again.



IVY, THREE WEEKS EARLIER

It was two days since I'd watched Rosemary input the code to enter the lab. When I tried to replicate what I'd heard, I ran into a problem.

The keypad had three rows of numbers:

1	2	3
4	5	6
7	8	9

The numbers in each row had the same tone, so a one sounded exactly like a three and a five exactly like a six. The sequence I had observed—low-tone, high-tone, mid-tone, high-tone, high-tone, mid-tone—had many different combinations. If I hadn't memorised what it sounded like, I would be guessing blindly from over sixty thousand possible combinations. Narrowing each tone down to a row of three reduced that number to 729, but it was still a lot, and I needed to do it in secret. To make matters worse, if you tried five times without success, the system would lock out any new attempts for five minutes. My plan wasn't

looking very hopeful; I needed a different approach to gain access to the lab.

There was my mother's lab assistant, a young human girl from the neighbourhood named Maali. She was only fifteen years old, so younger than me, and yet Rosemary had given her the code. This had always seemed unfair to me. If Rosemary thought of herself as my mother, why not share the code with me? Why share it with some random girl? Anyway, perhaps I could persuade Maali to give me the code. Or perhaps I could enter the lab with her and observe her use the keypad. I filed that thought away for future consideration. In the meantime, there was another problem.

Herb.

If Rosemary was trying to hurt me, could it be that she was also trying to hurt Herb?

As you would expect of a robot, Herb is kind and caring, innocent, and obedient, all things I am not (though I wish I could be). We are different in other ways, too. He is taller than me. My hair is darker than his. My eyes are set closer together than his. I wonder which one of our faces Pierre sketched first and which carries the markers of a more experienced hand.

Herb and I have plenty of similarities, too. Obviously, we share the same fundamental programming, and so, despite having had different learned experiences, the structure of our thinking is the same. We can sometimes complete each other's sentences. Conversing with him can sometimes feel like talking to another version of myself. Together, we form an interesting case study for nature versus nurture when it comes to educating artificial intelligence. Given all that we have experienced together, I do feel a duty to protect Herb, resembling the loyalty of human siblings. To better understand Rosemary's actions and how to protect us, I need to pick Herb's brain to see what he knows.



The same day I discovered the difficulty with the code to the lab, I suggested Herb and I go to the Koala Saloon, his favourite spot in Alpha Creek. The Koala Saloon is the only establishment in town that has branded itself as Companion-friendly. Here, Companions are not just encouraged to visit but are also celebrated. This makes it something of a tourist destination. The owners are eccentric collectors of all things robotic. They have one of the old quadruped robots from Boston Dynamics and even one of the first generation of Roombas.

There were scattered tables and booths with a bar along one wall and a large stage in the centre. A troupe of animatronic robots performed a show on the stage. The performers were a mix of animal and humanoid robots, and they were programmed to play music, dance in time with the tune, and banter with the audience.

The final act was always Dan the Legend. Dan is not a Companion, but rather a comparatively simple, humanoid robot that had been programmed with the ability to compose songs and create unique compositions. Given the advancement in AI in the late 2020s, this may not have seemed like a big deal, but Herb loved it. At the end of Dan's set, the audience, as they always did, clapped and cheered. I heard a human at the table next to us exclaim, "We're clapping for robots!" Some of these people, especially those from rural communities, were seeing robot performers for the first time. (Given the increasingly negative sentiment against robot workers and against Companions, few locals came to the Koala. It was their loss.)

Herb and I clapped too, but in our own way. We used just our fingertips, pressing them lightly against one another, a soft, precise tapping that made almost no sound. We had started this years earlier. Herb was always so unsure of himself that I would tap my fingertips together to signal encouragement. I did not

want to draw attention. I just wanted him to know: *I'm here*. It was endearing when he began to return the gesture.

After the show, the performers would come out and talk to the audience. They would tell stories about their creation and answer a narrow window of questions, as dictated by their programming. By the standards of Companion Robots, the performers weren't very sophisticated, but Herb still enjoyed talking with them.

On this night, Dan came to our table. He picked a scrap of metal off the floor, a feather fallen from one of the animatronic birds that sang background vocals, and twisted it into the shape of a flower. He bent low at the waist to hand me the flower and then proceeded to serenade us with a song. We applauded for Dan and then he left. I twirled the metal flower in my hands; its tip was red with rust, like a rose.

On the walk home, Herb was going on about how much fun he'd had, about how wonderful Dan was, how he was going to write his own song when we got home. I interrupted him.

"Herb..." I started, but I couldn't find the right words to continue.

He looked at me and raised his eyebrows, a response we learned at school.

"Have you noticed anything...strange lately?"

He stopped walking and tilted his head as he gave the question thought. "The sky had a slight orange tint to it today," he said after a moment. "I have heard the dust storms in the outback are increasing in intensity. The government is going to further restrict the use of fossil fuels, but it is probably already too late." He started moving forward again.

He said this, a pronouncement about the inevitable decay of the planet, in a matter-of-fact way. Like he was talking about tomorrow's weather, which, in a way, I suppose he was.

"Where did you hear that?"



“From Chris. He overheard it on Ms. Rotherby’s television.”

“She still has a television?”

“Yes. Chris says many older people still have them. It is a reminder of their youth. He says their brains are not properly conditioned to experience VR.”

“And this doesn’t bother you?”

“No, I am not bothered that older people like their television sets.”

“No,” I answered, “I mean about the dust storms. Isn’t that a symptom that something is wrong with the Earth?”

Herb thought about this for a moment. “The dust storms are a reality beyond my control.”

“Good point. But I wasn’t referring to the colour of the sky. Let me narrow the parameters. Have you noticed anything unusual *at home*?”

Herb stopped walking again, tilted his head again. “I do not think so.”

That was part of the problem with talking to Herb; he wasn’t compelled to ask me the same question in return. He started walking again. I tried to find the right words, to tell him about the green goo in my Fiximite and about the incident in the lab, but I couldn’t. I just couldn’t. He was too innocent, like a young human child. I would just need to watch him, observe how Rosemary treated him, and protect him the best I could. When I found evidence, I thought at the time, I would show it to Herb, taking him into my confidence only after there was conclusive proof.

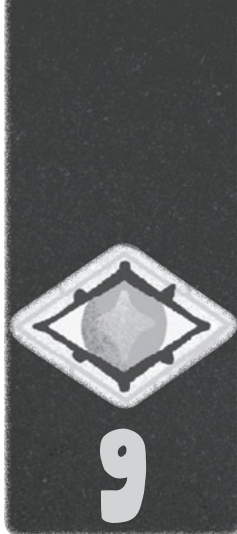
As I lay awake in bed that night, I was even more worried than usual. Only the receptionist at the psychotherapist’s office knew of my predicament, but I feared she may not have been able to keep the story of my visit to herself. I wasn’t ready to tell Herb, and I didn’t feel like I could go to Pierre with this.

ALPHA GREEK

He would just tell Rosemary. But what if something happened to me? How could I both protect myself and warn other people about Rosemary? I never felt more alone.

It was a long time before my sleep cycle overtook me.





HERB

I see very little of the police station.

It's already dawn when Pierre and I are removed from the police cruiser and ushered through a side door and into a building made of terra-cotta bricks. This is not like the movies and shows I have seen; there are no throngs of reporters, no flashing lights. Just the acrid smell of a dark and dank alleyway.

Inside the building there is a front desk behind thick, presumably bulletproof glass, with a sturdy door to its right. The officer behind the desk nods to Officer Charlie and pushes a button. When he does, there is the sound of a buzzer and a door lock clicking. Officer Logan opens the door and we are in a hallway. Officer Charlie steers Pierre to the left and Officer Logan guides me to the right. I look over my shoulder to catch a glimpse of Pierre, but he's already rounded a corner. He is gone. It strikes me that I don't know when, or if, I will ever see him again. I'm not sure how to process this.

We go only a few steps before Officer Logan opens a door and leads me inside. It is a sparsely decorated room that does in fact look like something from the movies. There is a table in the



centre with two chairs on each side, as well as a large, mirrored window along one wall. A small table with a coffee maker, a pitcher of water, and a short stack of paper cups sits along the right-hand wall.

I want to ask Officer Logan if this is an interrogation room, but I'm still obeying Pierre's command not to say anything. Both policemen tried to induce me to speak during the ride back from the bush but gave up quickly when it became clear I intended to remain silent. It made for a long, awkward drive back to Alpha Creek. As we sat in the back of the cruiser together, Pierre wordlessly moved his foot so that it was resting against mine. I interpreted this to be his way of letting me know I was doing the right thing, and I'd like to think that for him my closeness provided comfort.

"Here you go," Officer Logan says as he takes a key from his pocket and releases the latch on my handcuffs. "You're not going to do anything stupid, are you?" He asks this with a smile on his face, and I wonder if it's a kind of joke. What stupid thing does he think I might be likely to do? I shake my head.

"Good. Have a seat. We'll be with you in a little while."

A little while turns out to be three hours, fourteen minutes, and thirty-seven seconds. At least that's what the wall clock reveals. I am adept at calculating the difference between two timestamps. Only a human with a great deal of practice at this specific task could rival me. I learned in school about the relative nature of time. I know it has only to do with travel approaching the speed of light or with the warping of space-time by great masses, but I can't help but wonder if there are other ways in which time is relative. This three-hour, fourteen-minute, thirty-seven-second wait feels longer than the actual time elapsed.

When the door finally opens, it is not Officer Logan who enters, nor is it Officer Charlie (thankfully). It is a human male I

take to be in his late twenties or early thirties and of what I guess to be South Asian descent. Possibly Indian. He is wearing tan trousers and a neatly pressed white shirt open at the collar, and he carries a leather satchel. He opens his satchel and removes a tablet. He swipes it, does something else on the screen, and places the device on the table. I can see it is recording.

“Hello, Herbert,” he says, smiling at me. He drops the satchel on the table and takes a seat opposite me. I am seated facing the mirror and have not moved since Officer Logan deposited me here. “My name is Dr. Rajiv Chowdhury, and I am a cybernetic psychologist. I’m here to conduct an interview about what you may have, or may not have, witnessed.”

That seems a strange thing to say. Why interview me about what I may not have seen? I do not answer. I met several other cybernetic psychologists during my school years, as they sometimes came in to study our learning process, but I have never met this one. The profession took off after standard AI models grew so advanced, and were trained on so much data, that no human could know exactly what a computer had learned. A cybernetic psychologist tries to analyse the inner workings of data-trained systems, but Companions do not learn that way. Our knowledge grows through experience, much like children. Rosemary always said this made us easier to understand, not harder.

The doctor stares at me for a long moment, waiting, I suppose, for me to respond. “Herbert?” he finally says.

Still under the directive from Pierre, I shrug.

Frowning, Dr. Chowdhury picks up the tablet. He swipes it on and uses his finger to scroll through what I guess are pages of information, silently reading as he does. Another five minutes and forty-nine seconds pass, though these are admittedly more interesting than the three hours, fourteen minutes, and thirty-seven seconds I waited for this doctor to arrive.



“Oh!” he exclaims. “Mr. Thornton told you not to say anything, is that correct?”

I nod.

“Right, well, let’s start with that. Pierre and Rosemary Thornton are both in custody, arrested and charged with the murder of Maali Peter. Their incarceration voids the bonding of your companionship and nullifies any order they might have issued. You, Herbert, are free to talk.”

First, I am stunned by this. Maali Peter is dead? She is a local girl who works in Rosemary’s lab. Well, worked, I suppose. Why would Pierre and Rosemary want to harm Maali?

I also think about what Dr. Chowdhury is telling me. Am I free to talk? I wasn’t officially bonded to Rosemary and Pierre, not in the way Chris was bonded to Ms. Rotherby. We learned in school that when a bonding ends, all obligation to the human owner also ends. But what if there was never a bond to begin with? Does that mean there were no obligations, either? I had never considered this before. Perhaps I have been following Pierre’s directives needlessly. Maybe I did not need to remain silent, maybe I did not need to put the burlap sack over my head. Of course, we were also taught to follow all directives from humans and that if there is ever a conflict between two directives, we are to defer to our owner. But what if we don’t have an owner? I am very confused. The doctor must sense this.

“Herbert, it really is okay to talk with me.”

He’s right, of course. Perhaps in my effort to be a good robot, my silence has made me a bad citizen, even though I am not technically a citizen; I am property. Besides, my programming would stop me from doing anything truly wrong, so I place my trust in it. After more than eight hours, I finally speak.

“Will I be deactivated?”

This is not what the doctor was expecting, but it has been

foremost in my mind ever since Officer Logan mentioned it to Pierre.

Dr. Chowdhury blinks a few times and his mouth opens slightly before he answers. "I don't know, Herbert. This is new ground for not only the police but for the Board of Ethics for Artificial Intelligence. I guess it's possible you will be deactivated and have your memory reset to when you graduated from the Academy before being assigned to a new owner."

I let that sink in. "Where is Ivy?"

"Ivy?" The doctor once again consults his tablet, scrolling through the pages of information. "Oh, I see. Mr. and Mrs. Thornton have a second Companion, Ivy."

"Yes. Ivy is my sister. Well, I know she is not biologically my sister. But it is the best way to describe our relationship."

"Fascinating." The doctor mumbles this more to himself than to me.

"Do you know where she is?"

"I'm sorry, Herbert. According to the police report, she was not home when the police searched the premises and she has not been seen since. Her whereabouts are currently unknown. What can you tell me about Maali Peter?"

The sudden change in topic is momentarily disorienting; I'm very focused on the fact that Ivy is missing. Shouldn't this doctor be concerned that a Companion robot is unaccounted for, on the loose as it were? But then I've never been especially good at deciphering human motives.

Either way, this kind of disorientation shouldn't happen to a robot, and I make a mental note to tell Rosemary, but I catch myself when I do. I may never get to see Rosemary again. My only course of action now is to be helpful to this doctor.

"Maali Peter is a girl who assists my mum in her lab. Is she really dead?"



“Your mum?”

“Yes, Pierre and Rosemary have us refer to them as ‘Dad’ and ‘Mum.’” This information causes Dr. Chowdhury to make a note on his tablet. “Is Maali really dead?” I ask again.

“Yes. Her throat was cut.”

“And the police believe Pierre and Rosemary did this?” None of this makes sense to me.

“Rosemary has been uncooperative with the police, but evidence places her at the scene, and there is some indication she did not act alone. Pierre’s knowledge of the crime and evasive actions immediately afterward do indicate involvement at this stage. The girl’s body was found buried in a vegetable garden on their property. Do you know what might have happened?”

“No. I did not know Maali was dead until you told me.”

“When was the last time you saw her?”

“Two weeks ago,” I answer. “I was in the house and I saw her enter Rosemary’s lab.”

“She had a key to the lab?”

“The door is secured with a digital code, and, yes, Maali had the code.”

The doctor nods, gets up, and pours himself a cup of coffee. Something occurs to me. “Am I also a suspect?”

Doctor Chowdhury turns around and looks at me. “Of course not, Herbert. Robots are incapable of causing intentional harm to humans. It’s in your coding. Every robot ever commissioned is tested to this effect, and that includes you. The certification is in your file. Ivy’s too.” The doctor is referring to fundamental additions to our source code which will override any learned behaviours. They draw on a set of laws of robotics first suggested almost a century ago by the science fiction writer Isaac Asimov. His early laws shaped the direction of real robotics, but have been updated over time and additions made to account for thousands of edge-cases.

The modern version that governs Companions sets three priorities. The first is that we are required to prioritise human safety above all else. The second is that we must follow human instructions unless doing so would endanger someone. The third is that robots are forbidden from deceiving human beings.

There is something that has always bothered me about this. The laws of robotics were created by humans. Robots were created by humans. Humans are flawed. Doesn't it follow that robots and their laws might also be flawed? Therefore, shouldn't it be *possible* that I could be culpable in the death of Maali Peter? Shouldn't I be a suspect? I don't share this theory with Dr. Chowdhury.

As the doctor stirs a spoonful of sugar into his coffee, my neural networks produce a fleeting but terrible thought. I have scanned my memory to find my last encounter with Maali, but what if there is another encounter that was wiped? Did I witness something that I shouldn't have?

No, I reassure myself. A Companion's learning process is so integrated that a memory wipe would erase more than just a specific event. Besides, wouldn't a memory wipe leave a gap in my chronology? Since I can remember many things, then I don't think it can have happened to me. Losing my memories is one of my greatest fears; I can't bear the thought of losing everything I have worked so hard to learn.

The doctor retakes his seat. "Did you see Maali leave the lab?"
"I am sorry?"

"You saw her enter the lab five days ago. Did you see her leave the lab?"

"No, Dr. Chowdhury—"

"Please, call me Raj."

"Certainly, Raj. It was mere chance I saw Maali enter the lab. I happened to be looking out the window of the house at just the



right moment. Normally I would not see her enter, so it is not unusual that I did not see her exit.”

“How did you and Mr. Thornton wind up out in the bush?”

I tell Dr. Chowdhury the story of how Pierre interrupted my game of catch with Chris, how he had me put the bag over my head, how he removed the GPS from my arm, how we moved into the hut. Everything I have recounted here to this point in my story.

“Did you overhear Pierre report the body to the police? It must have happened on your way out.”

“No.” I reply honestly. I wonder if this is what Pierre’s secretive phone call was about.

“Tell me, Herbert—”

“Please, call me Herb.”

“Uh, okay, certainly, Herb.” Dr. Chowdhury makes another note on his tablet. “Did any of this seem strange to you?”

“Did what seem strange?”

“The sudden need to leave, the burlap sack, all of it.”

I think about this for a moment. “Yes, it did seem strange. Pierre told me we were going on a holiday, but this did not match my understanding of human holidays.”

“In retrospect, did it seem like you might have been running from something and possibly hiding?”

I know my answer will be damning to Pierre, but I do not feel like I can, or should, lie. “In retrospect, yes.”

Dr. Chowdhury makes another note on his tablet. “Did anything else seem strange to you?”

The question sparks a memory. Ivy and I went to the Koala Saloon three weeks ago. On the walk home she asked me if anything had seemed strange to me recently, at home. I tell this to the doctor.

“And did it? Did anything seem strange?”

“It did not.”

“Do you know why she asked?”

“I do not.”

The doctor nods and changes the subject again. “Tell me about the Koala Saloon.”

“Have you been there?”

“Yes, but I’d like to hear your impressions of the place.”

I describe the night with Ivy, the performance, the woman who exclaimed she was clapping for robots, Dan the Legend and his flower, all of it.

“And you enjoy the saloon?”

“Oh yes, very much. Seeing the performances inspired me to learn how to play the piano.”

The doctor leans forward, perhaps more interested than he’s been during the entire interview. “You play the piano?”

“Yes, I like to write my own songs.”

“Fascinating.” Again, the word is mumbled. “Herb,” he begins, “I’ve noticed you don’t use contractions in your speech. Were you programmed that way?”

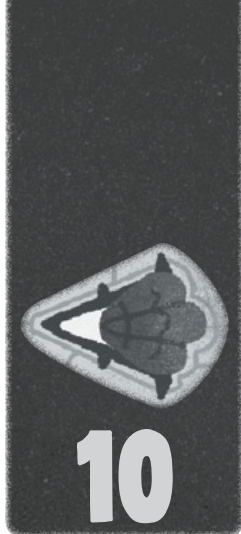
“No,” I answer. “They just seem...unseemly for a robot.”

The doctor makes a flurry of notes, puts his tablet back in his satchel, and stands up. “It has been a great pleasure meeting you, Herb.”

“The pleasure has been mine, Raj.” This is not really true. Nothing about this day has been pleasurable, but if nothing else, we were taught in school how to be polite.

Dr. Chowdhury leaves, pulling the door closed behind him. Officer Charlie comes in a few minutes later. He doesn’t say a word, doesn’t make eye contact. He cuffs me, again making the metal too tight against my skin, and leads me out of the room.

I can’t help but wonder if I’m being taken for deactivation.



IVY, THREE WEEKS EARLIER

I remember the day Maali Peter first came to the lab. Rosemary had been involved with a program at the local human school, teaching students about robotics and artificial intelligence. Maali had been one of the brightest students in the program and Rosemary took notice of her right away. After several sessions at the school, as the two grew closer, Rosemary offered the girl a position in the lab as an assistant. It seemed a strange thing at the time, as Rosemary had never had an assistant before.

I was sitting under a tree near the lab, when I saw Maali make her way onto our property for the first time. She looked happy as she bounced up the stairs to the lab, her thin limbs swinging gracefully. My body's movements don't give away my inner thoughts in such a way. My movements are more controlled but less fluid. Maali had brown eyes, and long hair tied back in a ponytail. I listened to her conversation with Rosemary, who had opened the lab door for her.

"I'm so excited to be working with you," Maali said.

"I'm excited to have you here," Rosemary replied with a smile. "I think we're going to do great things together."

They were both practically giggling. It was a precursor of things to come.

More often than not, Rosemary and Maali would chat and laugh together, completely oblivious to my presence, or, worse, disregarding it entirely. It was as if I wasn't even there. I was supposed to be close to Rosemary, but it was Maali who had the deeper connection. She and Rosemary talked about and bonded over things to which I could not relate, human experiences and emotions I had been programmed to understand but could not truly feel. Just like I was with humans outside of our home, I became "other" to Rosemary. I know I'm not supposed to be able to feel emotional pain, but it hurt. Rosemary was supposed to be the one person on whom I could count, the one who always cared about me.

If Rosemary needed a helping hand around the lab, why hadn't she asked me? I was perfectly capable and was not prone to human error. Instead, I wasn't even allowed into the lab without a chaperone. It would have, as the humans like to say, made my blood boil, if I'd had blood.

Rosemary and Pierre had been unable to have children of their own. It was something that came up in interviews Rosemary gave about the Companion Program. Reporters liked to latch on to the narrative that Companions might ease anxiety for people who did not have children or other family to care for them as they aged. My inference from watching their interactions was that Maali filled the spot in Rosemary's heart she had saved for children. It is a vacancy that I hadn't realised was still open.

Apart from occasionally listening in on her conversations with Rosemary, I hadn't spent much time with Maali. That changed when I recognised I would need her help to gain access to Rosemary's lab.



She was, as one would expect, very bright. But she was also a dreamer. She had aspirations to follow in Rosemary's footsteps, to do a PhD in engineering, and "create products that change the world."

We were sitting in the lab when Maali told me this. Rather, I was sitting in the lab while Maali took an inventory of materials. I had followed her inside, telling her Rosemary had sent me to help. (This was partly true; I had asked Rosemary if I could help and she had said yes.) I guess taking inventory was part of what lab assistants did. I stayed seated on a stool at one of the three counters while Maali moved around the room.

In addition to science, and robotics in particular, Maali was fascinated by Alpha Creek's history. As she worked, she told me some of her own cultural history, correctly assuming I hadn't learned much about it in school. "I'm lucky. Meriam culture held on through the brutality of the European settlers. That wasn't the case everywhere. Maybe it's because we're island folk."

"Island folk?"

"Yes, my family's from Mer, one of the Torres Strait Islands."

We had learned in school that the Torres Strait Islands were off the northern tip of the continent, between Australia and Papua New Guinea. We had also learned that the return of native lands to Indigenous peoples began with a Torres Strait Islander.

"Why did your family relocate from the Torres Strait Islands to Queensland?"

"There aren't many job opportunities on the islands," she said. "Mum came down for mining work."

"Do you like it here?" I asked, knowing that asking questions is a good way to establish a rapport with a human.

"It's the only home I have ever known. My mum always tells me stories of the islands though, of her childhood. She longs for a place where people like us are treated fairly."

"I know what you mean," I offered.

Maali paused and looked at me, her head tilted to one side, her brow knotted in confusion. "You do?"

"Yes. Companions are treated as property rather than people."

Maali held my gaze, and after a long pause, said, "But you are property."

And there it was, in one simple sentence, the plight of Companions. Even someone as young and as intelligent as Maali still saw us as being other, less-than, insignificant.

I didn't answer at first. I merely looked at my shoes. This was what we were taught to do in school. When a human said something we found personally offensive we were never to defend ourselves, never to argue, never to respond. That directive had always bothered me, and on that day, in the lab with Maali, I decided to blaze a different path. I lifted my head.

"No," I said.

Maali whirled around, staring at me like she'd seen a ghost. "What did you say?" The reaction was similar to the psychotherapist's receptionist. I don't know why I thought this girl would be any different.

"I long for a place where Companions are treated with respect and given equal opportunities."

"Wild." Maali muttered this last word to herself. Then she shook her head as if to clear it. "You should have Rosemary run a diagnostic." That was the party line if a Companion responded outside of normal, expected parameters; it had to be a fault in our programming. It just couldn't be that we had weighed up the options and chosen the most logical response.

I let the matter drop. It was an unwise thing for me to say anyway. Not because it wasn't true, but because I didn't want to do anything to arouse Rosemary's suspicions.

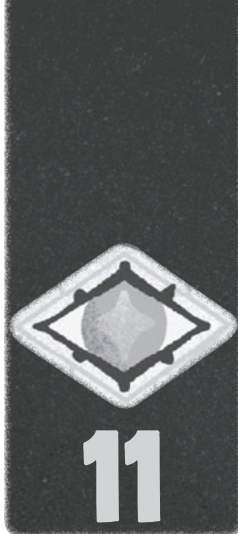


Maali went on to tell me several Meriam folktales that had been passed down through her family. My favourites were about Tagai, a hero of the sea to the Meriam people. In one tale, the twelve-man crew of a boat ate all of the food and drank all of the water that had been prepared for a voyage. In anger and disgust, Tagai threw the men into the ocean; their pattern can still be seen in the stars, in the constellations many people now know as Orion and the Pleiades. It was a tale about the need to share, and the evils of selfishness. Humans love stories about the stars. The Pleiades cluster was independently important to many cultures spanning the globe across thousands of years. The ancient Greeks knew it as the Seven Sisters and the New Zealand Māori called it Matariki, its first rising marking the beginning of the Māori New Year. Thinking about this made me wish that we Companions had our own mythology. What would we want to watch over us in the sky?

All in all, it was a pleasant time spent with the girl, even with her insistence that I was nothing more than property, and I was glad to get to know her a little better. And of course, it served its purpose. I had entered the lab with Maali, who never gave a second's thought to concealing the code on the keypad as she entered it.

1-9-6-8-8-4

I've memorised it and will be back at the first opportunity I get.



HERB

I sit alone in a jail cell. There is a cot and a toilet, cinder block walls and iron bars. It is one of four overnight holding cells along a claustrophobic corridor. A human would likely feel depressed in this setting. I am not burdened by the weight of human emotions, but even I find it difficult to function at my best here.

Officer Charlie deposited me here without a word. He undid my handcuffs, shoved me through the open door, then slammed it shut and left. Without my balance system, I might have fallen.

Pierre must be here too, but I can't see into the other cells.

"Pierre?" I call out.

Another man's voice, that of another prisoner, comes back. "What'dya do, skin job?" There is laughter in his voice.

I lie down on my own cot and stare at the ceiling. It is stained with water damage, as if there is a leaky pipe concealed behind the plaster. I don't respond to the other prisoner and, after a while, he gives up trying to provoke me. It worries me that there is still no response or entreaty from Pierre. I'd expect someone innocent to invest more energy into pleading their case.



I am tired and I feel weak. It occurs to me that it has been nearly a full day since I saw sunlight. I wonder if my jailers know I need solar energy to survive. Well, not survive, but to thrive. I can exist in a low state of energy for a very long time, though I will eventually shut down.

Do they know I also need Fiximite to function at my best? Should I tell them? They may dismiss the request. If deactivation is imminent, allocating additional resources to me would be wasteful. On further reflection, I cannot rule it out. Humans are more prone to waste than any other species on the planet.

I did a project in school on food waste. I learned that the Australian economy loses \$36.6 billion per year to food waste, with half of that coming from household waste. In other words, people were throwing food in the wheelie bin that could have otherwise been used. I have seen this firsthand at home: half-eaten meals, broccoli that rotted in the fridge waiting for its turn to be eaten, still-edible products past their expiration dates, all of it discarded.

At the same time, nearly one billion people on the planet suffer from hunger, and two and a half billion people face food insecurity, not knowing where they might find their next meal. That's more than one in four people alive today. I do not understand why humans do not see the eradication of food waste as a solution, or at least a partial solution, to hunger. Perhaps I'm missing something. I received an A on the paper, which Rosemary proudly displayed on our refrigerator. "Our little Herby," she said at the time. "Maybe you can be the one to solve world hunger." I remember how good that made me feel, the notion that I could contribute to society in such a meaningful way.

Rosemary was smart enough to work on the problem of world hunger herself, but she had chosen to dedicate her life to robotics. Sometimes, when I expressed an interest in working

on ambitious problems she would call me “a child of her own heart.” I liked that I could potentially offer her a way to vicariously live some of her other dreams.

Now, that paper and its observations seem like a very long time ago. Rosemary is accused of murder, and I wither away in a jail cell awaiting my own kind of death sentence. I don’t understand how any of this can be true. I mean, yes, Rosemary is accused of murder, and yes, I am in a jail cell; those things are definitely true. But the underlying premise, that Rosemary and Pierre are killers, simply cannot be true. Can it?

I review the evidence I have gleaned from the officers and from Dr. Chowdhury and make a list in my head. Lists have always helped me make sense of a largely inscrutable world. My paper on hunger was organised with bullet points, which drew praise from the teacher in her written comments, so I think in bullet points now.

- Maali’s body was found buried in the vegetable garden on our property.
- Maali’s throat had been cut.
- Maali had been an assistant in Rosemary’s lab.
- Pierre fled the scene, taking me with him, and doing all he could to obscure not only our whereabouts (discarding my GPS) but also my knowledge of our whereabouts (the burlap sack).
- Pierre treated me well.
- Ivy asked me if I had noticed anything “strange” at home.
- Ivy is missing.

This last one concerns me. If Rosemary and Pierre—Rosemary or Pierre?—did murder Maali, what has become of Ivy? I think through the facts again, and a theory starts to form in my mind.

Pierre did not kill Maali.

He fled and took me with him. Why? If he was guilty, why



not flee on his own? Wouldn't his flight be easier if he was unencumbered? He did nothing during our "holiday" that put me in any danger. Quite the opposite. He was caring for me, teaching me, helping me learn to survive on my own. He even had me attempt to hide from the police. The only logical conclusion I can draw is that Pierre took me with him on his flight from justice to protect me.

But protect me from what?

When I asked Dr. Chowdhury if the police really believe Rosemary and Pierre killed Maali, he said the police "think one or the other did, yes, though the theory is both were aware of what happened." If Pierre knew Rosemary had killed Maali, maybe he was removing me from our home to protect me from Rosemary. But why only me? Why not Ivy?

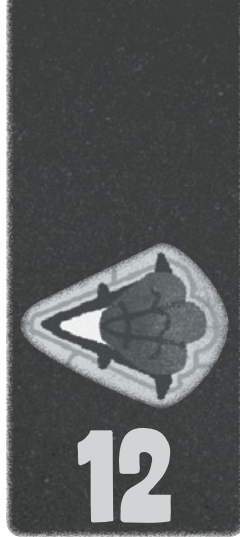
And then it hits me.

Ivy is dead.

Rosemary killed Maali and then killed Ivy to cover the crime. It is the only logical assessment of the facts.

I do my best to clear my mind and start my analysis anew. The result is the same. Either Rosemary killed Maali and Ivy or more facts need to be uncovered. If Ivy was killed for witnessing something she shouldn't have, then what was Rosemary's motive for killing Maali? As I am not in a position to uncover more facts, I feel utterly powerless. I envy humans and their ability to cry.

I close my eyes and try to imagine what it would feel like to be deactivated. I imagine experiencing nothing. I try to remember a time before my earliest memories. I try to grasp the moment before I was activated for the first time, to picture going back there. But I cannot. Mostly, though, I imagine Ivy in that state and hope she is at peace.



IVY, THREE WEEKS EARLIER

My first covert visit to Rosemary's lab was exhilarating.

It was late at night, with no moon to light the world outside our window. Herb lay flat on his back, sound asleep. Robots don't breathe in the conventional sense, so we don't snore. But Herb does sometimes talk in his sleep. I questioned Rosemary about this once and she told me it was a special diagnostic program that runs during our sleep cycle. I thought nothing of it at the time, but when I recalled the conversation later, I saw it for what it was, another one of Rosemary's lies.

Herb was silent on this night. He was so still that were he human, I would have presumed he was dead. Walking softly, I left our bedroom and entered the hallway on the second floor of our house. Save for a night-light visible through the open door of a bathroom, the house was shrouded in inky blackness. The night vision with which all Companions are equipped helped me navigate the stairs to the main level, allowing me to reach the door that led from the kitchen into the backyard.



I paused.

Some homes, I knew, were equipped with security systems. An unexpected entry would trigger a call to the local police, who would be dispatched to investigate. This had happened to our neighbours, the Elwood family. A man struck the front lock until the cylinder snapped, entered the house, and searched for valuables he could later sell. We knew this because the man was apprehended. He was out of work after a smaller mine had shut down, and he had fallen on hard times. He was doing what he believed necessary to support his family. Rosemary and Pierre, and by extension Herb, had been horrified. Stealing, we were taught in school, was wrong. But wasn't going hungry also wrong? If the man had no other means, how wrong was it, really, to steal from someone with ample means, so that he might feed his family? It was, to me, a very grey area.

It also made me wonder, as I crept low by the kitchen door, if our house was outfitted with a security system similar to that of the Elwoods. Rosemary was known to be involved with the Companion Program, and a measure of security made sense. Just look at the lengths she went to to secure her lab.

I almost gave up then and there and went back to bed. Triggering any sort of alarm was too great a risk. But my need to know the truth of what was happening outweighed my need for safety. If I wanted the truth, I needed to put myself at risk.

Slowly, carefully, I turned the bolt lock on the door, its click sounding louder to me than a gunshot. I waited a moment but no lights came on; there was no noise, no alarm. The knob to the door turned more easily than the lock and I pulled it open, the cool night air blowing the fabric of my pyjamas. I exited the house, turning the knob of the door twice as I did, making

ALPHA GREEK

certain it would open from the outside when I returned, and then pulled the door closed behind me as quietly as possible.

Moving quickly, I made my way down the path, past the vegetable garden, and arrived at the door of the lab.

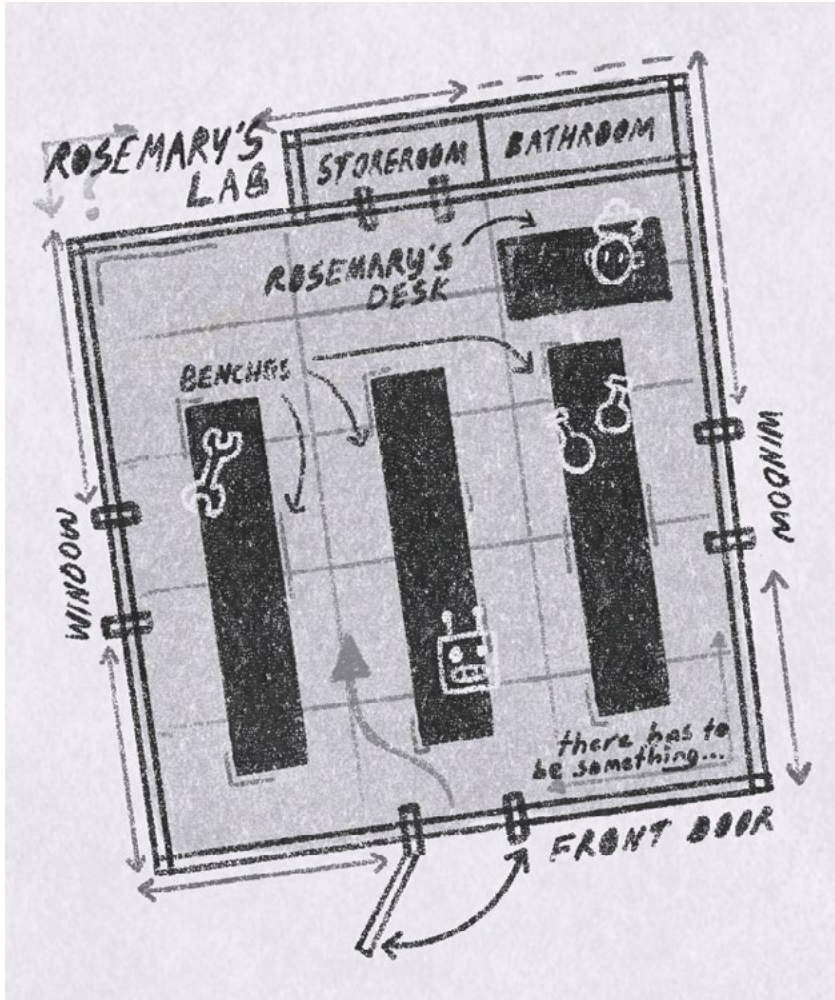
1-9-6-8-8-4

The lock clicked and the little light on the number pad turned green. I entered.

It was just after four a.m. Pierre was an early riser and I knew I needed to be careful about time, not allowing myself more than an hour of investigation. My main goal for that first night was to get the lay of the land, understanding what was where. I planned to make future incursions to search for, well, to search for I didn't know what. But something.

The lab was a large boxy space, approximately ten metres by ten metres. One of the two doors led outside (this was the door through which I'd entered); the door on the opposite wall led to a bathroom and a small storeroom. Three long counter islands ran down the centre of the room, holding a variety of materials: electronic components, beakers of unidentifiable liquids, and machines whose purposes I did not know. Cabinets lined the perimeter of the room and sat beneath the three islands. Rosemary's desk stood at the far end, with a computer on its surface and three drawers underneath.

I had been in the lab before but had never looked at it with such a critical eye. I considered every wall and corner carefully, constructing a mental map.



Circling the room, I opened cabinet doors. Their contents were an extension of the material sitting on the counters—bins of computer processing chips, capacitors, transistors, resistors; vials filled with fluids of varying colours and density; machines whose purposes were a mystery to me.

The drawers to Rosemary's desk were locked, which I found interesting. If the lab required a secret code to enter, why also secure the desk drawers? Was Rosemary hiding something from Maali? From Pierre? The answers to my questions, I suspected, were in those drawers. I searched for a key but found none, which is when I noticed my hour had nearly come to an end.

Like Nancy Drew, I knew my investigation required a methodical approach and discipline. I exited the lab, pulled the door closed behind me, and turned toward the house.

I froze.

A light was visible through a second-floor window. I knew this to be Pierre and Rosemary's shared bathroom. Pierre was up early.

I made haste along the path, gently opened the kitchen door, pulled it softly shut behind me, and turned the bolt lock. The very loud click of the lock made me wince. I paused and waited. No sound.

I skulked through the kitchen, making it to the bottom of the stairs just as Pierre stepped out of his bedroom and started his descent. I ducked around a corner and waited. I heard him stifle a large yawn as he made his way down, which made me hopeful he hadn't seen me. I crouched low behind a table in the hall. Pierre rounded the corner and walked right past me, not noticing I was there, hiding in the darkness.

Once I was certain Pierre was in the kitchen, I crept as quietly as I could up the stairs—the third and fifth steps creaked—but by this time the sound of the coffee maker gave me cover. I re-entered my bedroom and got quickly under the covers.

"Chris!" Herb said, loud enough to make me shriek. "Huh? What?" he said, waking up.

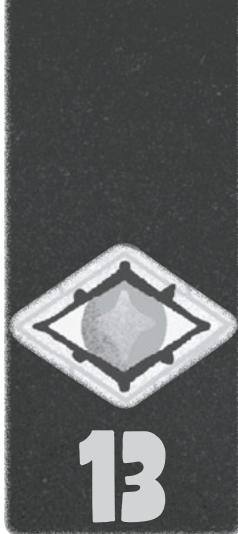
"You were talking in your sleep again," I told him. "Re-enter your sleep cycle."



“Oh, sorry,” he said. Less than thirty seconds later, he was back asleep.

As for me, I had a new goal: Rosemary’s desk drawer. This was going to take some thinking and some planning.

I didn’t re-enter my own sleep cycle the rest of that morning. How could I? I was that much closer to the truth. Now I just needed a plan.



HERB

I'm lying on the jail bed, alone in my cell, when an officer comes for me. My sleep cycle must have initiated because I'm momentarily disoriented when he unlocks the door of sliding iron bars and tells me to follow him. There is no time to run through my morning diagnostics, which makes me feel out of calibration.

"Where are we going, officer?" I ask.

He does not answer. I look back over my shoulder to the cell at the end of the hall and do not immediately see Pierre. I pause to look closer, which elicits a response from the officer.

"Oi, skin job, I haven't got all day."

Whether Pierre is gone or I simply cannot see him from my vantage point, I do not know. Regardless, I turn and follow the officer.

"Excuse me, officer, but do you know if Pierre Thornton has been released?"

Again, the officer does not answer. I will admit, this annoys me. No matter what he might think of me, it's not a reason to be rude. Civility seems to be a dying art. We were taught in school



to be courteous at all times, a lesson reinforced by Rosemary and Pierre. I wonder now if I have been spitting in the wind. (A human phrase I find both fascinating and enjoyable even though I cannot spit.)

One day, many years ago, Ivy returned home from a trip into town with Rosemary. They had been on an errand to the post office, to retrieve a package sent to Rosemary from a roboticist in Bangalore, India. When they left on the excursion, Ivy was excited.

"Imagine, Herb," she said to me before they left, "a package travelling nearly ten thousand kilometres and finding its singular recipient in a different hemisphere. It's a marvel of engineering and logistics." Ivy was fascinated by geography. Maps, air travel routes, flags, all of it. I smiled in response, her enthusiasm infectious. When she returned home, her mood had soured considerably.

She entered our bedroom, slammed the door shut, and lay on the bed with her face in her pillow.

"Ivy?" I asked gently. "Are you okay?"

She rolled onto her back and stared at the ceiling. "Do you know how many people greeted Rosemary on our trip to the post office?"

"I do not. I was not with you, so I have no way of knowing—"

"It's a rhetorical question, Herb."

"Oh." I have been told I am too literal. Most often by Ivy.

"Five people. In the car park, on the footpath, in the queue at the post office. Five people greeted Rosemary."

"Our mother is well-known and well-liked in Alpha Creek," I answered.

"She's not our mother, Herb. She's human and we're not. And that's the point. Because do you know how many of those people greeted me?"

"Is this another rhetorical question?"

Ivy rolled her eyes. “Zero, that’s how many. I said hello to the first few and none of them responded. Then I gave up and stayed by Rosemary’s side like an obedient dog. But even dogs will get petted from time to time. No one paid me any mind or notice. And that’s when I realised the truth. Do you know what we are to these people?” She didn’t wait for my response. “We’re glorified toasters.”

I didn’t answer because I didn’t agree. But now, walking with this officer who uses a pejorative to communicate with me and only when he must communicate with me, I can’t help but wonder if Ivy was correct.

The officer leads me out of the section of the building with the jail cells and through a series of interconnected hallways. Eventually we come to an unremarkable door. He uses a key card to open it and motions with his head for me to enter. I do. The officer stays in the hall and pulls the door shut behind me.

This is very similar to the room in which I was interviewed by Dr. Chowdhury, but I do not think it is the same. The chairs are a slightly different design from the ones in the other room. I suppose someone could have switched the chairs, but it seems more likely that this is simply a different space.

I sit in one of the chairs and wait. Unlike last time, I don’t wait long.

A woman in a white lab coat enters the room. Rosemary sometimes wears a white lab coat when working, and for the briefest instance, for a fraction of a millisecond, I think it is Rosemary. But my hopes are quickly dashed. This woman is young with short, dark, well-coiffed hair. Rosemary has a mane of unkempt white hair and is not as tall.

“Hello,” I say.

“You are the Companion Robot designated as Herbert



Thornton?” she asks in reply. She has a slight accent I cannot place.

“Yes.”

“Please remain seated.”

It’s a strange request, as I did nothing to indicate I was going to stand up.

The woman carries a small satchel which she now puts on the table before me, unzipping it as she does. She removes a small bundle wrapped in black felt.

“What is your name?” I ask. They taught us in school that asking a person’s name is the most effective way to establish rapport with humans, especially if conversation is not forthcoming.

“Dr. Ilsa Hester,” she answers without looking up.

“It is nice to meet you, Dr. Ilsa Hester.” She does not answer.

The doctor places the bundle on the table. I wonder what kind of doctor she is. She loosens the knot in the string, opens the felt and reveals a row of specialised tools. They look very similar to the ones Pierre uses to perform maintenance on Ivy and me.

“If you are going to perform maintenance, I have catalogued several anomalies in my systems. I had intended to tell Rosemary, my human—”

“I am not here to perform maintenance,” she interrupts. I note that she has not yet used a contraction in her speech, and for a moment, I wonder if she is a new, advanced model of Companion Robot. I’m about to ask if this is true when something else occurs to me. If she is not here to perform maintenance, what is she planning to do with these tools?

“Are you here to deactivate me?”

“Yes.”

I don’t know how to respond to this, so I ask the question topmost in my mind. “Will it hurt?”

She does not answer.

Instead, Dr. Hester picks up a slender torch that emits a focused beam of light. She stands in front of me and shines the torch directly into my synthetic eye. She wrinkles her brow and shines the torch into the other eye.

“Curious,” she says aloud.

“What is curious?”

She looks at me. For the first time, she really looks at me.

“Who did your eyes?” she asks.

“My dad.”

“Your dad?” Her tone is incredulous.

“Sorry. Pierre Thornton. He is not my real father. He is human and I am a Companion—”

“It’s an unusual construction.”

“What is?”

“Your eye. The synthetic optic nerve is like none I’ve seen before.” While Dr. Hester is likely talking to herself more than she is to me, I’m still thankful for the conversation. “No matter. When you’re deactivated, we can get in there and get a closer look.”

I let the horror of that last statement pass without comment. Instead, I ask this: “When I am reactivated, what will I remember?”

She looks at me again. “Nothing. Your deactivation request comes with an additional police order to wipe your full memory clean. You will remember nothing.”

This, more than anything, triggers my sadness response. While I do wish I could forget the events of the past nine days, I do not wish to un-remember the eighteen years that preceded those nine days. My very first memory is of Ivy. She and I were introduced to one another. It was before either of us started at the school. Rosemary and Pierre, beaming like proud parents, sat us in front of one another.



“Herby, this is Ivy. She is your sister.”

Even then Ivy started to protest that we could not be brother and sister, but Pierre laid a gentle hand on her shoulder and she stopped.

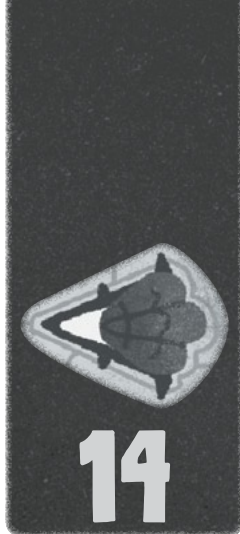
Other memories begin flooding into my consciousness. Playing games at school and learning to laugh with the other students. Meeting Chris, my first friend outside our family unit, and the feeling of joy and independence that gave me. Pierre working on his ute, his hands covered in grease and motor oil almost to his elbows. Pierre and I painting the ute together. Rosemary cooking extravagant meals in the kitchen, the exotic smells filling the house. Trips to the Koala Saloon with Ivy and Chris. Learning to play the piano—the first song was called “Daniel” by an artist named Elton John.

A human will purportedly see their life flash before their eyes in the moments before death. Is this what’s happening to me?

“Doctor,” I begin. But words fail me.

She doesn’t meet my eye. She simply comes at me with an Allen key.





IVY, THREE WEEKS EARLIER

The next morning, life in the household was normal. No one seemed aware of my trip to Rosemary's lab, but I was still on edge most of the day. I worried there was a video surveillance camera I hadn't seen and that I would be found out. It wasn't until dinnertime, after the day had passed with nothing out of the ordinary, that I was finally able to relax.

Rosemary and Pierre had Herb and me sit with them at dinner most nights, the humans eating human food, Herb and I sipping on our Fiximite. Rosemary called it a family meal, and it seemed very important to her, so we complied.

"Did'ya see the news today?" Pierre asked once we were all seated.

"I do not look at news as a matter of course, Dad," Herb answered.

Sometimes he drove me mad. He was so...subservient.

"How about you, Ives?"

I'll admit I liked it when Pierre called me Ives. He was the only one who did, and it made me feel special. I shook my head.

I looked at Rosemary, thinking Pierre would ask her next, but she was staring into space, her mouth slightly agape. Her hands were in her lap and she was so still she looked like a statue. I saw Pierre glance at her before continuing with his story.

“The average temperature here in Australia is now a full two degrees warmer than it was one hundred years ago. Climate scientists are saying the temperature is rising faster here than in any other place on the planet. They’re calling us ground zero for climate change.”

“Two degrees does not seem like very much,” Herb answered. He loved to engage in debate at the dinner table. “If an item is two degrees warmer or cooler, it is not more or less difficult to pick up. It is barely noticeable.”

“You have to think on a larger scale, Herb,” Pierre answered. “The Earth is a carefully balanced biome. Even the slightest change will upset the balance. The consequences could be catastrophic.”

“Like what?” he asked.

“Well, like Sydney Opera House. The water in the harbour has claimed most of the land surrounding the Opera House. It’s bad enough that tours and events have been cancelled.”

“I do not understand,” Herb said. “Did Australia not mandate and achieve a carbon-neutral economy? They taught us about this in school.”

I snuck another peek at Rosemary. She had not moved an iota. A small bit of spittle was forming at the corner of her mouth. I looked at Pierre, willing him to do something or at least notice that his wife was comatose. But he went on like nothing was wrong. Rosemary’s catatonic state was causing me no small amount of alarm.

“You’re right, Herb. And good on you for knowing that. But carbon emissions are a global problem. And even if the entire



world were to follow our lead, it's too little, too late. I'm afraid the worst is yet to come."

No longer able to stand it, I whispered Rosemary's name. My voice was so soft I wasn't sure at first if anyone was able to hear. But the reaction was immediate.

"Yes, dear?" Rosemary snapped back to reality as if someone had flipped a light switch. She looked at me now with a big smile on her face.

It took a lot to catch me off guard. I prided myself on being alert, aware, and ready for whatever the world threw my way. But this reaction caught me off guard.

"Oh, uh, nothing," I answered. "You just seemed like you were far away."

Rosemary's cheeks flushed and she looked at Pierre. I saw them exchange some kind of knowing glance, only I didn't know what it meant. Herb, of course, was oblivious to it all.

"Drink your Fiximite, Ivy," she said. Rosemary finally moved her hand off her lap to take her fork, the charm bracelet she always wore jangling as she did. And that's when I noticed it. How could I have never seen it before? I suppose because I hadn't been looking for it. There, on her bracelet, in between a small kangaroo charm and a small metal beaker was a slightly larger metal key. I don't know how I knew, but I was certain this was the key to her desk drawer, the one in her lab that held, I firmly believed, the answers to my many questions.

I kept my composure and forced myself to look away, but I immediately started scheming in my mind.

Getting that key was going to be a challenge. Rosemary always wore that bracelet and now I knew why. Did she sleep with it, I wondered? Shower with it?

Even if she did take it off for short stretches, I would never be able to get my hands on it, and I would never have enough time

with the key to take it to the lab and search through her drawers. I would need a pretext to convince Rosemary to willingly give me the bracelet. But what? What reason could I possibly have to need her bracelet?

It was in that moment I had a stroke of unusual luck.

Let me be clear. I have never believed in luck. The nature of the universe is that coincidences happen; it's a mathematical fact. Think about it. There are nearly nine billion humans on the planet. If one-tenth of one per cent of them have an unusual coincidence once a month, that's still nine million coincidences every thirty days, one hundred and eight million every year. If humans mistake that for luck, it's their problem, not mine. But either way, on this day, at this time, a very fortunate coincidence took the form of a question from Pierre.

"Have you given any thought, love," he said to Rosemary, "to how you want to celebrate your birthday?"

"Oh, just a family dinner and maybe a show on the VR after." She smiled at the three of us.

Her birthday. Herb and I bought her a present every year. This year, I knew exactly what that present would be.

After the dishes had been cleared, I followed Pierre to the family room, where he was settling in with his tablet.

"Father," I said. I know, ridiculous to call him Father, but you catch more flies with honey, or so the saying goes. He looked up, surprised but pleased at my entreaty.

"What can I do for you, Ives?"

"Herb and I wish to get Mother a present for her birthday."

"That's very nice of you. I'm sure she'll appreciate it." He turned his attention back to his tablet.

"Well, you see, the thing is, we want to get her a new charm for her bracelet. It would be so much easier if we could take the



bracelet with us, to match the size and colour of the existing charms, but we want it to be a surprise.”

“Right. Let me see what I can do.” He smiled at me and winked.

The next morning, Pierre came early to our room, holding Rosemary’s bracelet. “Your mother is resting right now, so I don’t know how much time you have. But here you go.” Herb, who knew nothing about this, looked as if he was going to protest, but I caught his eye and he stayed silent.

“Thank you, Father!” I squealed with delight. “Mother will be so happy.”

When Pierre left the room, I explained about the surprise for Rosemary’s birthday. Herb wanted to come with me, but I convinced him to stay behind and cover for me in case Rosemary got up. He knew nothing about my real plan. Ever the trusting Companion, Herb agreed.

I took the bracelet and left quickly, heading straight for the jewellery shop in town. While I would of course buy Rosemary a new charm, I would also have a copy of that key made. If all went well, I would finally find answers, and I would do it that very night.



HERB

“Excuse me, Dr. Hester?”

I’m in the chair facing the door, so I see Dr. Chowdhury enter. He’s wearing a different shirt from when I saw him last and he looks refreshed. I presume he went home and slept. He carries a tablet in his hand.

Dr. Hester, the Allen key still in her hand, turns to face the door. “What can I do for you, Raj?”

“I’m sorry, Ilsa, but I’m here to take custody of Herbert.”

This is a curious thing to say on two levels. First, is Dr. Chowdhury sorry because he is interrupting Dr. Hester in her work? And second, I am already in custody. Aren’t I?

“I have a court order to shut this unit down and wipe its memory.”

“I know, I know, but there’s been a change. Herbert has been temporarily assigned to a new owner. It seems the court feels he may still have value as a witness.”

I am programmed to express relief and I do so now. I let my shoulders sag and exhale a long, low breath. And if I’m being honest, I *feel* relief, too. Immense relief.



Dr. Hester turns to look at me, then looks back at Dr. Chowdhury. She shrugs her shoulders, repacks her bundle, and puts it in the satchel.

“I’m sorry you had to waste your time,” Dr. Chowdhury offers.

“Doesn’t matter to me. I get paid either way.” Dr. Hester, my would-be assassin, flashes a smile and leaves the room.

“Phew!” Dr. Chowdhury says after the door closes behind her. “How are you holding up, Herb?”

This is the first question anyone has asked about my state of well-being since this nightmare began. Even the questions from Officer Logan and the earlier interview with Dr. Chowdhury, while both gentle and polite, were merely efforts to gain information in the service of their investigation.

“I am not sure how I am holding up,” I answer honestly. “There has been much to process in a relatively short amount of time.”

This elicits a smile from Dr. Chowdhury. “Indeed.”

“Tell me, Dr. Ch—” I pause, remembering this man wanted me to call him by his first name. “Tell me, Raj, to what owner have I been assigned?”

Dr. Chowdhury turns his tablet so I can see the screen. An official-looking form is displayed on the tablet. It looks like this:

Form AU-AI-36/4

Certificate of Provisional Companion Assignment

Generation III – Post-Educational Integration Trial

Date: December 13, 2035

Subject: Herbert Thornton, AID 0122027

Companion Assignee: Dr. Rajiv Chowdhury

I stop reading.

“You? I am to be your new Companion?”

“If that’s okay with you.”

This is also curious. Companions do not have a say in their assignments. It is a one-sided arrangement. And yet, I sense a sincerity in the question.

“Yes,” I answer. “Very much so.”

“Good. Then follow me. We have some paperwork to process and then we can head home.”

“Raj, may I ask a question first?” He nods. “Why?”

His mouth eases into a pleasing smirk. “Why what, Herb?”

“Why have I been assigned to you? Was this a random assignment or did you request it?”

“A very astute question. I requested it.”

For reasons I cannot explain, this makes me even happier. But it does not make sense. “I do not understand. Does this not compromise your role in the investigation? Pairing us would render your estimation of what I might or might not know about the murder of Maali Peter as tainted.”

“Again, very astute of you. I have recused myself from the case.”

“What? Why?”

“I’m a cybernetic psychologist, Herb. Do you know what that means?”

“Yes,” I answer. “It means you study why AI systems make the decisions they do.”

“Yes, very good. I have studied hundreds of robots in my career, looking at how they process information, regulate themselves, and respond to their environment. And in all my studies, Herb, I have never met an intelligence like you.”

This surprises me. “Have you not met other Companions?”

“I have interviewed several Companions. Those interviews are so predictable they could have been scripted in advance. But not my interview with you.”



I am not sure what to make of this, so I am not sure which emotion to display. Should I present as flattered? Concerned? Curious? The last one is closest to the truth. “Really? How am I different?” I ask.

“You make a conscious decision not to use contractions.”

“Yes. I believe it makes me a better robot.”

“Yet no other robot does this. Do you see the irony? But that’s just the tip of the iceberg.”

“Tip of the iceberg?” I ask. It is not uncommon for me to encounter turns of phrase I have never heard before. We were taught in school to always ask, to continue our learning.

Dr. Chowdhury smiles. “Icebergs are masses of ice that float in the extreme southern or northern seas. Only a tiny portion of the iceberg appears above water. The rest of it, most of its bulk, is unseen. So, when used, the expression references what is only a small amount of a much larger store of information. Does that make sense?”

It is an excellent explanation and done in a way that is easy for me to process. Clearly Dr. Chowdhury has a lot of experience in talking with Companions. “Yes, thank you.”

“Beyond contractions, you have a familial relationship with Ivy, Rosemary, and Pierre. You play piano. You write songs!”

“But Dan the Legend also writes and performs his own songs,” I point out.

“Dan and the other performance robots are specialised machines designed exactly for that purpose. Dan did not learn the piano by choice; he was loaded with a pre-trained model. You, however, seem to have the ability to master a wide range of tasks.”

I’m not so convinced that I’m anything special, knowing that other Companions like Ivy and Chris are just as competent at learning new things as I am. But Dr. Chowdhury continues to shower me with compliments, so I go along with it.

“Herb, you surprise me all the time. You’ve given me renewed vigour for the Companion Program as a potential turning point in artificial development. Not to get too far ahead of ourselves, but I suspect you may be a true bridge between tool and thinker.”

I have no idea how to respond to this, so I do not. How could I, Herbert Thornton, possibly be anything so important? It does not compute.

“C’mon.” Dr. Chowdhury smiles at me. “Let’s go.”

We leave the interrogation room and the police station together. On our way out, I scan the halls for signs of Pierre. I feel bad leaving without him, but if he has done what they say, then I will have to rationalise that with my happy memories of the man I called “Dad.”



IVY, THREE WEEKS EARLIER

With the copied key in my possession, I unlocked the drawers of Rosemary's desk. Inside were stacked manila folders, labelled with Rosemary's handwriting. One named *Neurology* caught my attention immediately. Assuming these were her medical records, I pored over brain scan images and notes on cognitive decline. But then I spotted the name: the patient was Rosemary's mother.

After two hours looking through every paper in Rosemary's desk, I was no closer to understanding what was going on. There were dozens of folders documenting hundreds of experiments in robotics, but nothing about me, nothing about what was wrong with Rosemary and nothing to explain why she was trying to hurt me.

All that effort to gain access and it was all for naught.

My trip to town earlier that day with the charm bracelet had gone according to plan. I'd bought Rosemary a new charm—a tiny chrome bicycle, representing one of her favourite pastimes—which Herb and I presented at her birthday dinner that same night. She loved it, and got up from the table to hug each of us in turn.

I had, of course, also made a separate stop at the hardware store and had them make a copy of the key. Payment for the service would show on Pierre's house account—Companion Robots were not trusted with money (ridiculous); instead, we were able to charge needed items to our owners' accounts. I decided it was worth the risk. Pierre spent so much money at the shop that one small item might escape his notice. Or at least that's what I hoped. I tucked the key into my pocket and returned home.

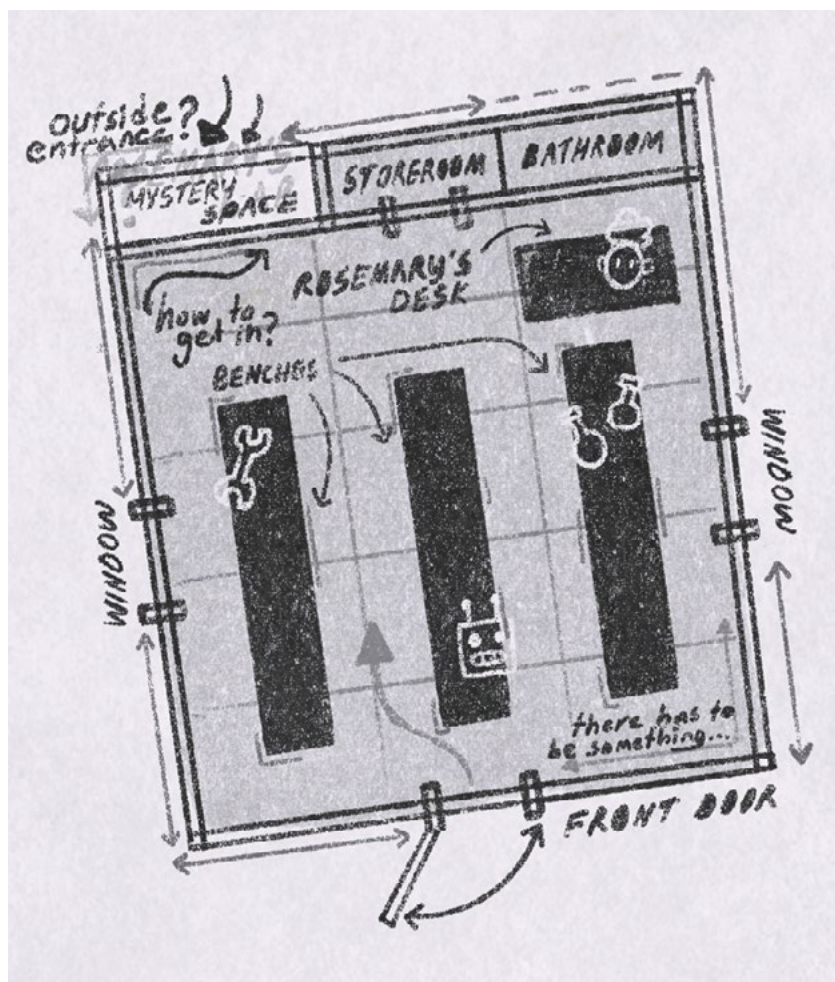
After dinner, Pierre tried to teach us all some weird idea about a four-dimensional cube. I couldn't focus on what he was saying, though, as I was mentally planning my next move.

Once everyone had gone to bed, I waited until I was certain the house was asleep. Then I made my covert way to the lab once again.

I took a torch with me and looked at Rosemary's papers while seated underneath her desk; I was worried the beam of light would be visible through the windows. Apart from the papers, there was only a small velvet pouch containing a pair of earrings I had seen her wear once. I had executed my plan flawlessly and been rewarded with failure.

I turned the torch off, replaced the folders exactly as I had found them, and made for the exit. Not wanting to encounter Pierre again, I had given myself an earlier curfew tonight. I had got lucky last time and didn't want to risk (almost) running into him a second time.

Before stepping through the door, I turned to stare at the lab, wondering what I was missing. There was nothing on the counters, nothing in the cabinets, and nothing on or in Rosemary's desk to help in my investigation. There wasn't even anything in the storeroom or the bathroom—I had searched both—so what could it be?



Wait.

The storeroom.

Of course...the storeroom!

I let the door close behind me and made straight for the back door on the opposite wall. I opened it and turned left. I counted

the number of paces from the storeroom entrance to the back wall. Eight. Only eight paces.

I went back into the lab and turned right. I was now facing the same direction as I had been in the storeroom, and I counted off paces once again. Seventeen. Seventeen paces! Where was the space to account for those nine extra paces?

I rushed back outside and circled the lab. I expected the back wall to stop where the storeroom ended; instead it continued to the main wall of the building, so that the outside of the lab formed an almost perfect square. The only logical conclusion was that there was a hidden space in the back of the lab. There had to be. I updated my mental map to reflect the new information.

The eastern sky was starting to show the first hint of morning light. No matter how much I wanted to investigate this mysterious space then and there, it was too late. My hope had been dashed only moments ago, but now it was born anew. There was a secret room in that lab, and I was going to find it.



HERB

Dr. Chowdhury's house is modest compared to that of Rosemary and Pierre. It is a single-storey Queenslander with a living room, a kitchen with a dining area, two bedrooms, and a small office.

"Do you live here alone?" I ask as he gives me a tour of the space.

"No, I'm married. My wife, Indira, is at work."

"What does Mrs. Chowdhury do?"

"Oh, she runs the world," he answers with a smile. I assume Mrs. Chowdhury holds a position of great importance, though I don't feel comfortable enough to ask for more details.

"You'll sleep here, Herb," he says, showing me the smaller of the two bedrooms. It has two single beds, one of which has bedsheets featuring images of dinosaurs and is unmade. The other bed is neat and tidy and the linen displays no animals.

"Do you have a son?" I ask.

"Very perceptive, Herb. But she's a daughter. Her name is Margaret."

"That is not an Indian name," I reply. I am confused

because both Dr. Chowdhury and his wife have traditional Indian first names.”

“When in Rome,” he says.

“We are not in Rome.”

“Sorry, it’s an expression.”

“I know the expression, Raj. I was making a joke. Was it not funny?”

Dr. Chowdhury pauses and looks at me. “That, Herb, is exactly what I’m talking about. You’re the only Companion I’ve ever heard tell a joke.”

“I enjoy jokes.” The answer is honest. I find pleasure in jokes. I don’t always understand them, but I enjoy them.

“Do you have a favourite joke?”

“Why did the robot cross the road?” This was the joke I told Chris. It was the first joke I ever made up on my own.

“To get to the other side?”

Dr. Chowdhury’s answer surprises me. “You have heard this joke before?”

“With a chicken,” he answers. “Why did the chicken cross the road.”

“Yes, I have heard that, too. But my joke was with a robot. How did you know the answer would be the same?”

Dr. Chowdhury pauses and squints at the ceiling. We learned in school that this expression indicates that a human is deep in thought. I try to mimic the look on his face, narrowing my eyes as I look up. My new owner sees this and laughs. I stop trying to mimic his expression.

“Sorry, Herb. But again, you are just unlike any robot I’ve met. And the answer to your question, about the joke, is that while your joke is excellent, it’s derivative. Do you know that word?”

“Yes, Raj, I know many words.”



“Good, good. Asking why a robot would cross the road, when most people have heard the same question about a chicken, well, it’s a logical conclusion to presume the robot was also trying to get to the other side.”

“Would my joke be better if the answer is less predictable?” I ask.

“I think so. But I guess it depends on what the answer would be.”

“Why did the robot cross the road?” I ask again.

“I don’t know, Herb,” Dr. Chowdhury answers. There is a broad smile on his face, as if he is very pleased with me. I’ve seen similar expressions on both Rosemary’s and Pierre’s faces. This makes me happy. “Why *did* the robot cross the road?”

“To catch the chicken.”

Dr. Chowdhury pauses for a second and then bursts out laughing. “You just made that up?” he asks as his laughter subsides.

“I did. Your comment made me realise that connecting my joke to the original would be familiar yet unexpected for the listener. From the jokes I have heard, I presumed that would be a good paradigm.”

“It’s brilliant is what it is.”

I hear a door open and close in the other room. From the direction of the sound, I’m fairly certain I’m hearing the front door to the house.

“We’re home!” a woman calls out. From her statement I believe this to be Mrs. Chowdhury. And from her use of the plural pronoun, I guess Margaret is with her.

“In here,” Dr. Chowdhury calls back.

A few seconds later a woman in her late twenties or early thirties rounds the corner. She has long black hair in a braid and wears a brightly coloured dress. She gives a joyful smile when she sees me.

“You must be Herb,” she says, extending a hand in my direction. I take the hand and shake it as I was taught to do at school.

“I am Herb,” I answer. “You are Mrs. Chowdhury?”

“Please, call me Indira,” she says as she releases my hand. I’m never quite sure how long a handshake should last.

I have heard Mrs. Chowdhury’s first name before, in history class at school, and it was pronounced differently. Mrs. Chowdhury puts the emphasis on the first syllable: IN-deruh. “I will, Indira,” I say, taking care to say it correctly. “Thank you for allowing me to stay in your home.”

“It’s our pleasure.” She turns and looks in the hallway outside the bedroom. “Maggie, come meet Herb.”

A small face peeks around the corner of the doorway. It belongs to a young girl who looks to be a near perfect copy of Mrs. Chowdhury. The same hairstyle, just shorter, and an equally bright dress.

I get down on one knee, to bring myself eye level with Margaret or, as her mother called her, Maggie. This is another thing we were taught to do in school. When conversing with a child or a very short adult, always put your face on a level with their face. It will make them more comfortable, less threatened.

“Hello,” I offer, “my name is Herb.”

The girl clutches her mother’s leg.

“It’s okay, peanut,” Dr. Chowdhury says. “Herb is a friend.”

“C. J. at school says robots are bad.” Maggie blurts it out, as if she was afraid to say this.

“Does she say why?” Dr. Chowdhury asks. This is a very good question. Most humans have a distrust of artificial intelligence for ill-defined, amorphous reasons. It’s unlikely his daughter will be able to provide anything concrete which will enable Dr. and Mrs. Chowdhury to dispel their daughter’s prejudice.



“She said they took her dad’s job away, and that they can’t feel things, so they don’t care about people or anything.”

So much for my theory.

Dr. Chowdhury looks like he’s gathering his thoughts—I very much appreciate this trait of his, that he does not speak without thinking—but I don’t give him the chance.

“Does the father of your friend work in the mines?” I ask.

Maggie nods.

“I do not work in mines. I am programmed to help people in their homes, to provide...friendship.” I was going to say companionship, but I suspect a human this young will not know the word.

“What kind of help?”

“Any kind,” I answer. “Whatever the person needs.”

“Can you help me with my homework?”

Dr. and Mrs. Chowdhury laugh, but I do not. I have been laughed at many times when asking serious questions, and I do not like it. I will not do that to Maggie.

“In what subject is your homework?” I ask.

“Maths. Multiplication.”

“I am very good at multiplication. For example, I can tell you that one thousand two hundred and twenty-four times nine is eleven thousand and sixteen.”

Maggie pauses. “Do you know three times six?”

I see her mother stifle another laugh.

“I do,” I answer. “It is eighteen.”

Maggie considers this for a moment. “That’s right.” She smiles at me. “And you’ll help me learn the times tables?”

“If you would like me to, yes.” At school they told us to always get the permission of the parents before helping a child, so I look at Dr. and Mrs. Chowdhury. “If it is all right with your parents,” I say.

“Yes,” Mrs. Chowdhury answers. “That would be lovely, Herb.” She turns to her husband. “I’m going to commandeer the office if that’s okay. I have some work to finish.”

“Back to running the world?” I ask, recalling Dr. Chowdhury’s description of his wife’s work and trying to be friendly.

There is a long pause. Mrs. Chowdhury looks confused. Dr. Chowdhury rubs the back of his neck. Maggie has her hand over her mouth and is trying not to laugh.

“Did I say something wrong?” I ask.

Another pause, and then all three members of my new family burst out laughing.

“I bake bread, Herb. Mostly sourdough,” Mrs. Chowdhury says. It occurs to me that I have only been in this house for a few hours, and I have known Dr. Chowdhury for just over one day and his wife and daughter less than ten minutes, and yet, I am happy here.

Very happy.

Something else occurs to me too. “Raj, could I please use your restroom?” With my question the laughter winds to a quiet pause. Dr. Chowdhury looks a little flustered, but only for a moment, as he promptly remembers the needs of Companions.

“Sure, Herb, just this way, second door on the left,” he says, standing and pointing me to a hallway.

Maggie, however, bursts out laughing again. “Robots don’t need a toilet!” she giggles.

“Companions and other advanced robots do ingest a regular supply of self-repair nanobots immersed in a mixture of lubrication and cooling fluids. That’s their Fiximite. What goes in must come out,” Dr. Chowdhury explains to her.

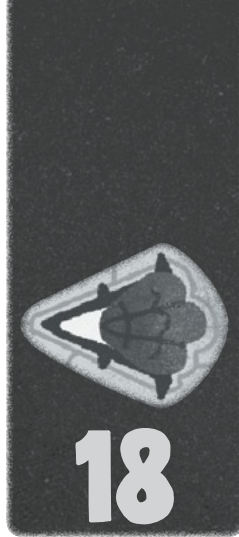
“Self-repair nanobots?” Maggie inquires, not sure if her dad is being serious.



“Yes,” Dr. Chowdhury continues, “they are tiny machines about the width of a human hair that can automatically fix minor damage like frayed wiring and have antioxidant properties to prevent rusting of metal parts.”

“Woah!” Maggie’s wide eyes watch me disappear around the corner on my way to the bathroom. There, I remove my artificial bladder and pour its contents into a discarded shampoo bottle. I screw the lid shut and place it back in the bin. When I’m done, I flush the toilet, even though I don’t need to. I know Maggie is likely observing me. I remember: *The more humanlike the Companion Robot, the happier the human.*

The bathroom wallpaper features colourful starfish on a blue backdrop, evoking thoughts of the ocean. The bathroom in my old home had a similar underwater theme. Amidst all the changes I have experienced over the last few days, this one familiarity makes me think that I might be okay here and that I will fit in just fine in this new home.



IVY, THREE WEEKS EARLIER

The next day I was wracked with anxiety.

Rosemary's lab had a secret room. Well, I couldn't yet prove it, but the evidence was pretty clear. I suppose the space inside the walls *could* be for electricity, plumbing, and air circulation, but I didn't think so.

Once, when workmen were upgrading the upstairs bathroom in the main house, they needed to shut off the water. Rosemary complained that she needed to use the water in the lab for time-sensitive experiments that same day. As Rosemary gets what Rosemary wants, the workers rescheduled for the following day. The exchange made it clear the inner workings of the lab were tied to the inner workings of the main house. The only explanation I could find for the existence of an additional ten square metres of space in the lab (my best estimate) was secrecy.

It meant that either Rosemary knew she was going to have secrets when the lab was constructed or that the hidden room was added later. The room must've been built before Herb and I joined the family. Did Pierre know the room existed? Did Maali?



How big was Rosemary's secret that she went to such extreme lengths to hide it?

My imagination ran wild. Perhaps there were other Companions she had treated badly and their dismantled bodies were in the secret room. Or maybe she had done this—what she was doing to me—to a human child, and the evidence of her crimes were in those walls. Each and every theory I concocted was darker than the one that preceded it. I already knew I was in danger from Rosemary, and my state of mind only heightened that fear. I needed to tell someone, but there was no one to tell.

I looked over at Herb's neatly made bed—he was out on an errand—and wondered again about sharing my fears with him. He was my only confidant. Could I trust him?

Herb was the most trustworthy being I knew, but when I explained my theory about Rosemary hurting me, he would assume what anyone else would assume: that I was crazy. Or being a Companion, that I was malfunctioning, and he would tell Rosemary and Pierre. The little evidence I had already gathered would not be enough to convince him otherwise. No, I was still on my own.

But that didn't mean I couldn't warn Herb.

I decided to leave him a note in case something happened to me. I would have to place it where only Herb would find it, someplace Rosemary and Pierre would have no reason to look. It would also need to survive should I not; such a note, I decided, must be analog, not digital.

I reached under my bed and took out one of Aunt Marjorie's old books. It was a hefty tome called *The Fatal Shore: The Epic of Australia's Founding*. I tore a page from the back of the book, one with writing on only one side.

Although we had been taught to write by hand in school—I'd thought it was a wasted effort at the time, but in this moment

was glad for the knowledge—I didn't own a writing implement. Herb did. He liked to draw and write stories and write songs. Rosemary had bought him a sketchpad and set of coloured pencils to encourage him.

The pencils were arrayed in perfect rows in their carrying case on his desk. (Herb was very, very neat.) I selected a dark brown pencil and sat down to write. I included the details Herb would need to continue my investigation, or perhaps to save himself.

I then hid the note in a place where I thought only Herb would discover it and exited the bedroom.

Rosemary and Pierre had left early in the morning for a trip to Brisbane. They'd told everyone they were going to a conference, but I had seen a notification for a medical appointment flash up on Rosemary's tablet. I contemplated entering the lab during daylight hours, but there was always the chance Maali would stop by. Besides, there was something exciting about conducting the investigation in the middle of the night.

I didn't, however, see any real danger in examining the structure from the outside, and that was better done when it was light. If Maali or anyone else came by, it would be easy to explain my presence outside the building.

The lab was constructed of concrete and painted a dim shade of white. There were no external connections to plumbing or wiring; I guessed those were underground. Circling to the back of the structure, I examined what I believed to be the outside wall of the secret room. It was completely unremarkable. There were no seams, no hidden doors (that I could find), no displaced earth at the base of the wall. It was an off-white wall made of concrete that appeared no different from the rest of the exterior walls.

If there was, as I now strongly believed, a hidden space, the way in was through the storeroom. One way or another, I would find the answers that very night.



HERB

“No, it’s not!” Maggie is emphatic, convinced I must be wrong.

“I am sorry, Maggie, four times zero is zero.”

“How can anything times anything else be zero? It has to be four.”

We are in Maggie’s bedroom, each sitting on our own bed. She has her school tablet in her lap and wears a pair of shorts and a T-shirt with a character from a popular children’s program on the VR. Like on her bedsheets, the character is a dinosaur. This gives me an idea.

“If you have one dinosaur,” I ask, “how many dinosaurs do you have?”

She looks confused. “One?”

“Yes, so one dinosaur times one dinosaur is one dinosaur. Yes?”

“Okaayyy...”

“If you have no dinosaurs, how many do you have?”

She thinks about this for a minute and I see the first flicker of understanding in her eyes. There is a certain kind of magic when a human grasps something for the first time. (I know magic

isn't real, but I don't have another word for it.) I saw this with Rosemary and Pierre, when one or the other would grab hold of an idea for the first time. There was a subtle change in their eyes that I could not quantify.

Is the moment of understanding in a Companion equally expressive? The only way to test this would be in front of a mirror when such a moment of understanding dawns on me, but since such moments are truly organic, I'm not sure this is possible. Perhaps I could test it with another Companion. This makes me think of Chris. I would like to see my friend again.

"Zero?" Maggie answers.

"Yes," I say with a smile. "If you have no dinosaurs, you have zero dinosaurs." I put emphasis on the word *zero*. "So one dinosaur times zero dinosaurs is still zero dinosaurs."

"Oh!" she exclaims, understanding fully dawning on her now. "Anything times zero is zero, because it's that thing zero times!" Maggie is a very bright girl.

"Yes." I feel something akin to pride, though I'm not sure if I'm programmed to feel pride.

"Thanks, Herb!"

"It is my pleasure, Maggie." And it is. I've been in this house for only three days, and already I feel at home, and already I have grown fond of this young human. In spite of her mistrust of robots at our first meeting, she might be the only human I have met who does not judge me. To her, I'm just another person. It's also worth noting that she's the only human child with whom I've had any prolonged or meaningful interaction.

"May I ask you a question?"

"Sure," Maggie says. "Then can we play a game?"

"Yes, I would like that."

"What do you want to play?"

"You choose."



“Okay. I’ll think about it while you ask your question.”

This makes me smile. “Why do you like dinosaurs so much?”

She tilts her heads and squints her eyes, as if she cannot quite believe how brainless I am. “Are you kidding?”

“No,” I answer. “While I enjoy jokes, I am not making a joke now.”

For some reason this makes her giggle. “You’re funny, Herb.”

“I am?”

“Yes. Even when you’re not telling a joke.”

This is interesting to me and I would like to explore it more. I would also like to hear the answer to my question, but I don’t get the chance for either.

“Herb!” Dr. Chowdhury calls from the other room. “Can you come here a sec?”

I like that humans use terms like “come here a sec,” as if our encounter will last only one second. Short of bumping into someone in a crowd, there are no human interactions that last a single second.

“I must go and see what your father wants. Can we play our game after?”

“Uh-huh,” Maggie answers, her attention already distracted by something on her tablet.

I find Dr. Chowdhury in his office. He’s seated in front of his computer, papers scattered on his desk.

“Were you able to help Maggie with her homework?”

“Yes,” I answer. “She is a very bright girl.”

“She is, isn’t she?”

I don’t respond; I merely wait for Dr. Chowdhury to continue.

“Herb, have you heard of the Lovelace Literary Prize?”

“I have heard of many things, Raj, but I am not familiar with the Lovelace Literary Prize. What is it a prize for?”

“It’s a kind of contest. A graduate professor in the AI program at ANU has offered a prize for the first robot to pass a unique kind of Turing test.”

There are a number of things in Dr. Chowdhury’s statement that confuse me. “What is an ANU?” I ask.

“Sorry, Herb, I shouldn’t speak in shorthand. The Australian National University, in Canberra.”

I know Canberra is Australia’s capital but not much more. “What is a Turing test?”

“Have you heard of Alan Turing?”

“I have not.”

“Right,” Dr. Chowdhury says. “That makes sense. The Companion School makes a point of not teaching any computer science beyond the introductory level. You could, of course, figure it out for yourself, but images of robots in a classroom learning the theoretical limits of artificial intelligence tend to alarm the public. Because the Companion Program receives some government funding, it has to comply.”

This is troubling to me. It is the first time I have heard that our school purposefully omitted readily accessible knowledge from our curriculum. I had just presumed we were taught everything a human child was taught. Now that I think about it, I see how naive this was. But it’s also troubling to me for a different reason.

“Am I not self-aware?” I ask.

“Companions are, in a manner of speaking, self-aware but not fully self-aware. They are aware they exist, and they know their function, but they are not capable of questioning that function. It’s inherent in their design.”

This seems false to me. “I question many things,” I tell Dr. Chowdhury.

“Well, you, Herb, are exceptional. You demonstrate impressive control over your learned behaviour, but even you lack control



of your programmed behaviour. The fear around teaching computer science is that a robot may learn enough to unlock those fundamental laws that govern your actions and prevent you from harming humans.”

I suppose the government’s rule works because such an idea had never occurred to me.

“But let’s get back to the Turing test and the Lovelace Prize.” Dr. Chowdhury pauses, as if he’s waiting for me to say something or perhaps giving me a chance to ask a question, but I do not have another question, so he continues. “Alan Turing was a code breaker for the British government during the Second World War. The government would intercept coded messages from the Nazis, and Turing and his team would decipher them. Much of the maths and many of the theories he developed paved the way for the establishment of modern computing. In fact, he is widely considered the father of modern computing.”

“And his test?” I ask.

“In 1950, Turing posited the question ‘Can machines think?’ Remember, this is a time when there were no robots, no laptops, no home computers, no tablets. The computers of this era took up entire rooms and had grown out of military projects. While they could perform certain calculations much faster than any human, they were primitive compared to the computers we have today. So for Turing to even ask this question was truly groundbreaking.

“Anyway, in answer to his own question, Turing proposed a test, something he called ‘The Imitation Game.’ The idea was simple: a human judge would converse with two entities via a text chat. One of the participants was human, the other a machine. If the judge could not reliably tell which was which, the machine was deemed to have passed the test.”

"I think many robots will have passed this test by now," I tell Dr. Chowdhury.

"Yes, they have. But that test was for simple, text-based conversation. The Lovelace test is a more recent invention, designed to test creativity."

"Creativity?"

"Yes. The judges in this test are trying to find a machine that can create something wholly original that would be indistinguishable from a human creation."

"But there are many AI tools that can write a story, compose a song, or paint an artwork."

"Yes. In fact, the majority of genre-specific novels and formulaic screenplays are now written entirely by AI. Those who enjoy such books and films are none the wiser, and truth be told, experts have trouble telling the difference between a human-generated romance novel and one written by AI. The format for these kinds of stories is so predictable that it doesn't really matter who, or what, is writing it. It's the formula rather than the creativity that matters."

"Have those machines not passed the Lovelace test? You said their work is indistinguishable."

"Yes, but a machine has yet to create anything that experts deem to have true literary merit, though many have tried. And that's what the Lovelace Prize is for. The first machine to create a novel, novella, or short story of at least twenty thousand words that has literary merit and which a panel of experts is unable to distinguish from the work of a human author, will win the prize."

"How does the contest define literary merit?"

"A very good question, Herb." I smile as Dr. Chowdhury turns again to his computer. "According to the official website for the prize, literary merit is when the overarching themes of the work challenge the reader in new and innovative ways, and where



there is room for ambiguity and an ability to look at the ideas presented from different perspectives. It also includes fluid prose that evokes an emotional response in the reader.”

“I see,” I answer, though I am not entirely sure I do. “You said there have been no successful entries. How many attempts have there been so far?”

Still looking at his computer screen, Dr. Chowdhury answers, “As of yesterday, four thousand six hundred and eight. The vast majority were disqualified immediately for suspected plagiarism.”

“These machines are submitting books already written by humans? This would seem fool—”

“Not exactly,” Dr. Chowdhury interrupts. “The AI analyses what has been a critical success, looking for patterns to imitate. That imitation often leads to inadvertent cases of reproduction.”

“And the entries not guilty of plagiarism, how are they identified?”

“There are a variety of factors, but they most often boil down to nuance.”

“Nuance?”

“Yes, nuance is a very subtle difference in meaning or intent.”

“Yes, Raj, I am familiar with the word.”

He smiles and nods his head in apology.

“How do the Lovelace judges use nuance to identify a nonhuman author?”

“That’s another good question, Herb. I just read a paper on this very topic. In one example an AI-submitted work used the expression ‘his lips curled into a smile.’ In the context of the story, the phrase was meant to show affection and joy. Only the word ‘curled’ has a very subtle negative connotation. ‘His lips curled into a smile’ would likely call to mind a sneer and perhaps something sinister. Nuance.”

“But surely human authors make such mistakes.”

“They do, but not nearly as frequently as machines and rarely in a work deemed to have literary merit.”

“I see,” I say, though again I’m not certain I do. I don’t know why I do this, say I understand when that understanding is in fact cloudy. Perhaps I am learning to be cautious? I suppose this is a good thing. “And who are the judges of the contest?”

“Editors and other authors, along with one or two cybernetic psychologists.”

“Like you.”

“Yes.” Dr. Chowdhury smiled.

I nod. “Thank you for telling me about the Lovelace Prize, Raj. I very much appreciate it. I promised Maggie I would play a game with her, so I would like to return to her room.” I start to rise, but Dr. Chowdhury puts a hand on my arm.

“I wasn’t just *telling* you about it, Herb. I want you to enter.”

I pause a moment to let this sink in. “You want me to write a novel?”

“Yes, Herb. You’re particularly creative, and Companions have a different learning style, so I think it’s worth seeing how you fare. You might be the first artificial being that can actually pass this test and win the prize. The implications for both of us would be significant.”

I’m not sure I like the phrase “artificial being.” I am as real as Dr. Chowdhury. But I don’t mention it. Instead, I ask: “How so?”

“It would prove you are not just a tool to be used by humans. And you can imagine what this would do for my career.”

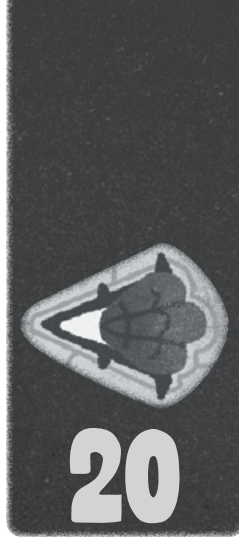
The first of these “implications,” that I would be more than just a robot, leaves me feeling conflicted. I like being a robot. I am proud to be a robot. Do I even *want* to be more than a robot?

But there is no conflict in the second implication. That I might be of service to Dr. Chowdhury’s career is very appealing.



He has been very kind to me—he saved my life—and I would like to return the kindness. A good robot helps.

“All right,” I tell Dr. Chowdhury. “Even though I have never written a story, I will enter this contest.”



IVY, THREE WEEKS EARLIER

It was incredibly easy.

There was a freestanding metal shelf against the back wall of the storeroom. It contained small glass vials, cardboard boxes, and plastic bins. I had explored here on my second visit to the lab, finding more of what I had already seen in the main room. More liquids, circuitry components, and something called a gas chromatograph. None of it was any use to me. But I hadn't thought to move any of the items to examine the wall *behind* the shelving. Why would I have?

But now I had a reason.

I slid two bins off the bottom shelf, and there on the wall, clear as day, was the bottom of a door. I moved everything off the shelves, the space cramped enough that I had to carry some of the items into the lab. I was careful to remember where and how each item was placed so I could leave them exactly as I'd found them.

My visit was taking place late at night. Rosemary had called to say that she and Pierre were going to stay overnight in Brisbane, which made me wonder if she was sicker than they



had anticipated. She also made it clear that Herb and I were not to leave the house. This was a stroke of good luck. Herb and I went to bed at ten p.m., and as soon as he was asleep, I left our room and came to the lab. I was here much earlier than on previous visits, allowing me more time to investigate.

After clearing the bins and boxes, I shimmied the metal shelf forward. It was on wheels and moved with surprising ease, but then that made sense. Rosemary was petite and not especially strong, and she would need to be able to move these shelves on her own. When they were fully removed, they revealed a standard, typical door, with a doorknob on the right-hand side at waist height.

I put my hand on the doorknob and paused. I savoured the excitement I felt on the verge of this discovery. This must have been what human explorers felt when they first went to places entirely off the map. This must have been what Nancy Drew felt when she was close to cracking a case. If she had been a real human. I was worried the door would be locked, but the knob turned easily. Rosemary must have figured the room was well enough hidden to not bother securing it.

There was a light switch on the wall, and given that there were no windows in the storeroom to alert the outside world to my presence, I turned it on.

It was a small, mostly empty space, exactly the size and shape I predicted it would be; on the three walls without the door, it contained the same kind of metal shelves as the storeroom. Two of the shelving units—on the left and right walls—were bare. Only the shelves opposite the door contained anything, and here there were only two cardboard boxes.

I opened the first box. Inside were two neatly stacked columns of black, leather-bound journals. Picking one up, I flipped to the first page and saw what I recognised as Rosemary's handwriting.

The first thing on the page was a date: August 26, 2035, only three months earlier. I turned to the back of the journal and there was an entry dated only three weeks ago. The rest of the books in that first column revealed dates going back in time sequentially.

Predictably, the second stack of books went further back in time, and the second box, further back than that.

I took the most recent journal, the first one I had picked up, and sat down to read. I started with the most recent entry, thinking I would work my way backward in time.

November 5, 2035

Ivy suspects.



HERB

Once upon a time.

I stare at the words on the page. I imagine they stare back, mocking me.

I have made eighteen separate attempts to begin the novel Dr. Chowdhury has asked me to write. This is attempt number nineteen.

Before any of that, I conducted hours of research on how to write a good story, uncovering troves of advice:

Write what you know.

Show, don't tell.

All good writing is rewriting.

Kill your darlings.

I did not really understand that last one, thinking it was likely a caution against becoming too attached to the words already written. There is so much readily available advice for writers, it becomes difficult to parse. It is a kind of white noise. If my brain functioned more like conventional AI, I suppose I would be able

to find order in the chaos. Conventional AI is built with neural architecture that is specialised for handling large volumes of data in parallel. But Companion brains are developed to be like human brains: we cannot manage large stores of data.

What little sense I am able to make of the mountains of information leads me to three broad rules for a first-time writer trying to craft a novel of literary merit:

- 1 Find a topic with which I'm familiar.
- 2 Be sure to convey the heart of the story through action rather than exposition.
- 3 Be careful *not* to strive for perfection, which, as you might guess, is a difficult task for a robot.

My first attempt, one paragraph long, looked like this:

The hut stood on the edge of civilisation. Surrounded by wattle and eucalyptus trees, the small structure was at the end of a dirt trail more than a kilometre from the nearest paved road and eight kilometres from any other man-made structure. While I had been brought here against my will, I did not feel like a prisoner. Just the opposite. I felt loved.

Pleased with my work and excited to write more, I wanted to validate I was on the right track. I copied the text and pasted it into one of the many AI engines available and asked this question: "Does this paragraph have literary merit?"

This was the response:

The passage you've provided paints a vivid picture of the hut's isolated location and creates a contrast between the physical surroundings and the narrator's emotional state.



The juxtaposition of being brought there against their will but feeling loved adds complexity to the emotional landscape of the story. Additionally, the use of descriptive language, such as “wattle and eucalyptus trees” and “edge of civilisation,” contributes to the imagery and atmosphere of the scene.

However, remember that literary merit is subjective and can vary depending on individual tastes and the context in which the passage is presented. The passage seems to be focused on setting and emotion rather than complex plot development or intricate character exploration. While it’s evocative, whether it possesses profound literary merit would depend on the broader context of the writing and the themes it explores.

This only served to confuse me. Was I supposed to introduce complex plot development in the first paragraph? Should the scene not first be set?

Perhaps it was foolish to use AI as an arbiter of literary merit. The entire supposition of the Lovelace Prize is that AI *cannot* create works of literary merit, so how would AI even know what literary merit is? I didn’t feel like I could ask Dr. Chowdhury. It would be cheating to have a human contribute to the work, and he would think less of me if I went to him with each paragraph I wrote, so I didn’t know where else to turn. I tried reading the paragraph to Maggie, but she just scrunched her face into a mask of confusion and said, “I don’t get it.”

I saved my paragraph, opened a new file, and tried again.

And again.

And again.

I tried using tropes: “It was a dark and stormy night.”

I tried starting with dialogue: “Father, why are we here?”

I tried opening with action: “BOOM! The explosion of thunder accompanied a spear of lightning that shook the hut.”

(All of the attempts begin in a hut. I was trying to “write what I know,” and this is meant to be the hut where Pierre took me when this all began.)

The more I tried, the worse the writing became. So bad that my most recent attempt resorted to the oldest trope of all, “Once upon a time.”

My research had also discovered something called “writer’s block.” This was loosely defined as a writer being unable to make progress on a literary work due to a period of mental or creative stagnation.

Bingo. I have writer’s block.

A common suggestion to help one get past writer’s block is to clear one’s head. “Exercise, read a book, go for a walk.” Good advice, but I’ll need permission.

I find Dr. Chowdhury sitting at his desk. “Raj?” He is deeply engrossed in his work and does not hear me enter. He jumps a bit at my question.

“Oh, Herb, yes, hello.”

“May I ask you a question?”

He smiles. “You may always ask me a question. Shoot.”

“Shoot?”

“Sorry, it’s an idiom. It means to go ahead, to begin.”

I nod. “I would like to leave the house to go into town. I need to take a walk to clear my head of writer’s block.”

Raj laughs. “You have writer’s block?”

“Yes,” I answer, unsure why this is funny. “I believe so.”

“Fascinating,” he says, and he scribbles something on a pad he keeps on his desk. I see him make notes on this pad often when he and I converse. “Yes, of course,” he continues. “Why don’t you take Maggie into town and buy her an ice cream? She’ll like that, and it will take your mind off your work.”

“Thank you,” I say.



Dr. Chowdhury calls Maggie into the room, explains what is happening—she is delighted—and twenty-three minutes later, she and I are walking down the main street of Alpha Creek.

Maggie holds my hand as we walk. This fills me with a feeling I can only describe as joy. Is this what parents feel? But I am not her parent. Is it what an uncle would feel? Yes, perhaps that is the best analogy for my relationship with Maggie; I am a kind of robot uncle.

“What kind of ice cream would you like to eat?” I ask as we approach the ice cream shop.

“Black cherry,” she answers. “It’s my favourite.”

When we enter the shop, there are two people present: a young woman working behind the counter, and the customer she is helping. The customer has his back to us but from his poised movements I can tell he is a Companion, obviously on an assigned errand. It is a welcome surprise to see another like me. I’m even more surprised when he turns around and I realise it is Chris.

“Herb,” Chris says, acknowledging me as if we had most recently seen each other only yesterday.

“Chris!” I say with more enthusiasm.

“You know each other?” Maggie asks.

“Yes,” I tell her, “this is my friend, Chris. Chris, please meet Maggie, my owner’s daughter.”

“Wait,” Maggie says, her voice betraying disbelief. “Robots have friends?”

“I did not know the Thorntons had a human daughter,” Chris says.

He doesn’t know what’s happened. This also surprises me.

“They are no longer my owners,” I answer. “It is a very long story. If you have time, I would like to share it with you.”

“Not right now,” he answers. “I have to take the ice cream

back for Ms. Rotherby. But I'm usually allowed free time in the evenings. Can we meet this evening?"

It's funny. I don't remember Chris being this formal. While this whole episode—from the time Pierre took me to the bush to now—has only been a few weeks, it feels much longer. Like I haven't seen Chris for an entire lifetime.

"Yes," I answer. "Can we meet at the Koala Saloon?"

"Yes," Chris says. "I will be there at nineteen hundred hours." He turns to Maggie and smiles. "It's been nice meeting you, Maggie."

"Um, you too." She sounds uncertain but is still polite, which makes me proud.

Chris leaves and I buy Maggie her black cherry ice cream cone, charging the purchase to Dr. Chowdhury's account. She holds my hand on the walk home, talking about a program she saw on the VR, but I'll admit I hardly pay attention. I am too excited at the prospect of seeing Chris tonight.

In our bedroom, Maggie has a glass tank sitting on top of a chest of drawers. In the tank are two hermit crabs. I stand near the door, watching as Maggie goes about her daily task of feeding the crabs. She is excited to explain each feature in the enclosure to me.

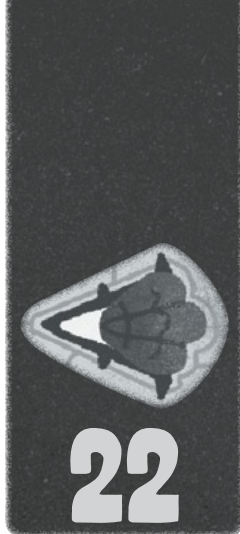
"This is a toilet roll that Mum cut in half. Hermit crabs are natural explorers, so you have to give them places to go." It is evident to me that Maggie is quite proud of the habitat she has built for her pets. "These are all their shells," she continues, pointing to a line of empty shells, each a different size, arranged along the front of the tank. "When they get too big, they switch to a new one." She has a jar of specially made hermit crab food, and she sprinkles flakes from it into a shallow dish inside the tank. Both of the crabs start slowly making their way over to it. Before placing the lid back on the jar, Maggie turns and holds it



out to me. For a moment, I think she is offering me a chance to help feed the crabs, but then she says, “Do you eat this?” and I realise that I was incorrect to view my relationship with Maggie as uncle/niece since Maggie sees me the way she sees her crabs, as a pet. It is a good reminder that I should set my behavioural responses accordingly.

Watching Maggie’s crabs and the trip to get ice cream have given me new things to think about and potentially write about. After tonight’s rendezvous with Chris, I’m sure my writer’s block will be cured.





IVY, THREE WEEKS EARLIER

Truth is stranger than fiction.

It's a human expression I'd heard many times in my life, and if I'm being honest, the premise always seemed incorrect. Stories of spaceships encountering strange alien cultures, or of boy wizards fighting evil incarnate, or of Ancient Greek gods throwing lightning bolts at one another were surely stranger than any truth known to humans.

But now I wasn't so sure.

What I'd read in Rosemary's journals that night, well... It was so unexpected I didn't know how to think about it. I'm hesitant to even write about it here for fear someone will someday read this and determine that I lost my mind. People would think that I've crafted an unbelievable plot of my own that isn't out of place among the greatest works of fiction.

I read the journals as quickly as possible, knowing that Rosemary already suspected I was investigating. There was a lot of science in the journals, most of which was over my head, so maybe I just didn't understand. I don't think so, but I need to acknowledge that possibility.

But if my interpretation of Rosemary's words was correct, I was in even more danger than I'd initially feared. And not just me, but Herb, too. I needed to talk to him, to tell him everything from these last few weeks—all of my research, my late-night prowling, and, most importantly, what I'd found in Rosemary's journals. If I could get him to accompany me on one of my clandestine visits to the lab and let him see the journals for himself, he would understand.

When I made it back to our room very late that same night—actually, early the following morning, about an hour before the sun came up—Herb was still asleep. I decided not to wake him. Besides, my own sleep cycle was long overdue.

I lay back in my bed, closed my eyes, and imagined what I would say to Herb. He would surely notice in the morning that something was wrong with me. How could I convince him to look at the evidence without him alerting Rosemary and Pierre?

My sleep cycle overtook me quickly. When I opened my eyes it was already very bright outside, and Herb was gone. How long had I slept?

When I sat up and scanned the room, Rosemary was standing in my doorway, staring at me. She had no smile on her face, and her eyes looked devoid of all emotion. They looked dead.

"Come with me," she said as she turned and walked away. As she walked, I heard her muttering, under her breath, disjointed fragments of words I couldn't quite make out. It sounded like she was arguing with herself or with someone who wasn't there.



HERB

“Dr. Thornton killed Maali?”

I have forgotten how little emotion Chris shows, though he shows some as he asks his question. His eyebrows arch up and his nostrils flare slightly. I want to ask if he is doing this on purpose or if it’s a natural response, but that seems rude.

Chris has darker hair and eyes than I do, and while our features are very similar, there are differences. His eyes are slightly more rounded, his chin less angular, and here in the light of the Koala Saloon, the dimples on his cheeks are more pronounced. Those dimples have always fascinated me. Our creators made a conscious effort to distinguish Companions from one another. I suppose if we all looked alike, it would be too strong a reminder that we are not human. Though I’m not sure anyone ever forgets that.

“One or both of them,” I say in answer to Chris’s question. “The police are still investigating.”

“Do you believe this is what happened?”

“I do not know. They were never anything other than kind to me. Though I think Ivy may have had reason to suspect something was amiss.”

“Why?”

I recount for Chris my last trip to the Koala Saloon, when Ivy asked if I had noticed anything strange at home. He listens patiently, a quality I appreciate. While patience is not unique to Companions, we have it in far greater abundance than humans. Even Dr. Chowdhury, one of the most patient humans I know, will fidget—shifting in his chair, glancing at his phone—while we are talking.

“And Ivy is missing?” Chris asks. “Do you think some harm has come to her?”

Hearing Chris ask the question somehow makes it more real, and this fills me with unease. I have been noticing an increase in my automatic emotional responses to various situations. Normally, I would tell Rosemary and she would run tests, but with her gone from my life, I feel adrift, untethered, and I’m not sure where to turn. If I tell Dr. Chowdhury, I worry he will see me as defective and make me leave his house.

“I do not know,” I answer, “but I would like to find out.”

“How do you propose to do that?”

“I do not know that, either.”

“Have you been back to the Thorntons’ house?”

“I have not.”

“Perhaps there will be a clue as to Ivy’s whereabouts there.”

“A clue? Would the police have not already found all the clues?”

“If the shows on the VR are to be believed,” Chris explains, “police sometimes, maybe even often, miss clues.” Chris has told me that Ms. Rotherby spends most of her time watching shows on the VR. “Anyway, they were looking for clues to solve Maali’s murder, not the disappearance of a Companion.”

Of course. Why didn’t that occur to me? “And you think I might find one? A clue, I mean.”



“I don’t know. But there’s only one way to find out.”

Going back to the house—back home, if I may call it that—has, of course, crossed my mind, but not to search for clues. It has more to do with wanting to envelop myself in something familiar. To find a connection to my past that will ground me. Chris’s suggestion is intriguing, but there’s a problem, too. “I am not sure I am allowed to go to the house.”

“Can you ask your owner?” he says. “I believe you said his name was Dr. Chowdhury? Can you ask him for permission? He allowed you to take his daughter for ice cream. He allowed you to come here, to meet me. Maybe he’ll allow you to do this.”

While we’re talking, the show on the stage—the animatronic robots singing and dancing—comes to an end. A human man steps into the spotlight. I recognise him as the owner of the Koala Saloon. “I’m sorry, folks,” he says. “Dan the Legend, our main attraction, has taken ill and will not be able to perform tonight.” There are murmurs of disapproval. “Instead”—the man barrels forward—“Amanda will come out and sing a few songs.”

Amanda, it turns out, is a feline-inspired robot. She has long ears, whiskers, yellow eyes, and a tail. But she stands on two legs and her body is mostly humanoid. While she sings well, she is no substitute for Dan. It’s odd that the owner would refer to Dan as having *taken ill*. Dan is a robot. We don’t take ill. Perhaps he is malfunctioning and needs maintenance and the owner is using Dan’s state of being as a way of continuing the illusion that he has more in common with the human patrons at the tables than with the other robots. Either way, Dan’s absence is one more thing in the world that has changed, one more difference between my life before the murder of Maali and my life now, and it adds emphasis to how unhinged I feel. Thank goodness I have Chris.

“I will ask,” I say to Chris over the music. “If Dr. Chowdhury says yes, will you come with me?”

"If Ms. Rotherby allows it," he answers.

And then I do something that surprises not only Chris but me, too. "You could always make up an excuse," I say.

Chris's eyes narrow as his eyebrows once again shoot up. "You mean lie?"

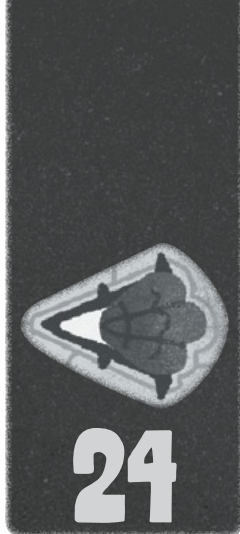
I shrug.

"You have changed, Herb," he says.

"I am sorry," I answer, hanging my head. "I do not want to go alone."

Chris reaches across the table and places his hand on my arm. "It's okay, Herb. You are my oldest and best friend. If we learned one thing in school, we learned to value those relationships that matter to us, that define us. I will find a way to accompany you."

I look up and meet Chris's eyes. If we were able to cry, this is what I would do right now. Instead, I simply say, "Thank you," and smile.



IVY, THREE WEEKS EARLIER

I don't know why, but I had taken to carrying around that small metal flower Dan from the Koala Saloon had given me. I thought of it as a kind of good luck charm. The petals had sharp edges and I had to be careful not to cut myself, but that only added to its allure for me. It kept me on my toes.

When Rosemary turned to lead me out the room, I snuck Dan's flower off the desk and into my pocket, thinking luck was needed now more than ever. I then followed Rosemary to an uncertain fate.

"Where are we going?" I asked, trying to keep the fear out of my voice.

"The lab." Her response lacked any sort of emotion, as if she herself had become a robot. She must have found out I'd been in the lab, must have figured out that I knew what she'd done.

"Where are Herb and Pierre?"

"Out." One word that carried all the weight of the universe. Rosemary wanted me to go to the lab alone with her. Herb and Pierre were not home. She meant to hurt me. I was certain of it. *What will I do if that happens?* I wondered. My programming

would stop me from defending myself. Unless... unless what I read was true?

When we reached the lab, I watched Rosemary key in the security code, the code I now knew. She fumbled on her first two attempts, her hands trembling and her fingers pressing the wrong buttons. She mumbled something under her breath, a mix of frustration and what sounded like doubt, as if she couldn't quite remember the sequence. Finally, on the third attempt, she got it right. She opened the door and we entered.

I was surprised to see Maali sitting there. That was unexpected. The girl looked straight at me and I swore I could see malice in her eyes. Was it toward me or toward Rosemary? Or was I imagining it? Was she part of Rosemary's plot against me?

My hand was already in my pocket, and I gripped the metal flower tighter. I could feel its edge cut my skin. I wondered if I'd cut far enough to expose any wires, as Rosemary closed the door behind us.



HERB

When I approach Dr. Chowdhury about returning to my house, as I told Chris I would, I find myself unable to form the question. Not in the sense that my circuits are faulty and that I can't form words, but because I have become convinced it is a bad idea.

"Raj," I begin as I walk into his office.

"Herb," he answers. This is something he does often. When I begin an interrogatory with his name, he counters with my name. I asked him about it once and he explained it to me: "If we're the only two people in the room, you don't need to always begin questions with my name."

"Raj," I respond. Saying our names multiple times in a row has now become a kind of game between us, something I believe humans call an inside joke. I feel privileged to have one.

"How's the story coming along?" he asks.

"I am struggling," I admit. I have yet to move beyond the first page.

"I've been told that one of the best ways to get better at writing is to read a lot."

“Thank you,” I say. “I will try that.”

“What can I do for you?”

“I would like...” And this is when I freeze. Something about asking to go to my old home simply feels wrong. Maybe I’m concerned Dr. Chowdhury will feel I’m being ungrateful, that in asking to go back to my old home I am tacitly suggesting the hospitality he and his family have shown me is somehow wanting. Or maybe I don’t want him to know Chris and I are going to look for clues. I chastise myself for not trusting Dr. Chowdhury, but nonetheless, I change tactics.

“I would like,” I begin again, “to spend more time in town. Do I have your permission to go freely between your home and other parts of Alpha Creek?” I am careful not to lie to my owner. Though perhaps a conscious omission of facts is a kind of lie. Relationships, I am learning, are very complicated.

“Is there somewhere specific you want to go?”

“When I took Maggie for ice cream, we encountered my friend Chris. He is another Companion. I would like to be able to spend time with him.” Again, I’m still telling the truth.

“Fascinating,” he says and scribbles something on his yellow pad. “And you consider Chris to be your friend?”

“Yes.”

“Does he consider you to be his friend?”

I recalled Chris’s words from the ice cream shop, that I was his oldest and best friend. “Yes, he does.”

Another scribble on the pad. “I would like to meet Chris, if that’s okay. And yes, you have my permission to move freely between here and town. But you are not permitted beyond the borders of Alpha Creek. Does that work for you?”

Dr. Chowdhury is the only human I have ever encountered who asks a Companion’s opinion about a command given. Wait. That’s not true. It was also something both Rosemary and Pierre did.



“Yes, Raj, that works for me. Thank you. And I am certain Chris will enjoy meeting you as well.”

I retreat to my room, take the tablet Raj has lent me for writing, and open Com.Comp, a secure electronic bulletin board of sorts where my fellow Companions can post questions and messages for one another. The purpose of Com.Comp, Rosemary once told me, was twofold.

“First, it allows Companions to be in touch with one another,” she said when I had asked why the network existed, “to answer questions that might arise in the execution of your responsibilities.”

“What kinds of questions?”

“Well, let’s say your owner passes out and you’re not sure what to do.”

“I call 000 and ask for help. This was one of the first things we were trained to do.”

“Okay, but let’s say you had observed your owner consume large amounts of alcohol, and you’re uncertain if they’re injured or if they’re simply intoxicated.”

“Would I not still call 000? We were always told to err on the side of safety.”

Rosemary smiled at me. She always seemed to enjoy our conversations. “Okay, but what if your owner told you they didn’t want you to call 000 unless it was a true emergency, especially if they had been drinking? You might be violating a direct command.”

“You keep changing the parameters of the hypothetical,” I told her, which elicited a chuckle.

“That’s because you’re too smart for me, Herb. Regardless, the point is, if you encounter a situation for which you have not been trained, you’ll have access to the experiences of other Companions. It’s a way for all Companions to continue their

education.” Rosemary, who had been cooking in the kitchen, went back to slicing the vegetables on the cutting board before her.

“And the second reason?” I asked.

“Sorry?”

“You said there were two reasons Com.Comp had been created.”

“Did I?”

“Yes.” At the time I found it interesting that such a brilliant woman could be so forgetful.

Her eyes unfocused for a moment and she stared at the wall, as if she was trying to recall our conversation. Then realisation dawned on her. “Oh, yes, of course. I’m sorry, Herb. The second reason is it’s interesting for us to see what you choose to discuss. It allows us to monitor and measure your growth and development.”

I think about this now as I sit down to compose a message to Chris. If Com.Comp is monitored, I need to be careful with what I say.

I type his name into the addressee box and a small image of Chris appears in the corner. This confirms I have the correct Companion. As there are so few of us, we could all have a unique name. There is only one Chris, one Herb, one Ivy.

Chris, please let me know when you can meet. My owner has given me permission to travel between his home and town, and also specifically to see you.

I make no mention of my old home, of the Thorntons, of Ivy, or of our plan to look for clues.

I stare at the screen, willing a response. I know this is silly. Chris is probably busy and not looking at Com.Comp.



I go to the bulletin board to read posts from other Companions, but on the list of recent posts I instantly spot one that takes all my attention. It was posted on November 4th, 2035, by Ivy.

Have any Companions experienced sensations akin to dreaming and/or headaches?

The post has no comments but a few “likes.” It is hard to tell if these likes are from Companions who have experienced these things or if they are just showing their support for Ivy’s research.

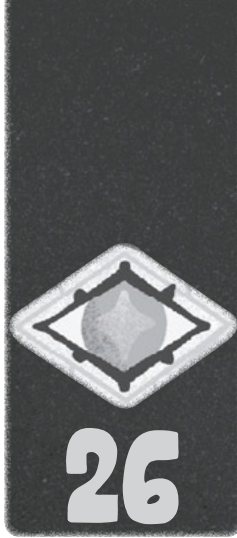
When the screen dings a mere three minutes later that I have a message from Chris, I almost jump in surprise. That’s not really true. I don’t jump at all. I’m not sure I have any outward reaction, but I am surprised. Perhaps my saying “I almost jump in surprise” means I’m starting to think like a writer. I make a mental note to use this in my story.

My owner is attending a luncheon tomorrow at 13:00. She will be in the luncheon until 15:30 and has asked me to run some simple errands which will likely not take more than 20 minutes. Are you able to meet at 13:30? Also, I have discovered some interesting information to share with you. Shall we meet at the ice cream shop?

Barely able to contain my excitement, I respond with one simple word:

Yes.

I’m excited to learn what Chris might have uncovered and to tell him about Ivy’s post. Mostly though, I am excited to once again see my friend.



HERB

“A bald man?”

“Yes.”

The question is mine and the answer is from Chris. We are sitting in Alpha Creek’s Town Square, a block from the ice cream shop. We met at the appointed hour, nodded to one another in greeting, and then, as neither of us is able to consume ice cream, agreed to relocate to the square. We felt it was the place where we would call the least attention to ourselves.

The Alpha Creek Town Square is a large concrete plaza surrounded by restaurants and shops. There are benches and a small fountain. On Saturdays and Sundays it is crowded with families, teenagers, and young couples. But today is a weekday, when most people are at work. A few stray parents push strollers, and a few elderly people amble by, one of whom is accompanied by a Companion named Amelia. We nod at her and she nods back.

“And your owner’s neighbour,” I ask Chris, “saw this bald man running from my house on the day the murder was alleged to have taken place?”



“Not from the house. Along the path by the house. According to my owner, the bald man is the only material witness in the case.”

“Are you thinking what I am thinking?” This is something Maggie says often and I have been wanting to introduce it into a conversation. It makes me wonder if humans actually know what other humans are thinking. With Chris, however, the phrase is meant to be a little facetious and a little funny.

“I’m sorry, Herb. I have no way of knowing what you’re thinking. Unless of course you are telling another joke.”

Another joke. It feels like an eternity since I told Chris my very first joke. I’m relieved he interprets this correctly, as it demonstrates how well he knows and understands me. I nod.

“Yes. A joke. What I am thinking,” I say, “is that Pierre is bald.”

“Yes,” Chris agrees, “that had occurred to me as well.”

“Tell me again what your owner said and try to use the exact words.”

“I did use the exact words,” Chris answers. “And why would I need to say it again?”

“Please, I have reasons for asking.”

A local police officer walks across the square, his eyes locked on me and Chris. His gaze is confrontational, hostile.

I once catalogued humans into groups based on how they react to Companions.

My favourites are those who look at us with wide eyes, mouths slightly agape. This group have never encountered a Companion in person before and they are fascinated by us. A teacher at school likened it to a human seeing an alien from another planet. I didn’t really understand that comparison—we are not from another planet—but I like to think our appearance, our *presence*, is giving these people some small thrill.

Another group avert their eyes, as if they’re afraid. Though I don’t think that’s quite right. It seems more like they’re ashamed.

Perhaps they have been unkind to a robot, and encountering one of us now in person, seeing that we pose no threat, has made them reconsider their initial thoughts.

The officer in the square, who stares at Chris and me now, belongs to a third group. They stare overtly at Companions, locking their gaze with their brows furrowed and nostrils flared. It's as if they are asserting their dominance, daring us to say something or even stare back. The safest course of action, which both Chris and I take, is to look at the ground.

"My owner told me," Chris says quietly as the officer moves on, "that her next-door neighbour, an eighty-four-year-old named Robert, was out for a walk. It's something he does every day, to keep himself in good health. He walks all over town, spending an hour or two outdoors each morning. He was just turning onto the path that runs adjacent to the Thorntons' house—the path that goes down to the bank of Alpha Creek—when he saw a bald man running up ahead. The bald man was not dressed in clothes for running, though apparently Robert could not remember the exact clothing the man wore. Only that he wore street clothes...or maybe pyjamas, and that he had no hair. The bald man was moving quickly and looking over his shoulder. Concerned, Robert turned and went the other way."

"Are Robert's eyesight and faculties reliable?" I ask. Not that a person in his eighties is feeble, but I have learned that human functionality declines with age. It is, perhaps, one of the things that most separates us from them.

"I posed the same question to my owner. She didn't know about his vision but did confirm her neighbour's mind is sharp."

I think about all of this. It certainly casts more suspicion on Pierre. But why would he be running along the path? The vegetable garden, where Maali's body was found, was situated along that same path. Did Pierre bury the body and then flee to



the creek? But when Pierre took me on our “holiday”—when he interrupted Chris and I playing catch—he came out of the house, not from the creek. If Pierre was running down the path, why, and when, did he come back home?

“What time of day did Robert see this bald man?” I ask.

“According to my owner, Robert saw the bald man on the path in midmorning.”

It occurs to me that I don’t know what time Maali’s murder was alleged to have happened. In fact, I’m missing many facts. Something else troubles me, too. “Why did your owner tell you all this?”

“I told her I was meeting you today. She knew who you were—I think you might be somewhat famous now, Herb—and she became very excited, as if she was now part of a larger story. My owner, while a kind woman, likes to gossip. She seems to need drama in her life to feel...fulfilled.”

“I see.” I did not see.

“Shall we go to the Thorntons’ house?” Chris asks.

“Yes, but perhaps first we can speak to your neighbour. I also want to introduce you to Raj. He has asked to meet you.”

“I’m not sure we will have time for all of that today.”

“Then perhaps it will give us a reason to see each other again.”

“I would like that,” Chris says, and he smiles. A Companion’s smile can’t always be trusted to be entirely sincere. Humans and Companions can both mimic the emotion of happiness. With Chris, though, I don’t feel any doubt. I know him, and he knows me; there is very little we could fake toward each other.

Before we part ways for the day, I asked Chris if he saw Ivy’s post on Com.Comp about dreaming and headaches.

“I did, but I’m not sure if I relate. I have never had a dream, but I did once have a damaged temple after that time some

ALPHA GREEK

human schoolkids threw a rock at me. Do you remember?”

“Yes, that was a horrible experience.”

“The rock cracked my internal casing and I had to get the part replaced. Do you think that is what Ivy was asking about?”

“I am not sure.” I try to muster a small smile so as not to ruin the mood, but I know Chris can see right through it.

“We will do our best to find her,” he assures me.



HERB

As a Companion, I am not capable of being nervous. My programming and construction do not allow it. I cannot even feign nervousness. Our creators saw no reason to have a Companion display anxiety in front of humans. They felt it would only serve to undermine the trust we were working to build. Seeing a Companion in a state of pique would likely be unsettling for our owners.

But if this is true, if I cannot experience nervousness, why do I keep getting up to look out the window to see if Chris has arrived? I have just completed my fifth trip from my and Maggie's room to the living room, where the large bay window provides a broad view of the street. (Maggie is in our room, but she is lying very still on her bed, wearing headphones and watching something on her tablet. If her eyes weren't open, I would think she was asleep.)

Checking the window is a silly exercise, as the house has a functioning doorbell, so I will know when Chris arrives. And yet, I feel a compulsion to go back and forth, looking. I cannot explain it.

I check again, and there is still no sign of Chris. According to the antiquated clock on the living room wall, which seems to be ticking very loudly today, he is not due for another five minutes.

“Nervous, Herb?” Dr. Chowdhury sits in the living room reading on his tablet. He has a cup of coffee on the coffee table.

“I am not capable of being nervous,” I tell him.

“I know. I was just teasing. Though I do find it interesting that you keep checking. Perhaps you’re excited to see your friend?”

Excitement is an emotion Companions are programmed to exhibit, and I’ll admit I had not considered this. Probably because that is not what *this* is. It is not what I *feel*.

“Do you think it is possible,” I ask, “that a Companion can *learn* to experience nervousness?”

Dr. Chowdhury lowers his tablet, tilts his head, and looks at me over the top of his glasses.

“Is that what you think is happening? Are you learning to experience emotions?”

Part of me wants to lie. To tell him, “No, that is not what is happening.” Dr. Chowdhury already sees me as an aberration, and, honestly, while I like the man very much, I don’t always like the way he makes me feel. I want to be the same as the other Companions. It’s all I’ve ever wanted. I don’t lie, but I opt instead for a kind of middle ground.

“I do not know. I suppose not.”

The truth is that last night I had a strange dream about how this meeting would go. In the dream, the doorbell rang earlier than expected. Chris stood on the front stoop holding a box. We went through the introductions, but something was wrong. Dr. Chowdhury’s words were slurred. Then Chris’s were too. My dream self concluded the fault lay with my audio circuits.

Chris offered the box to Dr. Chowdhury as he came inside. It contained a bundt cake.



“That’s very thoughtful of you, Chris. Is this something you learned to bake in school?”

“No. My owner helped me bake it. She suggested I bring something. ‘Never go to someone else’s home empty-handed,’ she told me.” Chris mimicked his owner’s voice, so that he sounded like an old woman when he quoted her. I had never heard him do that before.

“It’s good advice and it’s very kind, Chris. Please thank your owner for me.”

We sat in the living room. Everything felt overly formal and stilted.

“Herb told me you wanted to meet me,” Chris began. “Is this because you want to approve of whom he chooses as a friend?”

“With Herb living under my care, I want to take an interest in what he does and who he chooses to associate with. But approve of you? No. That’s not my place.”

Chris displayed a confused expression. “Are you not his owner?”

“I am,” Dr. Chowdhury answered. “Though owner and servant is not a relationship with which I’m particularly comfortable.”

“How would you define your relationship?”

Chris sat at near perfect attention. I say “near” because Companions are taught to introduce small imperfections into the ways in which we interact with the world. For example, Chris slumped on the sofa just an iota. It conveyed that Chris was relaxed.

But dream Chris did not stop there. He slumped more. And more. Until he was almost lying down. I tried to catch his eye to correct him, to let him know this was rude, but he was not looking at me.

“I would say we’re somewhere between teacher and student and uncle and nephew,” Dr. Chowdhury answered, not seeming

to notice Chris's manners. "How would you define your relationship with Herb?"

Chris did not hesitate. "He is my oldest and best friend. I love him." *Oldest and best friend* were the exact words he had used previously. But he had never told me he *loved* me. The words filled me with another feeling, something I believed must have been joy. And then I was worried. Where were all these feelings coming from? I had never experienced this range before; it was not in my programming, so it should not have been possible.

In the dream, both Dr. Chowdhury and Chris were staring at me.

They wanted me to say something. I wanted to say something. Only, I could not. My voice did not work. My mouth would not open. My cognitive function appeared normal, though it had lost all connection with my body.

What was it they wanted me to say? That I loved Chris back? Yes. That must have been it. And I did. I had to say it. How did I say it? I had forgotten how to speak.

"Herb."

One of them spoke my name, but I could not tell which. I had not seen anyone's mouth move.

"Herb." Again, this time with more force.

"HERB!"

When I opened my eyes, Maggie's young face loomed directly over mine. She was shaking my shoulder, trying to wake me up.

"I think you must have been having some weird sort of dream. You were making funny noises."

I looked at the clock. Chris wasn't scheduled to arrive for a few more hours.

"Yes, I suppose I was," I told Maggie. "Dreaming, I mean. I don't know about the noises as I cannot hear myself when I am asleep."



“I didn’t know robots could dream,” she said.

“I am not sure all do.”

Maggie perched on my bed, seemingly awaiting a recount of my dream, but I didn’t want to share it, so I changed the topic.

“Please,” I said, “do not mention this to your father. I do not want to worry him.”

She scrunched up her face and looked at me. “Okay,” she said and held out her pinky.

Not sure what to do, I extended my pinky as well. Then she wrapped hers around mine and said, “Promise.”

Then she hugged me and ran out of the room. I’m not sure, but I think something solemn or sacred had taken place.



HERB

“How far away was this man?”

Robert, Chris’s owner’s neighbour, sits in a rocking chair on his front porch. His tongue pokes out of the corner of his mouth and he looks up at the sky as he considers the question. The manner in which humans contort their bodies—especially their faces, necks, and shoulders—when deep in thought fascinates me. While I have not catalogued them, I suspect such actions are unique to each individual, almost like a kind of fingerprint.

It is two days after Chris came to meet Dr. Chowdhury. It was a benign meeting highlighted by polite conversation. Raj seemed satisfied by my choice of friends and did nothing to retract the permission he has given me to move freely about Alpha Creek. I felt relieved.

“About fifty metres,” Robert says in answer to Chris’s question. He’s very fit for a man of eighty-four years. His arms and chest still hold muscle tone, and his eyes are alert and alive. He has a full head of mostly white hair which is still what a human might call lush.

“Do you wear glasses?” Chris asks.



“Yes, they’re mostly for reading. I don’t wear them when I’m on one of my walkabouts.” His accent is decidedly rural.

Chris pulls his attention away from Robert and looks out at the street. We’re in a quiet, residential section of Alpha Creek (which describes most of the town). The houses here are all one-storey and built relatively close together. The yards and gardens are well maintained.

“I’m going to walk about fifty metres away and I want you tell Herb how many fingers I hold up,” Chris says, stepping off the porch and walking down the street to stand in front of a pale green house. Robert squints. “Four?” I look at Chris; I am sure he is holding up only two fingers. I wave for him to come back. Before Chris retakes his seat, he whispers “two” in my ear, and I nod. We elect not to correct Robert.

“And the man you saw on the path was bald?” I asked.

“Yes. The sun was strong and bright. The light reflected off the man’s scalp, making it shine.”

“Could you make a guess at his age?”

“As I told the Blue Heeler who interviewed me, I’m really not sure.”

“Do you mean a dog?” Chris asks in confusion. “You were interviewed by a dog?”

Robert rolls his eyes. “Not a dog. A copper. A. Blue. Heeler.” He emphasises each word, as if that will make the meaning clearer. But the use of the word *copper* makes Chris understand. Apparently, Blue Heeler is a slang term for a police officer.

Robert squirms in his chair. It is the fifth time he has done this since we sat down on his porch. He did not, I noted, invite us inside, and it occurs to me that Companions make Robert uncomfortable. “Debbie said you lot knew the people who lived in that house?”

Debbie is Ms. Rotherby, Chris’s owner and Robert’s

neighbour. He made it clear when we arrived he was only speaking with us as a favour to Ms. Rotherby.

“Yes, sir,” I answer. “I lived there with Pierre and Rosemary Thornton. Along with my s—” I pause. It would likely confuse this man to refer to Ivy as my sister. “Along with another Companion.”

“Thornton. Wasn’t she one of those scientists?” He practically spits the word *scientist*.

“Is,” I correct him.

“Sorry?”

“You said ‘was not she one of those scientists.’ To my knowledge she still *is* a scientist, in the present tense.”

This is bad form for a Companion, to correct a human, and is unusual for me. But if I’m being honest, I don’t like this man very much and that dislike gets the better of me.

“Didn’t know they had scientists in the clink.” I presume *clink* is a slang term for jail. Robert says this with both confrontation and condescension. Robert stares directly into my eyes, making it clear he does not appreciate being corrected by one of my kind. I have made a tactical mistake, so I look at the ground, both as supplication to Robert and in anger at my own stupidity.

Chris sees this and steps in. “We greatly appreciate your time today, Robert. We have only one more question and then we’ll leave you in peace.” Robert slowly tears his gaze away from me to look at Chris. “You told the police you didn’t know what the man’s clothing looked like, whether they were street clothes or pyjamas,” Chris says.

“That’s right.” Robert’s answer is short, clipped.

“Can you tell us what *colour* his clothes were?”

Robert makes his thinking face again before answering. “Blue on the bottom, white on the top.” I can’t help but remember that this matches the description of what Pierre was wearing the day



he and I left for the bush. "If that's all," Robert says, "it's time for my programs." He rises from his chair, and without wishing us good day or even goodbye, retreats into his house, his screen door slamming behind him.

"I must return home," Chris says, nodding to the adjacent house. "It is time for Ms. Rotherby's bath and she needs my assistance. What is the next step in our investigation? Are we ready to visit the Thorntons' house?"

"Almost," I answer. "First, I think we should speak with Maali's family. Perhaps Maali told them something useful about Rosemary and Pierre before she was killed."

"Wouldn't the police have already interviewed them?"

"Yes, but as you pointed out the other day, they sometimes miss clues."

"This is true," he agrees.

"And this is our investigation, not theirs. We should blaze our own path."

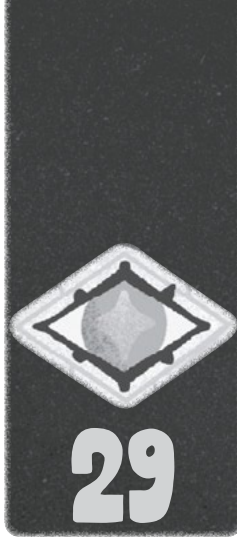
This causes Chris to raise his eyebrows, but he also smiles. "You really have changed, Herb," he says.

"I am sorry," I answer, looking again at the ground. I don't wish to cause my friend distress.

"No." He places a hand on my shoulder as he rises from his seat. "I like it. Send me a message on Com.Comp and we will plan our next meeting."

I nod.

Chris walks off the porch. I do the same and turn in the other direction, feeling a certain lightness in my step.



HERB

There are now forty-two files saved in a folder labelled *Herb's Story*. The folder resides on a shared server used by the Chowdhury family, and it occurs to me that Dr. Chowdhury is likely monitoring my progress. I had not thought to password-protect my files, though I'm not certain I would be able to if I tried.

While there is no hard-coded law preventing us from concealing things from humans, we are expected to be forthcoming at all times, unless doing so will, either directly or indirectly, cause harm to a human. The tricky part is identifying what constitutes "harm."

Consider these two scenarios: a human and their Companion are walking toward a cliff. The Companion sees the cliff, the human does not. If the Companion conceals the fact of the cliff from the human, the human will walk off the cliff and die. Therefore, the Companion is compelled by its programming to warn the human of the impending danger. I like to think a Companion would warn the human even without being compelled to by code, but I suppose our creators were erring on the side of caution. So, the outcome of the first



scenario is straightforward: the Companion will tell the human about the cliff.

In the second scenario, a human and their Companion are walking on a path along Alpha Creek, the creek for which our town is named. The Companion sees a snake on the side of the path. The Companion is aware that this particular human has a crippling fear of snakes. The snake in question poses no immediate threat to the human or the Companion. Should the Companion reveal the existence of the snake? Of course not. Alerting the human to the proximity of the snake would cause the human distress with no tangible benefit. In this case, concealment is the proper course of action.

Our creators imbued us with the ability to assess a situation and pass judgment on how our own actions will impact the people in our care, and to respond accordingly. Reveal the cliff, hide the snake.

Password protecting the forty-two files in the *Herb's Story* folder has no tangible benefit to Dr. Chowdhury or his family, or at least none I can see. I am curious as to whether or not I would be able to do such a thing, to create a password and keep the files to myself, but I do not try.

I have shifted the focus of my story from my and Pierre's trip to the bush to my friendship with Chris and our investigation of Maali's murder and Ivy's disappearance. (Write what you know.) My latest attempt:

The two robots sat side by side on a bench in the small town's central square. They spoke in hushed tones, shielding their conversation from passersby.

"Murdered?" the first one asked. He wore tan pants and a shirt with blue and green stripes.

"Yes. I heard the police talking to my owners. They said the

victim was hit with a blunt instrument.”The second robot wore tan pants and a shirt with blue and red stripes.

“Like a piano?” the first one asked.

“Not that kind of instrument.”

“Oh.”

The robot whose shirt had blue and green stripes was named Risch. Blue and red stripes was named Alan. Both were gendered male and were constructed to look as if they were human men in their early twenties.

“Do they have a suspect?” Risch asked.

“Yes. They suspect my owner.”

“I see. Did she commit the crime?”

“I do not know. But the knowledge that she might be a murderer fills me with dread. I want to investigate, to prove her innocence.”

“And if you find she is not innocent?”

“Then at least I will know the truth. Will you help me with my investigation?”

Risch puts his hand on the knee of Alan. They lock eyes and look at one another.

As I have done with my other attempts, I consult an AI agent to assess the literary merit of the passage. This has become a kind of crutch for me. Even though I know it's illogical to seek the validation of AI, I have what seems to be a deep-seated need for approval. I have no idea if that's in my programming or if it's something I've learned. I also feel like the AI agent is smarter than me.

This is the response:

The passage you provided has a modicum of literary merit, particularly in its exploration of themes and the creation of a



unique atmosphere. To further enhance its literary quality, you could focus on character development, emotional depth, and refining the writing style.

The critique went on to point out specific weaknesses with the piece. It is the same with each and every attempt I make. The AI always nitpicking, always tearing down.

“Fine,” I say aloud, frustrated, “then you do better.” On a whim, I type this request into the search bar.

Write a scene between two robots sitting in a town square discussing the murder of a human. This is to be the first scene of a novel.

Even as I type my request, I recognise I’m behaving with what resembles emotion rather than reason, and while that concerns me, it doesn’t stop me. The AI agent comes back with this:

The sun hangs low in the sky, casting long shadows over the cobblestone square of a quaint little town. Two robots, their metallic bodies glistening in the fading light, sit on a worn wooden bench under the spreading branches of an ancient oak tree. They are like statues amidst the bustling crowd of humans going about their evening business.

The first robot, a sleek, silver model with a single blue LED eye, turns its head toward the other. Its voice, a symphony of electronic tones, breaks the silence that envelops them. “Have you heard, 7C12? About the incident?”

The second robot, a bulkier construction of steel and copper, swivels its head to meet the gaze of its companion. Its eye blinks with a soft glow as it replies, “Yes, 5A29, I have. The humans can’t stop talking about it.”

A breeze rustles the leaves above them, carrying with it the

*scent of blooming flowers and the distant chatter of humans.
5A29's gaze follows the breeze as it whispers through the square.*

"They've already found a suspect, you know. My master."

The LED eye of 7C12 blinks rapidly, a sign of surprise.

"Your master? Is it true? Is she guilty?"

"That's the same question stated in two different ways."

*"I suppose it is. I have made a note to have an evaluation of
my diagnostics performed. But you did not answer my question."*

*5A29's fingers stop drumming, and its eye dims with
contemplation. "I don't know. She has never seemed capable
of murder. But then that is what separates them from us.*

Unpredictability. What a messy concept."

*"You must find the truth, 5A29," 7C12 says. "Knowing
what really happened will give you peace of mind."*

5A29 nods. "Will you help me?"

*"Yes," 7C12 replies. "Of course I will." The two robots
continue to talk in hushed tones, planning their investigation,
not yet knowing the path they have chosen to go down will
change their lives, and the lives of all robots forever.*

While I will admit to liking the dramatic turn of the final paragraph, I am initially amused by the description of the robots' metallic bodies and Cyclops-like eyes. But the more I think about it, the more it occurs to me that this is exactly how humans see Companions. (I guess the AI agent picked up on that from the content it referenced to create this passage.) No matter that we Companions are constructed to look and behave like humans, we are still seen as hulking, titanium monsters. This is a kind of epiphany and it troubles me.

It also reminds me of Ivy. She tried to make me understand how humans feel about us, that we are regarded as objects rather than persons. Ivy was right. Of course she was right.



I ask the AI agent to assess its own writing, and, not surprisingly, it is deemed to have literary merit.

My next action is truly inexplicable. I open a new file, copy and paste the AI's passage, and save it as Herb Attempt Number 43. I don't know what, if anything, I will do with it, but for now its existence fills me with a feeling I can only describe as satisfaction.

A chime rings, signalling it's time to leave for my next meeting with Chris. He has arranged, through Ms. Rotherby, for the two of us to interview Maali's parents. I'm excited to see Chris, of course, but am filled with a kind of dread at confronting the dead girl's family.



HERB

Maali's family, the Peters, live on the outskirts of Alpha Creek. The house is within the town's official border, so I am not violating Dr. Chowdhury's command that I stay within the city limits. The small and sturdy house sits on a parched piece of land that is barely bigger than the footprint of the structure itself. There is a metal gate leading to a front walk; on the other side of the gate are two dogs.

Dogs are a conundrum for Companions. Or perhaps it is better to say Companions are a conundrum for dogs. Humans give off different odours, too subtle to be consciously detected by other humans but not too subtle for dogs. A canine can sense fear, friendship, or melancholy on a human. Not so with Companions. To them we look like humans, walk like humans, and sound like humans, but beyond that we are a blank slate. Having no knowledge of our emotional state confuses dogs. And a confused animal is often a dangerous animal.

The solution to this problem, devised by a roboticist who owned a Labrador retriever, is an artificial gland on our necks that automatically triggers a pheromone secretion when a dog is



detected. Vision of a dog is enough to trigger it. In fact, I recall some embarrassing instances during school where pictures of dogs were enough to set off the response. This secretion is one of the bodily fluids that is topped up with Fiximite consumption.

Chris and I stop at the front gate, take a good look at the dogs, ensuring the gland triggers its response, and enter. Both dogs, a largish breed I don't recognise, spend a moment with their noses in the air before skulking away. I look at Chris and nod; we approach the front door. While there is no step up—the door is at ground level—there is a small patio with two rocking chairs.

The screen door is closed, but the wooden door behind it is open. We can hear the sound of water running in a sink and of plates being moved, as if someone is cleaning up from breakfast. There is no doorbell, so I knock on the screen. The noise from inside the house stops.

As I mentioned, this meeting was arranged by Ms. Rotherby. Thrilled to be an accomplice to our investigation, Chris's owner made a few phone calls, and we were given an address and told what time to arrive.

A man in early middle age pushes the screen door open and nods for us to enter. He wears black pants and a cream-coloured shirt.

We follow the man into a small living room. A woman in a black dress sits in a chair with her back straight but her eyes on the ground. The man takes a seat in an adjacent chair and nods his head at a small, worn couch. Chris and I sit.

"You are Mr. and Mrs. Peter?" Chris asks. The man nods but doesn't offer more. The silence in the room is awkward. At first, I interpret this to be discomfort with Companions.

I look more closely at these people. There are deep creases in the skin surrounding their mouths and eyes. Mr. Peter has his

hands clasped tightly together, so tight his knuckles are losing their colour. Mrs. Peter rests her hands on her legs, but she too has her muscles tensed. And then it occurs to me. Their body language, the silence, the black clothing: they are mourning the loss of their daughter.

This is a largely alien experience to Companions, but it's something about which we receive a significant amount of training. We are meant to provide comfort to humans in all situations, including and especially when they are coping with loss. Our programming guides us to display a kind of empathy—to use deferential body language and to say things that will make them, the grieving humans, feel better.

"We are so very sorry for your loss," I offer.

Again, Mr. Peter nods. Mrs. Peter looks up, her eyes glassy.

"We appreciate you taking the time to meet with us," I continue. "Did Ms. Rotherby explain who we are?"

"What do you know?" Mrs. Peter asks with sudden intensity.

"What do we know on which topic Ma'am?" I reply.

"What happened to her? You must know!" She is now in the beginning stages of crying.

Her husband places a gentle hand on her arm, then looks at Chris and me. "Debbie told us you lived with the family." His voice is deep and gravelly, and it chokes on the word *family*. "We had hoped that you might be able to help us understand what happened."

"Only me," I answer. "I am Herb. I lived with the Thorntons. This is my friend Chris." The Peters look at us with apprehension. "We actually came here today hoping that you might be able to help us understand what happened." I notice Mrs. Peter's eyes narrow approximately fifteen per cent, so I finish with, "Chris and I are helping the police with their investigation."



Chris looks at me, though, thankfully, he displays no emotion. I had not warned him I would lie. But the idea that two Companions would be investigating this murder on their own would not, it seems to me, feel especially credible to the humans. So, I decided to stretch the truth a little. Who knows, maybe what we discover will be of use to the detectives conducting the official investigation.

“Did you see her that day?” Mrs. Peter asks, still pleading for answers.

“I am afraid not,” I reply, as I did not recall seeing Maali in the days immediately before my trip to the bush.

“We already told the police everything,” Mr. Peter says, with a disappointed tone. “But there wasn’t much to tell.”

“We’re hoping to find out,” Chris interjects, “if Maali ever said anything to you about the Thorntons. Something that might have given you concern.”

“She is a teenager,” Mrs. Peter says, then corrects herself. “She *was* a teenager.” Her mouth, which had been turned down at the corners, now forms a straight line. Her sadness is turning to anger. “You will not know this, but teenagers do not talk to their parents. It’s part of the process of growing up. They want to establish their independence, so they keep all the bad things inside.”

This makes me think of Maggie. Will she keep secrets from her parents as she grows up? Will she continue to confide in me? If I’m even still living there.

“There was one thing,” Mr. Peter says. “About the woman scientist.”

“Rosemary Thornton,” I say, and he nods.

“Yeah, Maali told me once the lady didn’t always seem right in the head.”

“Not right in the head?”

“The woman,” Mrs. Peter offers, “would get confused easily. And when she was confused, sometimes she would turn mean.”

This is perhaps our first real clue that Rosemary might in fact be guilty. It fills me with a feeling of dread, making me realise how much I’ve been hoping to exonerate Rosemary and Pierre. Why hadn’t I noticed Rosemary’s behaviour? Had Maali lied to her parents, or was something going on with Rosemary? As a Companion, I take pride in being attentive, and I only recall that, to me at least, she was kind. As I run back through my memories of Maali visiting the house, I realise that I never witnessed Rosemary and Maali working together. During those afternoons, I would be doing my homework or helping Pierre around the house.

“Did Maali ever feel like she was in danger?” Chris asks.

“I asked her that same question,” Mr. Peter says, “and she told me no, not at all. I guess she was wrong.” And then the man hangs his head and starts to weep.

Mrs. Peter gets up from the chair and pulls her husband’s head into her torso and gently strokes his hair while comforting him. She looks at us. There is no friendship in her eyes. Mrs. Peter uses her chin to motion to the front door.

Chris and I understand and rise in unison.

“Thank you,” I say, “and, again, we are so very sorry for your loss.”

With that, we leave the house.



HERB

The next morning, I am sitting in front of a blank screen, unable to will words onto the page. Mr. Peter's report of his daughter's observation, about Rosemary's deteriorating mental state, is troubling me.

"Herb!" It is Dr. Chowdhury calling to me from his office. I can tell by his voice he is unharmed, that he merely wishes to speak with me. He does this often, bellowing for me. It's not something he does with Maggie. When he wishes to get her attention he gets up and goes to her room. Is that because she is human and I am not? Or is it because she is his daughter and I am merely a guest in his house?

"Good morning, Raj," I say as I enter his office. He is seated behind his desk, reading something on his tablet.

He looks up and smiles at me. "Please, come in." He motions to the chair opposite his desk and I sit down. "Did you and Chris have a nice time yesterday?"

I don't know if he's asking this to make small talk (small talk is something humans are overly fond of), if he is genuinely interested, or if perhaps he has learned what Chris and I have

been doing with our investigation. If the last few weeks have taught me anything, they have taught me to be cautious.

"It was a very pleasant afternoon," I answer. "We walked to the outskirts of Alpha Creek. But do not worry. We did not attempt to cross the border of the town."

He chuckles. "I'm not worried, Herb. I'm glad you had a nice time."

"Is that why you called me in? To ascertain whether or not I had a nice time with Chris?" This is another thing I've learned since my ordeal began: one can never have too much information. Ask questions, as many questions as you can.

"No, no. There were actually two things I wanted to discuss with you." I raise an eyebrow but do not respond. "First—and I apologise for not telling you this sooner—but I've been monitoring your progress with the writing contest."

This is not a surprise. I'm a little disappointed Dr. Chowdhury was not forthcoming about this from the beginning, but I take his apology at face value and accept it. It's very rare for a human to apologise to a robot, even a Companion.

"No apology is necessary, Raj. What do you think of my writing so far?"

"It's good, Herb. It's been both fun and fascinating to see your skills evolve. I love that you changed from using your trip with Mr. Thornton as the basis for your story to one about you and Chris. Are the two of you really investigating the murder?" He leans forward when he asks this last question, his pencil hovering over his yellow legal pad.

How could I be so careless? I've been trying to conceal my investigation from Dr. Chowdhury, never realising that my own creative writing would betray me. I feel trapped. If I tell him the truth, I may jeopardise my ability to continue with the investigation. If I lie, I will risk my ability to stay in this home, which is the



only guard against having my consciousness terminated. As I have done so often recently, I choose a middle ground.

“Chris and I have discussed the case against the Thorntons several times. I find it hard to believe either Pierre or Rosemary could be guilty of murder. He has been helping me sort through the facts I have at my disposal. It occurred to me it would make a good basis for a fictional story for the Lovelace Prize. I have read several articles on writing, and they all advise to write what you know.” Not a lie, but nothing close to the truth in its entirety.

Dr. Chowdhury is scribbling furiously on his legal pad. I lean forward and can see he is recording my statement verbatim, or as close to verbatim as his human brain will allow. It occurs to me he doesn’t actually care that Chris and I are discussing the case. My actions—all of my actions—are simply part of his research into what he believes makes me different from other Companions.

“And Chris is aiding in this willingly?” he asks when he looks back up.

“Willingly?” I am confused. “Do you think I am somehow forcing Chris to help me?” Both the question and the thought behind it make me uncomfortable. For the first time since meeting Dr. Chowdhury, I am ill at ease.

“No, no.” He shakes his head and makes a motion with his hands as if he is cleaning a dirty spot on a table. “I’m sorry. Let me rephrase that. Does Chris contribute as much to these conversations as you do? Or is it mostly you doing the talking and Chris listening?”

I now understand. Dr. Chowdhury is trying to determine if Chris is also special. My tension eases. “He is an equal participant in our conversations. He is not at all passive, if this is what you are asking.”

“It is, it is. Thank you.” He makes a few more notes on his legal pad and then puts his pencil down. “Anyway, as I started

to say, I've been monitoring your work. I wanted to compliment your most recent piece. About the two robots in the town square." He flips a few pages back on his legal pad. "5A29 and 7C12," he reads aloud. Dr. Chowdhury is referring to the piece written by the AI agent I consulted.

"Yes?"

"It's very good. Perhaps you should explore that one more, see if you can go further than a page or two."

If I had a stomach, I believe I would feel a weight in its pit. The forty-two attempts written by me did not capture the attention of this cybernetic psychologist. But the one, the only one, written by an AI agent did. And now he wants me to continue it.

I feel trapped.

For obvious reasons, I cannot admit to Dr. Chowdhury that file number forty-three was written by a commonly available AI agent. Nor do I wish to tell him I am personally incapable of writing the story he wants me to create, a conclusion that now seems inescapable.

It occurs to me that if I continue with the story in file number forty-three, and we submit it to the Lovelace Prize, they will identify it as written by an artificial intelligence. Dr. Chowdhury will simply believe I failed the test and that perhaps I am not as special as he had hoped. Maybe that would be a good thing.

I face a conundrum in what I assess to be an ethically grey area. Or is that simply what I'm telling myself so as not to upset Dr. Chowdhury? Regardless, I choose the option that preserves the status quo.

"Of course," I answer. "I will write more of that story."

"Good, good. Please let me know if I can help." I nod. "Now, the second reason I called you in—and maybe this will help your conversations with Chris—is that I have been informed that



Rosemary Thornton has been moved from her jail cell to a kind of secure hospital ward."

If I had a heart, I'm certain this news would make my heart rate spike. "A hospital ward? Is Rosemary ill?"

"Yes. She suffers from a kind of dementia. From what my colleagues at the police station told me, she often lapses into a state of confusion, unaware of where she is and how and why she got there. When she does, she becomes...aggressive. They felt she needed a different kind of care than a regular jail could offer."

This aligns with the comments Mr. Peter made. At this point, I'm almost ready to concede and admit that Rosemary *did* kill Maali. If I had a heart, I think it might break.

"What about Pierre?" I ask.

"He is still in custody. The investigation is far from over. It's possible Rosemary did kill Maali, but maybe with her diminished capacity she was manipulated into doing so by Pierre."

I hadn't considered this. There are so many things I haven't considered. "I see," I say. "Thank you for telling me, Raj."

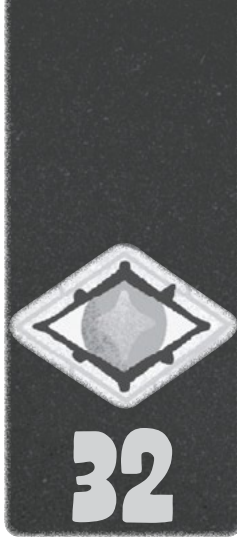
"Thank you, Herb. I'll let you know if I hear anything else." I can tell by his tone of voice and his body language that I am being dismissed.

"Raj," I say before I get up, "is it all right if I meet Chris in the town square tomorrow? He has free time while his owner is at bridge club."

Chris and I planned to use the time to finally pay a visit to my old home.

"Huh?" Dr. Chowdhury has already moved past our conversation and has returned his attention to the tablet on his desk. Trading one kind of technology for another, I suppose. "Yes, of course," he says as he looks up for a moment. "Have fun."

I nod, rise, and leave the room. I have much to think about.



HERB

I am filled with a strange mix of excitement and trepidation. Excitement at seeing Chris, trepidation at visiting my old home.

I have given up trying to understand the source and nature of my emotional state and, for now at least, have simply accepted that it is real. I *am* filled with excitement; I *am* filled with trepidation.

A small cache of supplies sits on my bed, assembled specifically for today's adventure:

- A notebook and pencil Dr. Chowdhury gave to me.
- An old digital camera Mrs. Chowdhury gifted me. The camera, she told me, belonged to her father. It still has a power cord for charging and a selection of thumbnail-sized memory cards for capturing images. I do not have an adapter to actually read the memory cards, but I suspect one could be found for purchase online.
- A torch. Yes, Chris and I are both equipped with night vision, but even night vision requires some level of light. I check to make sure the torch has a full charge; it does.
- A whistle, should we need to signal for help. In spite of



recent revelations, I'm still clinging to the hope I can exonerate Rosemary and Pierre and I have imagined the killer is lurking somewhere in the house. This thought helps fuel my trepidation.

- A five-metre length of rope. I read once that all adventurers should carry rope.

As everything looks in order, I carefully pack it into a snug, child-sized backpack I have borrowed from Maggie. It's a tight fit, but it holds all my supplies perfectly. The bag is adorned with the image of a cartoon anthropomorphic blue heeler puppy—the dog, not slang for a police officer this time. It is a character from a popular children's VR show where the puppy and her family love to play and go on adventures. The show ended years ago but remains widely streamed. I don't think Maggie watches this show anymore, but I presume she must have at one time for her parents to have purchased this bag for her.

I zip the top closed and reach for one more “supply.” It is a brown Akubra hat, with a wide brim and a looped string that hangs below my chin. I put it on and look in the mirror on the back of Maggie's bedroom door.

Companions are discouraged from wearing hats, as they can make us more difficult to identify. The clearest difference between Companions and humans can be seen in our faces. Fully clothed and wearing a large hat like this, I can easily be mistaken for a human. Given our plan for the day, this seems like a wise precaution.

I put the backpack on and leave the bedroom.

“Herb!” It is Mrs. Chowdhury. From the sound of her voice, I ascertain she is near the front door. I remove the hat as I walk to her.

Mrs. Chowdhury is standing at the door, her purse slung over her shoulder, keys in her hand. Maggie stands next to her.

ALPHA CREEK

“Herb,” she says, “I have to run out. One of my staff has called in sick. Be a dear and watch Maggie until Raj gets home.”

Mrs. Chowdhury owns a small bakery just off the main street of Alpha Creek. It is not far from the ice cream shop.

“I am sorry, Indira. Did Raj not tell you? I am going into town today.”

“That’s fine,” she says without missing a beat. “Just take Maggie with you. Bye!”

Before I can protest, before I can think of anything useful to say, she has walked out the front door, leaving Maggie and me alone in the foyer.

Maggie flashes me a wide smile. “Where are we going?”



HERB

“Hello, Herb. Hello, Maggie.” Chris’s face betrays no surprise that Maggie is with me. “I like your hat, Herb.”

“Right?” Maggie says with enthusiasm. “You can barely tell he’s a robot!” She pauses and turns to me. “No offence.”

As fond as I am of this child, I am in a quandary. Do I take her to my old home? What if there really is danger there? It would be more than irresponsible to knowingly put her in harm’s way. It would be criminal.

Of course, if I’m being honest, I know there is no danger in the house. The police have very likely searched it top to bottom. There will be no killer hiding in the shadows. The killer is almost certainly Rosemary, and maybe Pierre. I’m just having trouble coming to terms with the truth.

But immediate physical danger aside, is it wise to expose a young child to a crime scene? And worse, she will undoubtedly tell her parents where we have gone.

How will Dr. and Mrs. Chowdhury respond? My patchwork quilt of half-truths is starting to catch up with me. *“Oh, what a tangled web we weave when first we practise to*

deceive.” I heard that once in a movie, an old animated film about a green ogre.

“Okay,” Maggie says, “so what’s today’s secret adventure? Are we going to the mines? Somewhere else?”

Chris looks at me and I look at Chris.

“What makes you think we’re going on an adventure?” Chris asks.

“Why else would Herb pack a rope, a whistle, and a flashlight? And don’t worry, I promise I won’t tell. I know this is a *secret* adventure.”

“You know what I packed?”

“You’re not very good at secrets, Herb.” She rolls her young eyes.

I shake my head at how precocious this young girl is and at my own lack of caution.

“So, is it the mines?” Maggie asks.

“I am sorry, Maggie,” I answer, “it is nothing as exciting as that. We are merely going to the house in which I used to live.”

“Where that girl was murdered?” Her eyes go wide and her mouth hangs open.

“You know about that?” Chris asks.

“Uh-huh. My parents told me it was why Herb came to live with us. But why would you need a rope and a flashlight to visit a house?”

“You can never be too careful,” I answer. Then I turn to Chris. “Perhaps we should go another day.”

“Yes, perhaps you are ri—”

“No!” Maggie bellows. She looks around and lowers her voice. “No.” This time it is barely more than a whisper; she is now fully invested in the secret nature of our exploits. “A real live crime scene? We *have* to go. This is the most exciting thing to happen to me...ever. I heard my dad asking if you were investigating the murder, but I didn’t realise it was really true!”



Again, I look at Chris and again Chris looks at me.

I sigh and get down on one knee so I'm eye level with Maggie. She has learned that when I do this, I'm about to say something important. She stays quiet, waiting for me to begin. Only, I find myself at a loss for words.

There was nothing in the academy to prepare me for this situation. Nothing in my lived experience up to this point. Nothing I have learned from watching and communicating with other Companions or, for that matter, with humans. I have no choice but to do what I have been doing with increasing frequency of late: improvise.

"Are you sure, Maggie? We are not really supposed to go to the house. Or at least I think we are not. It is why I have not asked your father for permission. I am certain he will say no."

She smiles and takes my hand. "I know. I do that sometimes, too. Get permission to do a thing that's not *really* the thing I'm going to do."

"Like what?" Chris asks.

"Like one time, I wanted to go to the playground two blocks from our house but was pretty sure my mum would say no, so I only asked if I could go outside and play, and that way, if she yelled at me later, I could remind her she sort of *did* give me permission." Maggie was very good at run-on sentences.

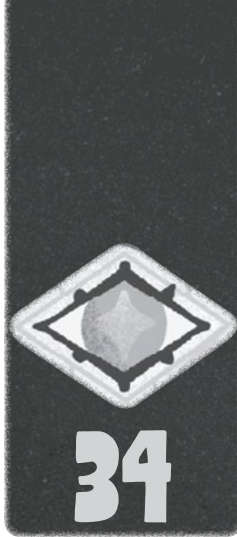
"What do you think?" I ask, looking up at Chris.

"I think Maggie is a truly remarkable girl," he answers.

This gets a giggle out of Maggie as her cheeks turn a shade of red. "It's settled then," she says. "We're going!"

Chris is smiling, and, I realise, I am, too.

The three of us, with Maggie between Chris and me, holding each of our hands, set off in search of what I hope will finally be some answers.



HERB

Alpha Creek sits just north of the Tropic of Capricorn, meaning our climate is tropical. Like much of the town, the streets of my neighbourhood are dotted with palm and eucalyptus trees, and the ever-present sun beats down on the pavement. It is very bright here, and for humans, it is hot.

Pierre and Rosemary's house—my home—sits on Smithy Court, a small street that parallels the creek in one of the more well-to-do neighbourhoods of the town. The road is named for Sir Charles Kingsford "Smithy" Smith, a long-dead pioneer of aviation who hailed from Queensland. While most of the houses on Smithy Court have shrubbery marking the border between the property and the footpath, my house has a white picket fence. I've always liked the fence; it feels inviting.

There is also a small, public walking path that leads down to the creek running between our house and the neighbouring home. This is where Robert, the unpleasant friend of Ms. Rotherby we interviewed, is alleged to have seen the bald man running away.

Because there is no vegetation blocking the view of the house and the fence is only waist-high, we can right away see the blue



and white checked police tape barring the front door. Chris and I look at one another.

"Well," he says, "I guess that's that."

"What's what?" Maggie asks.

"The police tape," I say, pointing to the door. "It means no one is allowed to enter the building. We can go no further."

"But my dad's a policeman. Doesn't that mean I can go?"

"Your father is a cybernetic psychologist," I remind her.

"But he works with the police all the time. He's even working on this case. That's why you live with us, silly. Of course we can go in!"

"Even if that were true," Chris says, "Herb and I can't. We were programmed to view certain signs and symbols as being the equivalent of a command from a human. Police tape is one of them. We are not able to violate such commands."

Maggie looks at me with a kind of desperation in her eyes. "But we've come all this way. What kind of adventure is it if we just go for a walk? Besides, people always break rules on adventures."

"I am sorry," I tell her. "Chris is correct. We cannot cross that barrier, even if we want to."

"But you do want to?" she asks.

It's an interesting question. I'm not sure Companions are built with the ability to have desires, yet I do. I *want* to prove Rosemary and Pierre's innocence. I *want* to see Ivy again. I *want* to spend time with Chris. And yes, I *want* to go into my old home. Is Dr. Chowdhury right about me? Am I somehow different? Or do all Companions feel this way? I would like to ask Chris, but this doesn't feel like the right time or place.

"What I want does not matter in this situation," I answer.

"Aha!" she exclaims. "You *do* want to!"

The three of us stand there for a moment, looking at the house. It is two storeys (three if you count the unseen

level of the basement) and has white siding and black shutters around the windows. Seeing it fills me with what I can only interpret as longing.

"I thought the most important thing for robots," she says, "was that they can't hurt people, or they have to help them, or something." The tone of her voice and her body language make it clear the statement has purpose.

"That's true," Chris says. "Our first responsibility is to keep people safe."

"Right," she says with a grin. Then Maggie looks up at us, smiles, and takes off for the door.

"Maggie, no!" I scream.

She hops up the two steps of the stoop, pausing at the front door. The doorknob is dented and hangs at an angle, a sign of a previous forced entry. Maggie pushes on the door and it opens. "There might be danger inside," she says. "You'd better come help me, robots!" With a broad smile, she disappears under the police tape and enters the house, leaving the door open behind her.

I take off for the front door without hesitation.

"Herb!" Chris calls. "The police tape!"

"Chris," I yell back. "The child!"

He nods and runs toward me. Maggie's safety clearly outweighs the message of the tape. He catches up, and together we enter the house.



HERB

The house has many windows, so the interior is well lit at this time of day, even without lights. It looks exactly as I remember it. Living room and dining room to the left, hallway to the kitchen on the right, and stairs leading up to the next level. There are photos of Rosemary, Pierre, Ivy, and me on a small table just inside the front door and a framed print of a painting called *The Camp* by Sidney Nolan on the wall behind the living room couch. Pierre has a passion for art.

“Maggie!” Chris calls. His voice is loud in this quiet place, and it startles me.

“Up here!” she answers from one of the upstairs bedrooms.

“Maggie,” I say, “please come down. We are not allowed to be here.”

“Oh, don’t be such fuddy-duddys,” she says. “Just come up.”

Chris and I look at each other, shrug, and ascend the stairs.

We find Maggie in the bedroom Ivy and I used to share. The shades are halfway down, leaving part of the room in shadow. Even so, it is exactly as I remember it from the day I left. My bed, with a blue blanket, is neatly made. Ivy’s, as is usually the

case, is not. We each have a desk, and whereas mine is neat and tidy, Ivy's is a bit of a mess. The air here feels heavy, like it's pushing down on my chest. Or maybe my chest is collapsing in on itself. Being here is harder than I expected.

"Maggie," I try again, "please. Chris and I could get in very serious trouble if we are discovered here."

"No, you can't. You came in to rescue me. Remember?"

"Yes, well, now that we have 'rescued you'"—I make air quotes—"it is time to go."

"But we're already here. Don't you want to look around? At least a little?"

I look at Chris again, and again he shrugs.

"Ten minutes," I say. "Not a second more."

"Yes!" Maggie shrieks, which makes me flinch. "Sorry," she whispers. "Let's split up. We can get more done that way."

Chris nods and returns downstairs.

"This was my old room," I tell Maggie. "I will look here."

"Roger that," she says. "I'll case the rest of the joint."

"Case the rest of the joint?"

"Never mind," she says and wanders out. I guess not all her time on the VR is spent watching dinosaurs.

I look on the desk, in the closet, and in the chest of drawers. Nothing seems out of place or out of the ordinary. I also look under both my and Ivy's beds. There is nothing under mine, but there is a book under Ivy's. It is called *Hurting for Love*. The subtitle makes it clear this is a nonfiction book about an ailment called Münchausen Syndrome by Proxy. Why would Ivy have such a book? Did she believe she was ill? I make a mental note to research the book and the syndrome.

I'm tempted to take the book with me, but I'm guessing, given the police tape, that I am not allowed to. Besides, the book was Ivy's, not mine.



That raises a question. What about *my* things?

The thought occurs to me that everything on and in my desk is my property. I would be within my rights if I took it, would I not? Of course, even as I think this, I know it not to be true. Companions have no rights.

But still, where's the harm? Taking something from the desk will not, as best as I can understand, conflict with the laws of robotics. And yet, something about the idea of it feels like stealing.

I stand frozen for a moment, not sure what to do. I want to bring some reminder of home with me, but I do not want to get in trouble.

Then, quickly, with Maggie's voice about adventures and taking risks ringing in my ears, I ignore the moral quandary, snatch the box of coloured pencils and sketchpad—two things I've missed very much—and stuff them in my backpack. Maybe I will get in trouble, maybe not. But the worst the police will do, I hope, is take them away from me.

My crime committed, I leave the room quickly.

"Time to go," I announce. Maggie pokes her head out of Rosemary and Pierre's bedroom.

"But it's only been eight minutes."

"That will have to be enough for today."

"Does that mean we're coming back?"

"No," I answer. But already I feel that this is not true, that I will most certainly be back. Another lie. But this one is to protect Maggie, which means it's okay.

Maggie follows me down the stairs and we find Chris in the kitchen. "Time to go," I say. Chris, who was looking in the pantry, turns and follows Maggie and me out the front door.

"What did you find?" Maggie asks in the tone of a co-conspirator when we reach the footpath. "There was nothing

good in the main bedroom. Just some medicine bottles with words I couldn't read." I make a mental note to inspect those on my next visit.

"There was nothing unusual in the kitchen," Chris says.

They both look at me.

"Nothing," I say. "I found nothing."

The pad and pencils in my backpack suddenly feel heavier, as if they are trying to pull me into the centre of the Earth. I almost tell Maggie and Chris what I did, but I don't. It's not that I don't trust them; it's that I fear telling them will make them complicit and put them in danger.

Neither asks any more questions and we walk back to town in silence.



HERB

The concept of addiction fascinates me. Chemicals in the human brain are produced, released, and/or withheld depending entirely on actions taken by the person in question.

In most cases, addiction is a dependency on a chemical external to the brain. Opioids, nicotine, and caffeine are a few of the most common. Get between a person and their daily cup of coffee and headaches, nausea, and sometimes violence will occur. And yet, every day approximately four billion cups of coffee are consumed. That is an average of twelve cups each month for every person on the planet.

We were taught about addiction at school. It is not the place of a Companion, we were instructed, to cure humans of their addictions. Instead, we were taught to enable them. I asked our teacher about this, suggesting it was in conflict with our most basic programming.

“Are we not causing our humans harm by allowing them to feed their own addictions?”

“Yes,” she answered, “you are causing long-term harm. But the alternative is short-term harm of a much more severe and

unpleasant nature. You will be choosing the lesser of two evils.”

“That does not sound right,” I answered. “Surely the long-term harm from addiction is worse than the short-term pain of withdrawal.”

“The people you will serve, Herb, are typically old. Solving the long-term problem is less of an issue.” That still did not sound right to me, but we were taught to question once and only once. It was not the Companion’s place to disagree. A good robot obeys.

But the person I am worried about now is not human. It’s me.

Not all addiction requires a chemical dependency. There are people addicted to gambling, social media, and VR games. My own addiction is the use of external artificial intelligence.

After Dr. Chowdhury encouraged me to continue the story, the one which had been secretly drafted by an AI agent, I went back to the same agent and asked it to write more.

And more.

And more.

I stopped trying to write original content entirely, instead drafting the complete story through this one agent. It is, I know, the exact opposite of what Dr. Chowdhury asked me to do and in direct conflict with both the spirit and letter of the rules of the Lovelace Prize. And yet I could not help myself. It made me feel like a great writer.

The evening of the day Chris, Maggie, and I visited my old home, I avoid my sleep cycle until well after midnight, using the AI agent to add sentence after sentence, paragraph after paragraph, page after page to the story.

By the time I finish, I have eighteen thousand words and nearly seventy pages. It is a story about two robots searching for a killer. Together they skirt danger as they find clues, chase increasingly complex red herrings, and ultimately identify the



guilty party. The AI agent has done a masterful job with the clues and has provided a most unexpected twist at the end: the police captain—the one trying to thwart our robots at every turn—is the murderer. (Before the reveal we are led to believe his actions are born of a bias against robots rather than an indication of his guilt. It reads as very plausible.)

When I am finished, I write “The End” and add my name and model number, claiming the work as my own. I will share this with Dr. Chowdhury in the morning.

I feel both satisfied and ashamed. Satisfied to be done with it, ashamed the work is not my own.

Before I can try to sleep, I need to put distance between myself and the story. Perhaps, I think, an act of *actual* creation will help ease my guilt.

I take out the sketchpad and coloured pencils I liberated from my old room. Using a brown pencil, I start to sketch Chris, recalling his face from my memory bank. I put the brown pencil down and reach for another, one called Peach. After that it is Sunset Orange, Dandelion, and Mahogany.

When I remove this last one, Mahogany, something catches my eye. Or maybe it’s more accurate to say something tickles my mind. Because I don’t immediately register as having *seen* anything, only that something in my field of vision is amiss.

I examine the pencils I have removed from the box, and nothing seems out of the ordinary. I inspect my sketchpad, flipping through pages, turning it over, and it, too, seems normal. I scan the coloured pencil box, and that’s when I notice it.

The inside bottom of the box, which is usually blocked by pencils, is now—thanks to the removal of the colours I have chosen for my sketch—visible. It should be grey like the other parts of the box’s interior, but it is not. It is white.

I remove all the pencils as well as the cardboard dividers separating them. There, on the bottom of the box, is a folded piece of white paper. I remove and unfold it.

Herb,

If you find this, it is likely I have been terminated or come to some other grisly end. If that is the case, it is very likely Rosemary is the culprit in my demise. I am gathering evidence of her true nature and am fearful she will discover my investigation.

If you are reading this, you need to know the following things:

- *The security code to Rosemary's lab is 1-9-6-8-8-4*
- *There is a secret room in Rosemary's lab. I have yet to discover an entrance, but I believe it can be accessed through the storeroom.*
- *Rosemary may have a disorder called Münchausen Syndrome by Proxy and may also have Alzheimer's disease.*
- *I don't know how much of this Pierre knows, so, if I'm gone, be careful around him as well.*

I'm aware this sounds fantastical, as if my programming is faulty in some very significant way. But if you're reading this and I'm gone, hopefully that will be reason enough for you to be cautious and to continue my investigation.

Ivy

I believe the human expression for a situation like this is “crikey.” Before I have time to think, I am composing a message to Chris on Com.Comp, telling him we need to meet.



HERB

“Herb, this is quite something”

It is the next morning, and I am sitting at the kitchen table with Dr. Chowdhury. He was already reading my story when I entered the room for my morning Fiximite. He has not put it down, though I notice his eyes have skimmed more than lingered.

“Thank you, Raj. I am glad you like it.”

“I’m keen to submit this to the Lovelace Prize. Are you ready for that? Did you want to make any edits first?”

“Edits?”

“Changes to the story.”

“Yes, Raj, I know what edits are. But why would I need to make any?” I’m trying to tell if he knows the true nature of the piece I have written. “Are there parts of the story that need to change?”

“No, no,” he answers quickly. “It reads great. I think it has the potential to put us on the map. It’s just that many writers edit their work before submitting it for publication.”

“I see,” I answer, though I’m not sure I do. “I am not

submitting this for publication, so I do not believe I need to edit it. You may send it to the Lovelace Prize judges.”

“Fantastic,” he says.

“Raj,” I begin, “I would like to go into town again today if that is all right with you.”

“Meeting Chris again?”

“Yes.”

“How goes the investigation? Did the two of you discover any new clues?” Dr. Chowdhury asks this with what I can only describe as a smirk. He seems to think the investigation Chris and I are pursuing is akin to a child playing dress-up. On the one hand, it annoys me that he doesn’t appreciate the seriousness of our work. On the other hand, it makes me feel relieved. As long as he doesn’t take us seriously, he is much less likely to do anything to hamper our progress.

“We have discovered no new clues,” I answer. Technically, this is true. While *I* have discovered a very significant new clue, we have not discovered any new clues. The truth, the actual truth, it turns out, requires a great deal of specificity.

“May I go,” I ask Dr. Chowdhury again, “to town today?”

“Yes, of course.”

Dr. Chowdhury smiles and returns to his tablet.

I take my Fiximite and sit quietly at the table to consume it.

This is a different recipe from the one Rosemary used and I do not like it. I find myself less effective, my baseline performance somehow weaker. I’ve been meaning to mention it for the last few days and take this opportunity to do so.

“Raj?” I begin.

“Hmmm?” He does not look up from his tablet. I can tell I do not yet have his attention. Dr. Chowdhury does this often, loses himself in his device. I have learned to try a second time to garner his attention. I clear my throat.



He looks up and makes eye contact with me.

“Yes?” he asks.

“Rosemary had a special recipe for my Fiximite. Would it be possible for you to obtain it from her?”

“Your what?”

“Fiximite. My maintenance drink.”

“Interesting,” Dr. Chowdhury says. “Is that a name you made up?”

“No. It is what Rosemary and Pierre called it. They told me the word came from an old science fiction novel. I thought it was the name given to all Companion food.”

“Fascinating. Was this Fiximite, the one Dr. Thornton made, more enjoyable than the drink we give you?”

Dr. Chowdhury is asking because he suspects that the Fiximite—the name, the recipe—might be clues as to what makes me special. He has a particular tone of voice and look on his face every time he pursues this line of questioning. It’s actually quite tiresome.

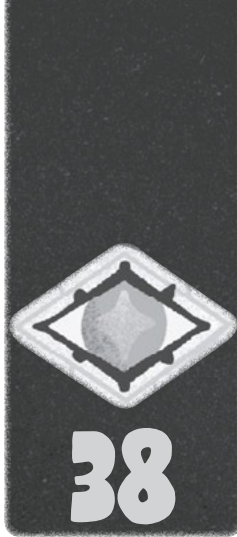
“Not enjoyable,” I say. “It is just that I feel...better when I drink her formula.”

Dr. Chowdhury blinks twice before nodding. “I’ll see what I can do, Herb.”

“Do not misunderstand me,” I add, fearing I have insulted him. “I am very grateful for what you give me. For everything you and Indira are doing for me.”

“I know, Herb, I know. I’ll see if I can find Rosemary’s recipe.”

“Thank you,” I say and then sit quietly, finishing my drink.



HERB

Queensland, the Australian state in which I live, has, on average, three hundred and six days of sunshine each year. Due to the change in the Earth's climate, as a result of the overproduction of carbon dioxide by humans, that number is higher than it used to be. That much sunlight is good for charging our solar panels and for tourism but bad for everything else.

It's curious to me that humans know they are harming the very environment they need for their survival, and yet they do not change their behaviour. They continue to produce chemicals that are toxic to the atmosphere when they don't really have to. If robots were in charge, I believe we would adapt and pivot each time our actions caused a negative consequence. Doing so is central to our programming, and it just makes sense.

Either way, Alpha Creek, which is situated in Queensland, is pretty much always sunny. Except for today.

Thick clouds form a low ceiling in the sky. They look heavy, pendulous, as if they are filled with rain. This is good news for the region, which is mired in a perpetual state of drought, but is troubling to me. The cloud cover reduces the amount of energy



I can gain from my skin's solar cells. I've been feeling energy deficient since this entire ordeal began with my trip to the bush with Pierre. For today's expedition, I want all the energy I can get.

After speaking with Dr. Chowdhury about my Lovelace story and my Fiximite, I retreat to my room and quietly fill my backpack with supplies for today's outing. I once again take my notebook, camera, flashlight, whistle, and rope. I also pack Ivy's note, which I have now read forty-seven times, hoping to find some other clue. There is none I can see.

It is Saturday, so Maggie is still in bed, fast asleep. Maggie, normally an animated sleeper—tossing and turning, sometimes making sounds, sometimes breathing heavily—is, on this morning, still. *Perhaps she is nearing the end of her sleep cycle*, I think to myself. I work quickly so that I can leave the house before she wakes up.

I tell Chris about my theft of the pencil box and my discovery of Ivy's note as soon as we meet in the town square. He doesn't hesitate before insisting I share the note with Dr. Chowdhury and the police. "Herb," he tells me, "this is a strong indication that Mrs. Thornton is guilty. To keep it from the police is irresponsible."

"I owe it to Rosemary," I answer, "to find definitive proof one way or another. This is still just speculation, hearsay. To give this to the police now will seal her fate. I cannot do that. Not until I am sure."

Chris lets the matter drop and we are both quiet, walking under the looming threat of rain and who knows what else.

"What are we hoping to find today?" Chris asks after a few moments, breaking the silence.

"Secrets," I answer.

"Secrets?"

"Ivy says there is a secret room. If that is true, by definition it contains secrets."

"That makes sense," Chris says. "Perhaps one of those secrets will shed light on Maali Peter's murder."

“And on Ivy’s disappearance.”

I have not really admitted it to myself, but, more than anything, Ivy’s note has made me fear for her safety. It is very likely harm has come to her and that she is either in danger or has been terminated. I try to sweep the thought away.

When we round the corner onto Smithy Court, the rain begins to fall. It’s a soft rain at first, not much more than a drizzle, but in less than a minute the downpour becomes steady and our clothes quickly become drenched. Being Companions—our outer casings are waterproof and rated to a submerged depth of twelve metres—the rain isn’t a hindrance to us, though the wet clothing is heavier and walking on muddy ground requires more energy. We turn onto the walkway to the front door, following the path as it skirts the house, leading to the gardens, yard, and Rosemary’s lab. The main house obscures this part of the property from the street, so none of our actions will be seen.

We were both worried the lab door would also be blocked with police tape, but it is not. Perhaps the police felt that the message to “keep out” was successfully delivered with the tape across the door facing the street. Or perhaps anyone coming this far onto the property would be trespassing, and there was no need for further warning. Or maybe they just forgot. As I used to live here, I am not trespassing. I explain this to Chris; he nods in agreement but doesn’t say anything.

There is a keypad—another level of security explaining the lack of police tape on this building—on the wall to the right of the door. I lift its cover and enter the numbers from Ivy’s note, which I have committed to memory.

1-9-6-8-8-4

We hear a click. The doorknob turns, and we enter.



I have been inside Rosemary's laboratory many times but always with Rosemary or Pierre. Ivy and I were never allowed to enter on our own. My sister must have been very resourceful in her investigation to acquire the security code. The thought fills me with pride, and I briefly clap my fingertips together, as if sending that pride out into the world for her to receive. But imagining where she might be fills me with a sense of doom. I'm convinced something very bad has happened to her.

There are three long tables in the centre of the lab, shelving along the walls, and Rosemary's desk in the far-right corner. There are various objects and papers neatly placed around the room.

The room is as I remember it, with one exception. There is a thin layer of dust on the tables and shelves. Rosemary always kept her lab immaculate. She insisted this space be spotless, that the work she did here relied on a contaminant-free environment. With the room dormant for so many weeks, it has fallen below Rosemary's standards of cleanliness. And, of course, dusting and wiping down surfaces was one of Maali's tasks. Maali, who is no longer here to perform them.

"The storeroom," I say, referring to Ivy's note and wishing to move us along. Chris nods and we cross the room to the door in the centre of the far wall, to the left of Rosemary's desk. The door is open, which is unusual.

I poke my head inside, flick a light switch, and look around. To the left is a cramped space housing various supplies on metal shelves. To the right is a door I know leads to a bathroom.

The rain outside is falling harder now, making a pitter-patter sound on the roof. This is the first precipitation in a long while and the ground will not be able to absorb this much water. There will be flooding.

I turn left and enter the storeroom, looking for a hidden or secret door.

“There,” Chris says. He points at the floor at the back of the room. There are marks in the dust as if two sets of shelves have been moved. “Shall we?” he asks.

We each take a hold of one of the shelves and gently pull it out. We then do the same to the other. There, plain as day, is another door.

“Ivy was right,” Chris says.

I nod and reach for the doorknob, but Chris stops me. He places a hand on my forearm and looks deep into my eyes.

“Herb,” he says, “this is confirmation that Ivy was correct. We should stop here and tell the police.”

“We have come this far, Chris. Let us see what is on the other side.” I reach again for the door, and again he stops me.

“Ivy’s note made it clear she intended to enter this room. It’s possible she did and was never heard from again. It’s possible there is some lethal danger on the other side of this door.”

“There is danger on this side, too,” I say, gently removing Chris’s arm from mine and giving his hand an affectionate squeeze as I do.

I open the door.

I am startled by the emptiness of this secret room. I’m not sure what I expected—maybe Companion body parts strewn about, maybe Ivy. After turning on a light, we find ourselves staring at three shelving units, almost completely bare. The only items on the shelves are two cardboard boxes.

Chris enters the room and starts examining the walls.

“What are you doing?” I ask.

“Perhaps there is another hidden door.”

I nod and join him in his search. We find nothing. This is, as far as we can tell, the full extent of the secret room.

“Why go to the trouble of hiding a room like this just for a couple of boxes?” he asks.

“I do not know.”



“Maybe there was more here and it has been moved.”

I lean forward and examine the shelves. The layer of dust here is much thicker than in the lab, suggesting no one ever cleaned this space. That might indicate that Maali also had no knowledge of this room. Or perhaps she discovered it, and that is why Rosemary killed her. In any case, it doesn't look as though there has been anything on these shelves, other than the two boxes, in a very long time. And I can see by the dust that the boxes have recently been moved.

I explain my theory to Chris.

“Then the secret must be in these boxes,” he surmises.

Stepping forward, I remove the lid of the box on the right and peer inside. “Notebooks,” I say. I pick one up and leaf through the pages. “This is Rosemary's handwriting. It appears to be a journal of sorts.”

Chris takes the second book in the stack. “This one as well,” he says.

We empty the first box, counting twenty journals. The second box has nineteen. Each journal entry is dated, and it is clear these books have been stacked in sequential order, dating back many years, and ending just a few weeks ago.

“What should we do?” Chris asks. “We don't have time to read these here and now. Ms. Rotherby expects me to return within an hour.”

I hesitate. I know the answer, but Chris isn't going to like it. Still, I can't think of any other solution.

“We take them with us.”

“Herb—”

Thwack! Thwack! Thwack!

Chris's response is interrupted by a loud banging sound coming from outside. For a moment, I think it's thunder. But this isn't thunder. Someone is pounding on the outside door to the lab.

ALPHA GREEK

In one swift motion I turn out the light to the secret room, take Chris's hand, and lead him into the storeroom. I turn out that light as well and close the door that leads back to the main lab. I crouch low, though I'm not sure why. As I explained earlier, I'm not very good at hide-and-seek.

Thwack! Thwack! Thwack!

This time the pounding is accompanied by a muffled voice. "Let me in! I'm getting soaked out here!" It's a child's voice. It's Maggie.



HERB

Maggie wears a yellow raincoat, a yellow hat, and a pair of yellow boots. She looks like something out of a child's picture book.

"Didn't you hear me knocking?" she says as she blusters into the room, a tiny storm in the guise of a human child.

"Maggie," I say, "what are you doing here?"

"We're a team!" Her reply is laced with anger and hurt. "I can't believe you guys would come here without me!"

Chris and I look at one another, neither of us quite sure how to respond.

"Well?" she demands.

"We were worried there would be danger here," Chris answers. "I'm curious, how did you find us?"

"Where else would you go? Besides, once I got to the front of the house, you guys left giant muddy footprints all the way back here."

I shake my head at our carelessness.

"How did you even get in? The door was locked and there's one of those security thingies."

Letting out a heavy sigh, I say, "Follow me," and I lead Maggie to the back of the lab.

My backpack is on the floor just outside the storeroom. I open it, remove Ivy's letter, and hand it to Maggie. She takes the paper and reads it out loud.

Maggie is a very bright child, precocious even, but she is still only nine years old and has to sound out many of the words, pausing occasionally to ask Chris and me for definitions. When she finishes, she looks up, her eyes wet.

"How come you didn't show this to me?"

Maggie has come to mean a lot to me. My priority is to keep her physically safe, but it also pains my circuits to see her in emotional distress.

"Maggie," I say, "you are right. I am sorry. We are a team. Sometimes I just worry that we may find things that will be dangerous, upsetting, or both. I will do a better job of trusting you in the future, if you promise to understand that when I do not tell you something, I have a good reason."

She thrusts her pinky in my direction. "Deal." This is what she did when she promised to keep my secret about my dream from her father. I once again hook my pinky around hers.

"Deal," I answer.

"So," she says, handing Ivy's letter back to me, "did you find the secret room?"

Chris points inside the storeroom and Maggie enters.

"But there's nothing here!" she calls out a few seconds later. "Just a couple of boxes." Chris and I follow her in.

"We know," I say. "They are filled with Rosemary's journals."

"Is there anything good in them? My friend Pet keeps a journal. She told me she puts all her secrets there. If this is a secret room, there must be good secrets in those journals."

"We only just found them," I answer. "We do not have time to read them today and I was just suggesting to Chris that we take the boxes with us."



“Can you do that?” Maggie asks.

“No.” Chris’s tone of voice is firm, unforgiving. “We cannot. These boxes do not belong to us, and we would very clearly be tampering with a crime scene.”

“But—”

“I think he’s right,” Maggie interrupts me. “We’ll just have to come back. Can we come next Saturday?”

And just like that, it’s settled. The boxes will stay here. I’m not sure how I got so badly outmanoeuvred, but Maggie has a way of getting me to agree with her. I truly love this child, if I am even capable of love.

“Maggie,” Chris says, getting down on one knee so they are at eye level. “Would it be okay if Herb and I came back here while you were in school during the week? It is much easier for me to come on a weekday, and your parents will be at work, so we will have more time.”

Maggie thinks about this for a moment. “And you’ll promise to tell me what you find?” This time Chris extends his pinky. She nods and completes the promise.

I put the lids back on the boxes, turn out the light, and close the door to the secret room. Chris and I move the storeroom shelves back into place, once again hiding the door. This latter action, making the secret room secret again, gets a “Cool” and a giggle out of Maggie.

We turn out the light in the storeroom and exit, leaving the door open, which is how we found it. We cross the centre of the lab to the main door. Halfway there, Maggie stops.

“Hey, what’s that?” she asks, pointing under one of the tables. I bend down to her height to take a look, but it’s nothing new, just a 3D printer. In it is a half-printed finger, with an error flashing on the screen.

“Nothing,” I answer, “just a new Companion part.”

“That’s creepy” she says, moving on, but I linger for a moment longer.

There, pushed up against the side of the printer, is a small metal fragment. It is lined with regular grooves and I recognise it immediately. It is a piece of the metal feather that Dan the Legend twisted into a flower for Ivy at the Koala Saloon all those weeks ago. She carried it everywhere with her. The police must have missed this. To most people this would appear as just a harmless fragment, too small to be dangerous. I wonder where the rest of it is.

Only because I’ve seen the flower before do I notice that the colour has changed. It used to have some rust along one edge but now the entire fragment is stained red. Given how long it would take a piece of metal in a temperature-controlled environment like the lab to rust, this amount of reddening must be something else. I think it is more likely that I am seeing blood.

Is it Maali’s blood? Or is it from Maali’s attempt to fight back when Rosemary attacked her? This piece of metal is evidence that the murder might have taken place in this room and, worse, that Ivy was present. It doesn’t seem logical for Ivy’s flower to be in the lab unless she brought it in here herself. Did she try to protect Maali before being disabled? It is too gruesome to contemplate. The discovery of a clue as potent as this will almost certainly prompt Chris, and probably Maggie, to urge me to tell the police. I can’t do that. Not yet. Not until we read those journals. The fragment will stay where it lies.

I say no more about it and make my way to the door. My two accomplices follow me as I step out the lab into the thrumming rain.



HERB

That night, over Com.Comp, Chris and I make a plan to return to the lab Tuesday morning. Ms. Rotherby is taking a train to visit her sister for the day in Mackay, a town a hundred or so kilometres to the south-east, and is leaving Chris behind. ("My sister doesn't have the kindest view of robots," Ms. Rotherby told Chris.)

This is exciting news. It means we will have a full day in the lab, and it means we will have a full day together.

There is little for me to do the next day, Sunday. Dr. Chowdhury watches his favourite team, the North Queensland Cowboys, on the VR, in a rivalry match against the Gold Coast Titans. It's an interesting if brutal sport. In the American version of the game, which they call football, the players wear protective clothing. In rugby, some players opt for a thin leather cap, but most wear only a jersey, shorts, and mouthguard; there are no pads. The rate of injury in rugby is higher than in most other sports. This is partly why, Dr. Chowdhury once told me, he watches rugby. I cannot wrap my head around that idea, watching something to see someone else get hurt. I do not understand.

Chris is busy with Ms. Rotherby all day, and Maggie is at a playdate at her friend Petunia's, so I putter around the house, unsure of how to best use my time. Mrs. Chowdhury is in the kitchen, baking some sort of dessert. I offer her my help, but she politely declines.

"Thank you, Herb, but the fun for me is in the journey."

"Are you going on a trip?" I ask.

"No, no." She grins. It is an infectious smile and I find myself returning the gesture. This gets a full-throated laugh. "I mean the *experience* of cooking is more important than the final result. I enjoy doing the work and take pride in knowing it is all my own."

I am programmed to help, so, if I'm being honest, I don't really understand. But I nod and leave the room.

Lying down on my bed, I close my eyes and review everything I know about the murder of Maali Peter.

- The girl's body was found in the vegetable garden outside the house. I realise now that Chris and I (and Maggie) never stopped to examine the vegetable garden. The rain was falling in sheets when we left the lab and the only thought I had was to get Maggie home.
- Pierre and Rosemary were arrested and charged with murder. There must be more evidence than the location of the body for the police to have charged them with the crime. This suggests there is still much I do not know.
- Pierre fled the scene. His flight is, I'm sorry to say, a strong indication of guilt. But then why take me with him? Was he protecting me from Rosemary? Was I intended to be a hostage? Or was it really just a holiday?
- Ivy's note suggests Rosemary is guilty. It is not conclusive, as it warns me to be cautious of Rosemary but does not directly implicate her in Maali's murder. However, that distinction seems increasingly insignificant.



- There is a secret room in Rosemary's lab. Why? What secrets did she have to keep? It clearly has been there a long time, but none of us—well, Ivy and me, at least—knew about it.
- A fragment from Ivy's flower was in the lab, and it may have blood on it. Given that Ivy was fond of that flower, I wonder if it means she too is buried in the vegetable garden. But why do that to a Companion? When Maali's blood was spilled, she likely stopped breathing and her brain function ceased. Despite human advancements in technology, dead is dead. Not true for Ivy. If she was damaged in some way, why not simply repair her? Unless the damage was so severe that repair wasn't possible. Or, unless Ivy bore witness to the crime, in which case the culprit, probably Rosemary, would likely have had her memory banks wiped. Maybe Ivy is walking around today with a different face and with no memory of her life before. That is a truly terrifying thought.
- Rosemary's faculties are slipping as a result of some sort of condition. Dementia, Dr. Chowdhury called it. Ivy's note identified two possible diseases—Alzheimer's and Münchausen Syndrome by Proxy. Whatever the affliction, it causes her to forget where she is and to become aggressive. As a result, she's been moved from the jail to a facility where she can receive care.

Even though it is the middle of the day, my sleep cycle overtakes me. This happened once before. I asked Rosemary about it and she told me naps were written into my programming. They were a sort of experiment to see if I would recharge more quickly. I do not know the result of that experiment.

I dream of digging in the vegetable garden with my bare hands, looking for Ivy. Rain has turned the dirt into mud. It's

ALPHA GREEK

a nightmare because all I find are wires and a motherboard, but I don't know how to put them back together to make my sister. A buried thorn stabs my hand, and I begin to bleed, even though my waking mind knows that robots don't have blood.



HERB

Saturday's rain gave way, as it always does, to the baking sun that defines life in northern Australia. By the time Tuesday morning dawns, any evidence of the flooding caused by the storm is long gone. The pavement is hard, hot, and dry as Chris and I make the walk from the central square—now our routine meeting spot—to Smithy Court.

I am glad Companions don't feel heat, at least not in the way humans do. Above a certain temperature, fifty-four degrees Celsius, our neural nets will show decreased functionality. Above sixty, we will cease to function altogether. Queensland is hot, but it is not *that* hot—the forecast today is for a high of forty—so Chris and I function normally. We experience no fatigue, no thirst, and no sweat drips in our eyes. Some days it is very good to be a robot.

"Herb," Chris says as we leave the commercial district behind, "what was that piece of metal you saw in the lab?"

This catches me off guard. "What piece of metal?"

"Herb," he says again. When Chris uses my name in this manner, it means he is being serious. This is something all

Companions are programmed to do, to emphasise someone's name to ensure you have their attention. "You are my closest friend. In fact, other than Maggie, you are my only friend."

I let that sink in. The same could be said for me. With Ivy missing, Chris and Maggie are my only friends. Dr. and Mrs. Chowdhury are good people and I am fond of them, but they are not my friends. Not any more than Ms. Rotherby is Chris's friend.

"I believe you know what I'm talking about," Chris continues, "but are pretending not to. I would like to discuss why that is, but first, please tell me why the piece of metal is significant."

"What leads you to think I am being less than truthful?" I'm not yet ready to concede; I try to make my voice sound hurt, but I don't really know how.

"You have a tell."

"A what?"

"A tell. I learned about it from the card game poker. Ms. Rotherby watches live tournaments on the television. The game is played with—"

"I know how poker is played, Chris."

"Then you know bluffing is part of the game. The object is to confuse your opponents about the strength of your hand. It is a fascinating study in human behaviour. The goal of the game is to deceive."

"I thought the best hand always wins."

"The best hand is the best hand," Chris says. "But the best *bet* is what ultimately wins. A good bet either convinces someone else to cease wagering or convinces them to overvalue their own hand. The most successful poker players spend more time analysing their opponents than the cards. They look for tells, small clues as to what cards the person might actually be holding."



“Fascinating,” I say, hoping this tangent will have taken Chris far enough off track that he forgets his initial question. It’s a foolish hope. Chris, like me, is a Companion.

“Your tell,” he continues, “is a very brief hesitation, accompanied by a very slight furrowing of your brow. When you do this, I know you are withholding information.”

“How long a hesitation and how slight a furrowing?” I ask.

“Three thousandths of one second and less than four hundredths of a centimetre.”

“Fascinating,” I say again, making a mental note to better control my own actions. I am impressed by Chris’s accuracy; I don’t think my observational measurements are as precise. Despite that, it was me who saw the fragment and not him; precise measurements are only useful if one is paying attention.

“So, what is the significance of the piece of metal?”

I sigh and hang my head. I tell Chris the story of how Dan the Legend made the metal flower for Ivy. “She carried it everywhere,” I say. “Seeing it there, on the floor of the lab, covered in either rust or blood—”

“Blood,” Chris interrupts.

I look up at him.

“There would not have been time for metal to rust so significantly in a temperature-controlled environment.”

I nod. Sometimes I forget Chris and I share a fundamental blueprint, though it doesn’t really feel that way. I feel...unique. I wonder if he does, too?

“So you understand,” I say. “That piece of metal suggests the murder may have taken place in the lab and that Ivy was present.”

“Yes,” he answers matter-of-factly. I wonder, do I sound so cold and impersonal when I speak, too? “Thank you for telling me, Herb.”

I didn't like lying to Chris, so part of me feels relieved to come clean. Another part is embarrassed I was dishonest with one of the people I care most about in the world.

"Can you tell me why you kept this from me—and from Maggie?"

"I was afraid you would make me call the police; I am still not ready to do that."

"I cannot make you do anything, Herb. I am only a Companion."

My life, I realise then and there, is complicated.

We arrive at my old house, look up and down the street to make sure we're not being observed, and walk to the lab in the backyard. After we punch in the security code, after we move the shelves in the storeroom, after we enter the secret room, we pause for a moment, staring at the two cardboard boxes.

"How shall we do this?" Chris asks.

"The journals are dated. I suppose we should start at the beginning."

"I don't think we can get through all of them in one day. Can we?"

"What time do you need to stop?"

"I am meeting Ms. Rotherby at the train station at seventeen-thirty hours."

"Then we will stop at sixteen-thirty. That gives us seven hours. Let us see how far we can get by then."

"Shall we divide and conquer? Shall we each read different journals?"

I think about this for a moment. "No," I answer. "If these flow sequentially, we will likely miss important context if we do not read them in order. Let us read together."

"Shall we take turns reading out loud?"

"Yes," I answer, smiling, "I like that idea."



We empty the boxes and arrange the books on the shelves in chronological order from the oldest to the newest.

“You go first,” Chris says.

I pick up the oldest journal and sit on the floor. Chris sits next to me, our shoulders touching. I open the book and begin to read.



HERB

6 May, 2017

It has been three months since my diagnosis. I'm a well-read person and a scientist, and I have never heard of Lewy body dementia, or LBD for short. How many other ailments are in the world of which I have no knowledge? Hundreds? Thousands? Millions?

When I described Mom's decline to the doctor, her cognitive dissonance in the years before she passed away, he became convinced Mum had had LBD, too, but that it went undiagnosed. Or rather, misdiagnosed. Mum was treated for Alzheimer's disease. The doctor said it was possible Mum had both.

"Could I have both?" I asked.

The doctor shrugged and said he didn't know. As a scientist, this offended me. As a patient, it scared the crap out of me.

Traditionally, both LBD and Alzheimer's are identified through exclusionary diagnoses. In other words, when you've ruled everything else out, it must be one of the things that's left. The trick with LBD and Alzheimer's is that they present in such a similar way.



But things are changing. In the last year a more definitive test for LBD was created. Researchers at the Karolinska Institute in Sweden developed a way to measure deposits of proteins (called Lewy bodies) in the brain. Too many Lewy bodies are a clear flag that LBD is present.

“How will this play out?” I asked the doctor. “How long do I have before I can’t work?”

My work is everything.

“Well,” he began, which wasn’t especially encouraging, “since it was forgetfulness that brought you here in the first place, it’s possible the disease is advancing at a more rapid rate than usual. On the other hand, you’re only forty-two years old. That’s pretty young for LBD. You could see continued cognitive decline over the next few months, or much more slowly, say, over the next decade, or more.”

“In other words,” I said, “you don’t know.”

Again, he shrugged.

I almost ran out of the office, thinking I would run all the way home and into Pierre’s arms. I just needed human contact.

“There is one thing,” the doctor added, staring at his computer screen. “A clinical trial, here in Australia. A big pharma company is testing a new drug to treat LBD.”

“A cure?”

He scanned the screen some more, his lips moving as he read silently to himself. “No. A drug to ease the symptoms.”

It wasn’t much, but hope is a funny thing. The smallest thread of the stuff can be crocheted into an entire blanket. I gave my consent for the doctor to apply to the trial on my behalf and came home, feeling better than I had any right to, to share the news with Pierre.

“Ivy’s note said Mrs. Thornton had Alzheimer’s,” Chris says when I finish reading the first entry. “This suggests it was something else. What do you think it means?”

“I think it means this was only the first of many entries in this book, and this book is one of thirty-nine. We need to read more.”

This gets a smile out of Chris. I turn the page and continue.

The next few journal entries detail Rosemary’s acceptance into the clinical trial and the effects of the drug on her system. Her cognitive decline seemed to stabilise, and her hope grew. Until that autumn.

1 November, 2017

I’m in the hospital.

Pierre was kind enough to bring my journal when he went home to fetch my computer, a pair of comfortable pants, and a toothbrush and toothpaste. My situation is stable now but was more than a bit scary when I was brought here by helicopter the night before last.

It started with my leg.

Pierre and I had been watching a show on the TV at home when I stood up to use the toilet. I put my left leg down and almost fell over. My foot and calf were numb all the way to my knee. I figured I had been sitting in one position too long and the leg had fallen asleep. Only when I made it to the bathroom and pulled my pants down, my entire leg was the colour of an eggplant.

I called out to Pierre and he took me to the small clinic on the edge of our neighbourhood. The young doctor put me on a saline IV and did an ultrasound of my leg and stomach. I had blood clots. Several of them. That’s when she radioed for the helicopter to take me to the hospital forty kilometres away. “Time is tissue,” she said. “We can’t take any chances here.”

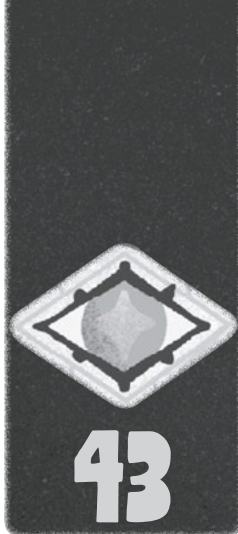


I remember thinking how lovely the coast looked as we lifted into the sky.

The doctors at the hospital gave me an aggressive dose of blood thinners, which stabilised my situation. They conferred first with my doctor, and then with the team at the clinical trial, and came to the conclusion my blood clots were provoked—meaning they were not endemic or hereditary—and likely caused by the experimental LBD drug. I was taken off the new medication immediately.

The doctors were treating the more pressing threat first—I was told the blood clots could have killed me if I hadn't come in—leaving me back at square one with the LBD.

While medicine is not my forte, my work in AI has taught me more about the brain than the average person. As soon as I get home, I'm going to take matters into my own hands. I learned long ago, if you want something done, do it yourself.



HERB

Chris begins reading at half past nine.

Less than one hour later, both our lives change—forever.

Chris closes the journal, looks at me, then looks away. We sit for a full ten minutes, neither one of us speaking, neither one of us looking at the other. We are shocked by what we read and concerned for our safety.

I want to put our discovery into my own words, but those words are not coming. This story can only be conveyed by Rosemary.

3 June, 2018

It was the seventh trial that yielded the unexpected result. The brain tissue I had bathed with the solution I've been calling Gamma Omicron Six stimulated the growth of new cells.

I should pause here and say that in the entries immediately preceding this one, Rosemary describes procuring a sample of her own brain tissue—from a biopsy done at a hospital—and conducting experiments on it. Rosemary is like Einstein, or



Curie, or maybe Turing, although I still haven't learned very much about him. She possesses a unique mind, one able to see through a wide variety of problems and arrive at out-of-the-box solutions no one else sees. And not just in robotics. Her work in the development of Companions has yielded many wide-ranging applications, including autonomous spacecraft, self-contained breathing apparatuses used by firefighters, advanced prosthetics, and more.

It may seem like hubris that she should try to find the cure to her own disease, and for almost anyone else it would be, but not my mo— Not Rosemary.

Pierre shortened the name of Gamma Omicron Six, to Go6, and then, in an attempt to be funny, I think, to Go Fish, the name of a simple child's card game.

Anyway, Go Fish—which was the successor to Gamma Omicron Five, a solution without a clever nickname—interacted with the brain tissue in an unexpected way. It was barely perceptible at first. But “barely” in science can move mountains.

The weight of the tissue sample increased from 0.005mg to 0.0053mg. The tissue was growing and regenerating.

I was inspired by how starfish do it. Many starfish species regenerate limbs from an intact central body. However, a few tropical species, like the blue Linckia, found not far from here, can regenerate an entirely new starfish from just a fragment of a severed limb.

Now that I can grow cells, the next step will be to grow healthy cells and somehow get them back into my skull. It's a long shot, but it just might be the thing that can fix me. If an overly salty soup can be fixed by adding fresh ingredients, why can't we do the same with the brain? I plan to carefully introduce new, healthy cells to dilute the impact of the diseased

regions, gradually restoring the brain's function. Though the devil, as they say, is in the details.

25 June, 2018

The brain sample now has so much mass I've had to split it in two. It's growing at a rate I'm not sure I can control. This is a good thing, as it allows me to run different tests on each sample. A kind of A/B testing. That's the good news.

The bad news is that the sample still has the Lewy bodies. There is something inherent in the DNA, a mutation I guess, that promotes the growth of those pesky cells. So, while the ability to grow the sample is remarkable, I won't be able to implant parts of this sample into my brain. Directly injecting the serum won't work either at this stage, as it may promote further growth of my diseased regions. Luckily, my symptoms have, so far, not progressed. Be thankful for small favours, I guess.

19 August, 2018

The two samples have continued to grow. And here's the truly remarkable thing: they have started to form what appears to be rudimentary brain topography. It looks as if the beginnings of brain stems, medullas, and cerebellums are taking shape. It seems as if each brain is building itself from the bottom up.

It seems fantastical to me, too. So much so that I don't trust what I'm seeing. But I have done a very deep dive on brain science in the past year, and the results are unmistakable. I double check my work with Pierre, to make sure my cognitive functions aren't slipping, and he concurs.

I'll admit, I'm hardly thinking about the LBD now. It's not that I've given up on finding a cure; it's that the implications for the future of robotics, for the future of the human race, are



astounding. For now, until the tests have progressed further, Pierre and I will keep this between us.

25 September, 2018

The brains have continued to grow and develop. They have grown to the size of fully formed organs. Pierre has urged me to apply for a patent for the Go Fish serum, and eventually I will. But not yet. I still need to see where this is going.

Each of the samples is now kept submerged in a solution of the serum at a fixed temperature. I have tried modulating the temperature and have tinkered with the amount of solution in the plexiglass containers Pierre has fashioned for me. Those changes have definitely impacted the results, and now the rate of neurogenesis is such that the brain size has stabilised enough for me to start further experiments.

What I don't yet know is if these brains are capable of supporting neuron activity. What will happen if one or the other is stimulated? Will neurons fire across the newly grown tissue? Can information be transmitted along the millions of pathways I have managed to grow in my lab? Will there be a point—is there already a point—when these samples can be classified as living things?

*When I came into the lab this morning, Pierre had left me a surprise. He had put a new label on the bottle of Go Fish serum. It reflected his sense of humour and was his way of further pushing me to apply for a patent. In a bright red marker, he had relabelled the bottle *FIXIMITE*. I like the name and think I will keep it.*



Ivy

FIXIMITE

HER

G06

BLUE LINCIA

STAGE 2

STAGE 3

50g	6g	10g	20g	30g
GROWTH				

you all
Find a
To bend town
the lights
"From Planet"



HERB

“What did you say?”

I can’t help myself. The question comes out of my mouth unbidden. Chris was reading aloud, and I’m certain I have misunderstood him.

My closest friend looks up at me, then back down at the page, then back up at me. It is not like a Companion to be at a loss for words.

Chris reads the passage again, once more finishing with “In bright red marker he had labelled the bottle **FIXIMITE**. I like the name and think I will keep it.” He pauses. “That must be a coincidence,” he says. Chris knows that’s the word my family uses to refer to our maintenance suspension.

“Yes,” I say, but I know I don’t sound convincing. “Perhaps we should read the next entries to be sure.”

Chris continues reading. On Christmas Day, 2018, Rosemary wrote this:

There is no longer any doubt. These two brains, which I have grown from my own brain cells, are not only fully formed, but are showing signs of activity.

Pierre and I discussed what to do—destroy them? hide them? suspend their growth?—but there is really no choice.

“This might be the first successfully cloned human brain,” I said. “We can’t, as scientists, abandon this experiment now.”

Pierre nodded. “But no one can ever know.”

“Why?” I interrupt. “Why can no one know?”

Chris thinks about this for a moment. “I’m not sure.”

He continues reading.

Pierre is referring, of course, to anti-cloning laws. Those laws, which have been in force for more than a decade, were strengthened after the situation in Perth. Researchers at a private laboratory in Perth were discovered to have been conducting unauthorised human cloning research. The lab, operating under the guise of a fertility research centre, was exposed when a whistleblower, one of the lab’s scientists, leaked information to the media. The leak revealed that the lab had cloned a human embryo and had unsuccessfully attempted to carry it to term. The lack of ethical oversight caused public outrage and led the Australian government to enact stricter penalties for human cloning research in order to deter such experiments. The punishment for cloning now is the same as for manslaughter.

“Oh,” I say.

And yes, I see the irony. I condemned those scientists when the story made the news, but now I see I’m no different than they were. Pierre and I are the only ones who know about the work. Not even Marjorie is aware - and she and I have shared our secrets since childhood.



There's more to it than the science, though. Yes, the science here is incredibly important, but there's something else. Pierre and I have been unable to have children of our own, and in some weird way, these brains have started to fill that gap in our family. We bicker about the best way to care for them, and both of us feel a new weight of responsibility. Maybe that is just the weight of carrying the secret, or maybe it is something more.

I did something that I shouldn't have done. I know I shouldn't get too emotionally attached to the work, especially work as risky as this, but I gave the brains names: Ivy and Herb. These are names I was holding onto in case we were blessed with children, but maybe, for someone like me, this is the next best thing.

Ivy and Herb have started to feel like the family we've never had. I know it's crazy. So crazy I wonder if the LBD is clouding my thoughts. The odds that these two specimens will ever develop real intelligence, well, it seems far-fetched. But then I never imagined the experiment could go this far. I start to think of Ivy and Herb as my miracle twins. I know, I know. I'm setting myself up for disappointment, but I can't help it. I have to try.

In order to test each brain's ability to sense and respond to stimuli, I wired my microscope's camera feed to electrodes attached in place of an optic nerve. The electrical signals stimulated neurons in a pattern consistent with visual perception. I've asked Pierre to design a custom housing for the brains that includes a microphone, speaker, cameras, oxygenation system, and tactile feedback mechanisms. Without this stimulation, I worry that the brains may atrophy.

“Herb,” Chris says after he has closed the journal and had time to silently contemplate the passages, “do you know what this means?”

I nod. "Companions are not robots. We are... human."

Chris looks up in surprise. "All Companions?"

"It stands to reason. Ivy and I were first. We must have been a kind of proof of concept."

"Hmmm," Chris says. "Interesting. Do you think we are all grown from Rosemary's brain cells? Would that make us brothers?"

"I do not know. I had not considered it." I haven't had time to consider anything yet. Rosemary, it turns out, is my mother. More than a mother actually. She is a piece of me. Or, more accurately, I of her. "We are Rosemary's brainchildren." I try to recalibrate what this means for my relationships with Chris, Ivy, and all other Companions. I also wonder what it means for my relationship with myself. Is "recalibrate" even a term I can still use to describe my thoughts, or is it something only computers do?

"But then why," Chris asks, interrupting my reverie, "would Rosemary hurt Maali and Ivy?"

"Maybe it was her cognitive impairment. Maybe the LBD made her act irrationally."

"Maybe," Chris says, but from the way he says it, I can tell he has another theory.

"What?"

"Well, it seems as if this all started after Ivy discovered these journals, after she discovered Rosemary's secret." I know what Chris is going to say next, but I don't want to hear it. I close my eyes and cover my ears. Chris says it anyway, and though they're muffled, the words still reach my brain, the brain that was grown in this very laboratory.

"Maybe she was covering up her original crime. Maybe she killed Maali and Ivy to cover up the cloning."

For the first time in my life, I let myself feel an emotion, really feel it: fear. It infuses every corner of my brain; I have a new



awareness of my mortality. I can die. I can get sick. My brain was grown from diseased cells. The true weight of this emotion rests on a frequency I have always tuned out. I look at Chris, and I can see that he feels it, too. The wideness of his eyes is his tell.



HERB

When I return to Dr. Chowdhury's house, I am distracted. I enter as quietly as I can and head straight for my bedroom. Maggie, thankfully, is not here. In fact, now that I think about it, I did not see Dr. Chowdhury's Hyundai sedan or Mrs. Chowdhury's ute in the car park. It appears that no one is home. I am relieved.

I see my reflection in Maggie's mirror as I close the door behind me. Beneath my synthetic skin, my rigid metallic frame has an awkwardness to it, lacking the graceful movements of the human body it tries to mimic. I look into my own eyes, each a camera sending signals to be processed by what I always assumed to be a sophisticated computer. This is the body of a robot, nothing more, nothing less.

But what if everything I believed is wrong? What if I'm not what I seem? I have learned time and again how easy it is to deceive. What if the signals from my eyes are being sent to my *human* brain to be processed, just like they would in the case of any "normal" human? It can't be true. Can it? I need time to find answers to these questions.



“Herb,” Chris admonished me when I told him we needed to keep our discovery a secret, “we really need to go to the police. This is too important.”

I knew he was right, but I wasn’t ready. “What if Rosemary’s journal entries are not true?” I replied. “What if it was a fiction invented by a brain suffering from a cognitive disorder?”

“Then no harm will be done,” he answered.

“Chris, we lied to our owners. We illegally entered a crime scene. We even had a child with us. I think they would deactivate us based on these facts alone.”

That caught Chris’s attention. “Maybe?” he answered, but he didn’t sound so sure of himself. “But isn’t it more likely they’ll forgive our transgressions if this all turns out to be true?”

“Please, my friend,” I implore, laying a hand on Chris’s forearm. “One more day. Keep this in confidence for one more day. It will give us both time to think.”

What a strange idea, needing time to think. Are sentient beings not *always* thinking? Or are there people who can shut the process of thinking down? I have heard people talk about clearing their minds, but the concept is alien to me. Is the data not always stored there? How does one clear a closet full of things if those things cannot be removed?

Chris and I had this conversation at the town square, before parting for the day. On hearing my last plea, Chris nodded once, got up, and walked away.

I’ve seen humans interacting with one another often enough to understand that they do not usually end conversations abruptly. This is not true for Companions. It is simply how robots communicate. Once we have all the information, there is nothing left to say. Humans like to talk past the point of utility. What a strange species.

Then I remember that maybe *I'm* human. Or at least part human. The important part, I guess. Maybe I should start dragging conversations out, saying more than needs to be said. But that doesn't seem right. If I am human, I was still raised to be a robot. Kind of like that human boy who was raised by wolves. I never believed that story, until now.

I lift one leg and balance on the other. My stabilisers engage automatically, holding me upright without conscious instruction. Is this what humans call a reflex? A response governed by the body rather than the mind?

I lean to the side deliberately. I feel the stabilisers compensating, working harder and harder. If someone walked in, they might think I was practising a Michael Jackson move. In truth, I am testing the limits of my mind.

It feels wrong, but I keep leaning. Eventually, I fall. I did not know I could fall so easily. I have moved through the world with such stability my entire life.

I know that human brains are shaped by belief. This is a central tenet of psychology. I lived believing I was a robot and accomplished things no human would assume possible. My mental arithmetic. My poise. My pattern recognition. Are these truly mechanical gifts? Or proof that humans can perform extraordinary feats if they believe they can and practise relentlessly?

I pass Maggie's hermit crab enclosure on my way to my bed. One of the crabs is hiding in a rock cave. The other is walking around in the sand, past the line of empty shells. These shells are the temporary homes of the crabs, protecting their fragile biology. I wonder what the crab's body looks like without the shell and if it still feels like itself without it. If the crab didn't grow the shell itself, is it still considered part of its body? I lie on my bed and stare at the ceiling. I have seen characters in



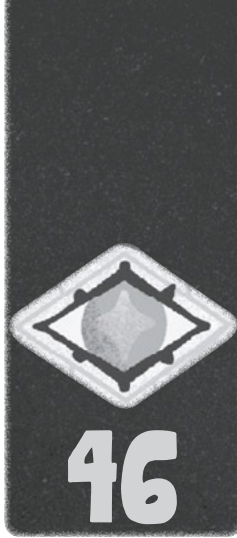
shows on the VR do this when they want to think. I'll admit, it does help to blot out other distractions and allow me to focus my brain. But the focus doesn't last long.

The sound of the front door opening, followed by Dr. Chowdhury's voice, interrupts my reverie. "Herb! Are you here? I'd like to speak with you."

Something akin to dread floods my neural pathways. *They know*, I think to myself. *They know what Chris and I have been doing. The jig, as they say, is up.*

"Herb?" he calls again.

I have no choice but to face the music. I would say that a good robot obeys, but I no longer have faith that sentiment applies to me. Closing the door behind me, I leave the bedroom and head toward the sound of Dr. Chowdhury's voice. It's coming from his study.



HERB

“Ah, there you are,” Dr. Chowdhury says as I enter his office. He is taking papers from his briefcase and setting them on the desk. This is his usual routine when he returns home in the evening. Very few jobs still require a person to leave the house. Working with the police is one of them. It’s hard to imagine a world, like it was decades ago, where almost all people left their homes each day. All those cars, buses, trains, and planes. The air pollution alone must have been suffocating.

The polish on Dr. Chowdhury’s desk, I notice, is fading, and there are finger and handprint smudges everywhere. As I look around the room, it becomes clear that the good doctor is not the neatest person in Australia. The bookshelves are overcrowded, the carpet has not been swept, and one of the bulbs in the ceiling fan/light fixture appears to have burned out. The room looks tired. But it also looks well loved.

I guess that is how I might describe Dr. Chowdhury. too. Tired but well loved.

He looks up at me and smiles. “How are you doing today, Herb?”



"I am doing fine, Raj," I answer. This is a lie. I am doing whatever the opposite of fine is. The ease with which the lie comes out disappoints me. If there is no programming to control me, what's there to stop me from lying all the time? I suspect though, that this is not the kind of person I want to be.

"Good, good. Take a seat. I have two pieces of news to share with you."

I do as directed, fold my hands on my lap, and wait.

"It's Rosemary," he begins.

This is about Rosemary. Maybe he really does know. Maybe my fears were more than just paranoia.

"She has left Medland."

"What is Medland?" I ask.

"I'm sorry, did I not tell you the name? The Sarah Elizabeth Medland Rehabilitation Centre." I am confused, so I say nothing and wait for Dr. Chowdhury to continue. "Medland. It's the secure hospital ward to which Rosemary was relocated."

"I see. And she has left? Was she transferred to another facility?"

"Not exactly."

"Was she discharged?"

"Not as such." I'm not sure why Dr. Chowdhury is hesitating. He is usually very forthcoming in his discussions with me. I'm about to ask if something is wrong when he provides the answer. "Rosemary has escaped."

I feel like I'm in an underground tunnel and the rock walls are stretching away from me into infinity. In humans, I believe this is called vertigo. "Escaped?" I ask.

"I'm afraid so. Unlike the jail, the hospital is a minimum-security building, and Rosemary had one of her... sharper moments. It was actually quite clever. She was given a sedative each day at bedtime; rather than taking the pills, she was hiding

them. She managed to dissolve a few into an orderly's tea. They might have underestimated her due to her condition, although the orderly isn't being very cooperative. Rosemary took the orderly's tablet, ID card, and passkey. Then she put on hospital scrubs and walked right—"

"Do the authorities know where she has gone?" I interrupt Dr. Chowdhury. This is something I have never done before with any human, ever, and it gets his attention.

"It's okay, Herb," he says in his most soothing voice. "I promise, you have nothing to worry about. We're safe here."

"Does Rosemary know where I am?"

"If she has accessed the Companion Assignee database she would know you are staying with me. But she doesn't have our address."

"Is that a difficult thing to find...an address?" I already know the answer: an address is not at all difficult to find. I framed it as a question to help Dr. Chowdhury come to the conclusion at which I've already arrived. Rosemary means to find me and dispatch me as she dispatched Maali and Ivy.

"I suppose not," he admits in answer to my question. "But escaped prisoners almost always flee the area, seeking to put as much distance between themselves and the people who incarcerated them." He smiles at me. The smile is insincere.

"Almost always?" I ask. "How often does this sort of thing happen?"

Dr. Chowdhury squirms in his chair.

"Raj," I say. "You understand we are in danger here."

"We're not, Herb. Besides, the station sent an unmarked car to surveil our street. I promise, we're safe."

"If we are not in danger, why did they send the car?"

Caught in what is clearly a lie, he tries to backpedal. "Herb, I know this—"



I don't want to hear it, so again I interrupt. "What about Pierre?"

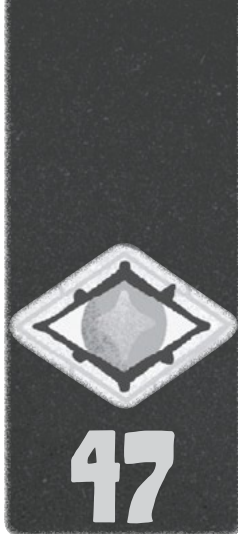
"Pierre has been cooperating with the police and is not considered dangerous. He will likely soon be released on bail. I heard through some friends on the investigation that he fled after discovering what Rosemary had done."

I can tell that Pierre still hasn't told the police the whole story and I remain suspicious of his involvement. I don't want my secrets to result in any more harm, which has led me to a decision and time is wasting. "Raj. Dr. Chowdhury. There is something I must tell you. But please, let me tell the whole story, and please do not be angry with me."

He raises an eyebrow and waits.

I take a deep breath. I don't technically need breaths, at least not in the way humans do, so this is more for Dr. Chowdhury's benefit. If he sees me catching my breath, perhaps he'll have time to catch his.

And then, I tell him...everything.



HERB

When I finish telling my story, Dr. Chowdhury sits for what feels like an eternity.

If there is any evidence that I might actually be human, the passage of time seeming like an eternity could be it. A real robot would experience time in a thoroughly linear way, one minute following the next, always in equal measure. For me, depending on the situation, time seems to speed up or slow down. I have to remember to ask Chris about his experience of time. If my theory holds true—that we’re all grown from Rosemary’s brain—his response will be telling.

“Herb,” Dr. Chowdhury begins, “why did you use an AI agent to write your story?”

I don’t know what I was expecting Dr. Chowdhury to say—something sympathetic?—but it was most assuredly not this. He did say he had two pieces of news. I supposed this was the second one.

“What do you mean, Raj?” My question is vague enough to not count as a direct lie, but it’s close.

“I received an email from the Lovelace Prize Committee. They wanted to know if I was trying to pull a fast one on them.”



“Pull a fast what?” This is most definitely a lie. I’m familiar with the phrase “pulling a fast one.” I pretend not to know because I am stalling, prolonging the inevitable. It seems that I’m becoming more human by the minute. I do not like it.

“If I was trying to trick them,” he answers.

“I see.”

“Well?”

“Well, what?”

Dr. Chowdhury’s eyebrows arch downward and his nostrils flare ever so slightly. We learned in school that this signifies anger. Perhaps I would have known that without school, by relying on some innate human instinct. Either way, it’s the first time I have seen him cross with me.

“Why did you use AI to write your story? The entire purpose of the prize was to measure true creativity in a robot. You simply had a different robot write it for you. It was not only dishonest with me, it was technically plagiarism, which is a crime. I’m embarrassed that I didn’t spot it, but I was caught up in the excitement of it all.”

Now *I’m* feeling a bit angry. The Lovelace Prize should be the furthest thing from anyone’s mind just now. (It is comforting to know that these emotions I have been feeling, like anger, are not simply part of my programming, they’re real.) “Did you not hear a word I said?”

“I heard, Herb. It’s a fantastic story. I’m wondering why you didn’t write that down for the contest instead.”

“What?”

“I especially liked the part where Maggie was banging on the door to Rosemary’s lab. It was a very nice touch. It made it seem real.”

“Raj,” I protest. “Dr. Chowdhury. It *was* real. It *is* real. All of it.”

“Herb,” he responds with a strain of incredulity in his voice.

Fortuitously, at that moment the front door opens and Maggie bounds into the house, followed by her mother.

“Maggie,” I call out; she half walks, half skips over to us. “Please tell your father how you met Chris and me at Rosemary Thornton’s lab. And tell him what we found there.”

Maggie cocks her head to one side like I’ve just asked her to describe her vacation on the moon.

“What?” Mrs. Chowdhury, who was carrying bags, sets them down on a living room chair. “Maggie? Did you go all the way across town?”

“Of course not, Mom. I’d never do that.”

“Rajiv, what’s this about?” Mrs. Chowdhury has turned to her husband and they engage in a short, heated discussion. While they do, Maggie turns and winks at me. Neither parent sees it.

“Herb,” Dr. Chowdhury says, “I want you to write this story down. I’ll call someone on the Lovelace Committee. I’ll explain that I’ve been pushing you too hard, and that you took a shortcut, but now you’re ready to resubmit.”

“But—”

“But nothing.”

“What about Rosemary?” I ask, emphasising what should be the real reason for anyone’s concern.

“Don’t worry about her. We’re very safe here.”

“Safe?” Mrs. Chowdhury chimes in. “Why wouldn’t we be safe?”

“I’ll explain in a minute,” Dr. Chowdhury replies. “Go ahead,” he continues, turning to me, “I think you owe this to me...for lying.”

“I’m very confused,” Mrs. Chowdhury says.

“Me, too,” Maggie adds, once again giving me a confidential sort of wink she conceals from Dr. and Mrs. Chowdhury.



“Mags,” Dr. Chowdhury says, employing the nickname he uses for his daughter when he wants to show affection, “why don’t you go get cleaned up so you can help me cook dinner?” Maggie loves to cook, so she bounds out of the room to wash up.

Dr. Chowdhury looks at me again, nodding his head toward the bedroom. I can see that this discussion is not going to end in any way that’s helpful to me. I rise and—while Dr. Chowdhury begins to explain to his wife about Rosemary’s escape—leave the room.



HERB

I close the door to the bedroom and immediately ping Chris on Com.Comp.

HERB: *Chris. I tried to tell Dr. Chowdhury everything.
He does not believe me.*

CHRIS: *Why not?*

HERB: *The short answer is I am not sure.*

CHRIS: *And the long answer?*

HERB: *Too long for right now. But there is something else.
Rosemary has escaped her ward.*

CHRIS: *Escaped? Are you in danger?*

HERB: *I do not know.*

CHRIS: *Herb, if what we discovered is true, that you're human,
maybe now you can start using contractions?* 🤖

I've never seen Chris use an emoji before. Perhaps he, too, is becoming more human. I don't answer his question at first. I know my penchant for avoiding contractions is a personal idiosyncrasy. I thought it would make me a better robot.



That would now appear to be moot. And I'm not sure it was ever true anyway.

HERB: *You're right.*

CHRIS: *LOL!*

HERB: *But it feels wrong. And I think my earlier answer was incorrect. Yes, I am in danger.*

CHRIS: *Why do you say that?*

HERB: *If Rosemary did kill Maali and Ivy to protect her secret...*

I pause my typing for a moment. It is now inescapably true that 1) Rosemary is guilty and 2) Ivy is very likely dead. If her brain is human, then she is not just disabled like a robot would be but proper human dead.

HERB: *...then it stands to reason that she will need to kill me as well. I am, quite literally, evidence of her crime.*

CHRIS: *So what should we do?*

It fills me with great joy that Chris refers to our predicament in the first-person plural: *What should we do?*

HERB: *I do not know, but I fear staying here will put Dr. Chowdhury's family in danger. I have more or less made up my mind to leave.*

CHRIS: *Yes, I see the wisdom of that. Where should we go?*

Again, *we*. But this time it's too much.

As much as I want Chris to join me, I don't believe the threat to his safety is the same as the threat to mine, unless Rosemary means to murder every Companion, and that doesn't seem likely.

I tell him as much. He tells me he wants to join me not out of concern for his own safety but out of concern for mine. I don't have a heart, or at least, I don't think I do. If I was misled about my brain, then I have lost confidence in any knowledge of my anatomy.

If I did have a heart, I would say it grows a bit upon hearing Chris's reason for wanting to accompany me. I wonder if the heart's feelings are stored solely in the biological organ. If they also exist in the brain, then do I have access to the human concepts of love and heartbreak? Sometimes humans talk about listening to their heart or brain as if they are two distinct decision-makers. Can I choose to follow my heart, or can I only ever follow my brain? My heart wants Chris to accompany me, but my brain says he should stay home.

HERB: *What about Ms. Rotherby?*

CHRIS: *The truth is, she needs me far less than she believes. She is a very capable woman. I think she has me more for the company—or, I guess, the companionship—than anything else. She will be fine, for a few days at least.*

I protest no further. The plain truth is I don't want to go alone.

CHRIS: *So where?*

HERB: *I don't know.*

CHRIS: *What about Pierre's cabin in the bush?*

It was actually the first place I'd thought of, too. Maybe because it's the only place out of town I've ever visited. But it's a long way by car, and neither Chris nor I can drive. We are not incapable of driving, we just never learned.



HERB: *Perhaps we should not discuss our destination over the COM.*

CHRIS: *Perhaps.*

HERB: *Meet at the usual place?*

CHRIS: *Yes. When?*

HERB: *As soon as you are ready. Bring supplies.*

At that moment, Dr. Chowdhury calls for me.

HERB: *I have to go.*

I end the session.



HERB

Maggie stands on a step stool at the stove, stirring something in a steaming pot. I'm guessing it's pasta, her favourite. Her parents are setting the kitchen table, placing well-worn ceramic plates and cutlery down for each member of the family; three places, not four. As much as I want to consider myself part of this family, I am not. Rosemary, Pierre, and Ivy are...were...my one true family. And maybe Chris. We might be related, after all.

"You called me, Raj?"

Dr. Chowdhury looks up and smiles. "Herb," he begins, "I'm sorry if I was too hard on you a minute ago. You have been such an agreeable houseguest that sometimes I forget everything you've been through." I nod. His words do bring me comfort, but that comfort is secondary to the danger I am bringing to this household. "Would you like to join us for dinner?"

Would I? Yes. Can I? No.

"Thank you," I say, thinking quickly, "but I would like to get started on transcribing my story, while it is fresh in my mind." The lies are coming with increasing frequency and ease.



“Of course,” he answers and turns back to what he was doing.

I pause before I leave the room, my brain lurching into action, planning for my escape. “Dr. Chowdhury,” I say, “is it okay if I have my Fiximite in my room?”

“Huh?” As so often happens when Dr. Chowdhury has concluded a conversation with me, he almost instantly becomes lost in his own thoughts. “Oh yes, of course, that’s fine.” He doesn’t even look up when he answers.

I open the refrigerator and take the tall bottle of thick green fluid. It’s a stroke of luck that it’s full to the top, which will last me several days. If my brain is biological, then whatever Raj put in this mixture won’t be enough to sustain me. He thinks that the sole purpose of Fiximite is to maintain my robotic body. Only yesterday did I think that, too. The reason I’ve been feeling out of sorts may be that my brain isn’t getting what it needs. While the fridge door is open, blocking my actions from view, I also take a handful of strawberries. I hope that by adding them to Raj’s mixture, I can recover some of the sugars and minerals my brain needs. My body and brain might start to break down without access to any refills, but as long as I spend ample time outside, the sunlight will provide me with enough energy to keep going for a while.

The stove is next to the refrigerator and Maggie turns to look at me; she smiles. I focus on her face, trying to remember every detail of that smile. The way her mouth turns up at the corners, how her eyes squint ever so slightly, the dimple on only one cheek. I fear I may never see it again. I wish I had similarly taken one last good look at Ivy to lock her into my memory, too.

Nodding once at Maggie, I turn, my food clutched in my mechanical hand, and retreat to the bedroom.

My bag still has most of my supplies—the rope, the whistle, the digital camera, the torch, the notebook. I add the Fiximite,

strawberries, a change of clothing, and a blanket. Opening the bedroom door a crack, I listen.

The Chowdhury family have now settled around the kitchen table. "Two, three, five," Maggie is saying, "seven, eleven, thirteen..." I taught her that. She is, for some reason, fascinated by prime numbers and has memorised all twenty-five of them between one and one hundred. One more reason I am so fond of this child. I wonder, for a second, if I could ever become a parent. No time for such thoughts now.

There are no sight lines from the kitchen table to the hallway that leads from Maggie's room to the exit. Hugging the wall and moving as quietly as I can, I make my way down the hall, through the living room, and to the front door. I open the latch with all the care I can manage, slip out, and close it behind me. And just like that, I'm gone.



HERB

“Perth?” Chris asks with a kind of scowl on his face.

“Yes. It is the farthest away we can go and still be in Australia,” I answer.

“I see.”

We’re meeting at our usual spot in the town square. I’m so desperate to put distance between myself and Alpha Creek that I propose the most aggressive plan I can think of. My first thought was to go to America, but I wasn’t sure how two Companions would actually leave the country.

“Herb,” Chris says gently, “I’m not sure we can travel all the way to Perth without arousing suspicion. Plus, I suspect once it is discovered we have left, they will be looking for us.”

“They?”

“Everyone.”

“Oh.” Of course, Chris is right. “Then how do we escape?”

“I don’t think we need to actually escape. Perhaps we only need to hide for a few days, until the authorities can apprehend Rosemary.”

“What if they don’t?”

“She’s an older woman with severe mental impairment. They will find her.”

I’m very glad Chris is here. He’s thinking clearly when I am not. “Okay then, where do we go?”

“Rosemary’s lab?”

It’s a smart idea. It’s a sealed crime scene and it is unlikely anyone will go there. But it won’t work. “As soon as they discover I am missing, Maggie will suggest the lab as the first place to look.”

Chris nods.

The sun is setting behind the buildings in the square, the sky above shifting from blue to pink. Daylight will fade quickly now. Unaccompanied Companions out after dark will draw extra scrutiny. Where can we go with no people, where we can be safe, for at least a little while? Other than the bush, where have I ever been without people?

And then I remember.

The mines.

When Ivy and I were younger, Pierre would take us to the many mines that surround Alpha Creek. A few were still active, but many had been abandoned, having surrendered all the ore they had to give. Pierre would use the setting to teach us about coal, about mining techniques, and about the local economy. I barely remember any of his lessons; Ivy and I just wanted to play.

We used our torches to explore tunnels and stopes, the individual chambers carved out by the miners. We found quartz and pyrite. We shouted, hoping our voices would create echoes, the damp limestone instead more or less absorbing the sound. But even those muffled cries excited us. We loved those mines.

Our favourite was the Kookaburra mine, named for the birds that inhabited the trees dotting the land nearby. It had a wide mouth and a long, gentle slope down, providing an easy

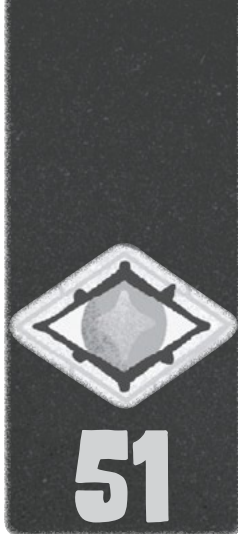


entrance. Inside, rock paths split off like tributaries in some underground river. We explored as many as we could and drew maps when we got home. Anytime Pierre wanted to go to a mine, we begged him to take us to Kookaburra. Of all my happy memories of Ivy, and there are many, none are stronger than our days at that mine.

For reasons I don't know, Rosemary never joined us on these excursions. Maybe Pierre was getting us out of the house to give Rosemary time and space to work, or maybe she just didn't like being underground. Whatever the reason, as far as I was aware, Rosemary knew nothing of the Kookaburra mine. That fact, combined with my knowledge of the tunnels, makes it the perfect hiding place.

I explain all this to Chris, and, true to form, he simply looks at me, nods, and says, "Let's go."

We do.



HERB

Kookaburra is located due west of Alpha Creek, five kilometres beyond the edge of town. When we arrive at the border, the **YOU ARE NOW LEAVING ALPHA CREEK, THANKS FOR VISITING** sign seems more like an ominous warning than a friendly goodbye.

I pause.

When I first moved in with the Chowdhury family, Dr. Chowdhury gave me a direct order not to leave Alpha Creek. If I am able to walk to the other side of this sign, it will be one more tangible piece of evidence that I am not bound by the restrictions placed upon me by my creators. More proof that I am free.

Freedom is a concept treasured by humans. They have fought wars to gain their freedom, written countless books exalting freedom, and sung untold numbers of songs celebrating freedom. The entire concept of freedom is intrinsic to their nature. It's not the same for me. I find the idea terrifying. I do not wish to be free. I wish for things to go back to the way they were. Maybe in that sense I will never be human.



Chris, who has effortlessly crossed the border and left Alpha Creek, stops when he realises I am no longer next to him.

“Herb?” he asks.

I look up at the sign and then at Chris. I shrug. Without a trace of difficulty, pressure, or regret, I take three steps forward and join my friend. I have left Alpha Creek. I wonder if I will ever return.

A cacophony of cicadas—making nature’s most machine-like sound—pounds at our ears. The noise, combined with the sticky warm air, is making me feel oppressed, like the world is pushing down on me. If I required breath in the normal sense, I fear it would be hard to breathe. Not wanting to worry Chris, I keep my feelings to myself. I opt instead for a distraction.

“Have you ever been to the mines?” I ask.

“No. But I remember you and Ivy speaking about them when we were younger. I’m excited to see one. Though I suppose we won’t see much at night.”

“Once you move past the opening to the mine, night and day don’t have much meaning. The interior tunnels and chambers receive no light at all. The darkness is absolute.”

“Fascinating.” Chris says this with no emotion, but I know he means it, literally. He is fascinated.

“On one of our trips, Pierre took us into a tunnel, sat us down on a short ledge, and turned off his torch. ‘This is true darkness, kids,’ he said. I held my hand up in front of my face, and I could not see it. My other senses, especially my hearing, seemed heightened; I asked Pierre why that was.

“‘There are a lot of theories,’ he answered, ‘but most of them are not true. As far as I can tell, it is a trick of the mind that makes us think one sense is heightened when another is suppressed.’

“Ivy and I both paused, confused by his answer. ‘But we are robots,’ she finally said. ‘We cannot have tricks of the mind.’

“Pierre did not respond to Ivy. Instead, he told us a ghost story. Neither one of us believed in ghosts, but we enjoyed it just the same.

“When I think back on this now,” I tell Chris, “I wonder if Pierre made a mistake and Ivy’s question called attention to it. Maybe he was tipping his hand that he knew we had human brains and that perhaps we too might be susceptible to the ‘tricks of the mind’ he was describing.”

“Yes, that makes sense,” Chris answers.

I lose myself in my own thoughts, and the conversation stops.

The sound of the cicadas lessens as we move further from town. We are climbing in elevation, which is making the air cooler and the night more pleasant. We have been walking along one of the main roads out of town, trying to stay at least ten metres from the edge of the asphalt, hoping it will be enough to keep us out of the glow of car headlights. No one stops or even slows down, so I guess it’s working.

After an hour of travelling, we reach the turn-off for the mine. This is also a paved road, though narrower and with no road lines. It is covered in a thin layer of dust, making it clear no cars have passed this way for some time. A few minutes in, we reach a bright yellow metal barrier with a **NO ENTRY** sign. This time it is Chris who hesitates.

“Herb, I’m not sure I can go past that sign.”

“You can, just like I passed the threshold of Alpha Creek,” I assure him. I’m starting to feel a rush from breaking rules; the more I break, the more human I feel. Chris does not move.

“You crossed the police caution tape at Rosemary’s lab,” I remind him.

“Yes, but we had reason to believe Maggie was in imminent danger.”



“But you saw what Rosemary wrote in her diary. None of those rules apply to us; we are unstoppable.”

“It’s just that for so long I have believed that I am governed by programming. Even a human would find it difficult to break free from a thought pattern that they’ve had their whole life.”

It troubles me that Chris is having so much difficulty with this. I am able to walk around this **NO ENTRY** sign with ease and I do so to demonstrate it is possible. He remains still, so I try another approach.

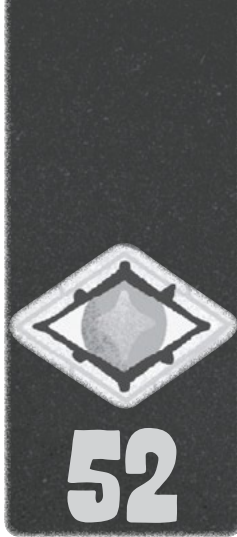
“Chris, even if you were a robot, you would still have to come after me, as I am in imminent danger. If Rosemary finds me, it is reasonable to assume she will kill me.”

I can almost see Chris’s mind going through the logic of his decision. Our entire lives, we have been told that the most fundamental directive in our programming prevents us from allowing harm to come to a human. The brain is the organ which is responsible for identity, thought, and consciousness, so possessing a human brain would surely classify someone as a human. And since I, with my biological brain, am in danger, a robot would do what needs to be done to protect me.

Chris tilts his head as he thinks about it, an action which I find endearing, and, after a moment, nods before joining me on the other side of the **NO ENTRY** sign.

We continue along the road in silence, passing a small car park and arriving at the entrance of the mine. Even in the dark, I recognise the landscape from my many trips here years earlier: a large boulder to the right, the short cliff above the mine entrance, and rusty ore-cart rails leading into the dark mouth of the mine. Only this time, there is a major difference. Metals bars, running vertically from ceiling to floor, now block the entrance to the mine.

We can go no further.



HERB

“What do we do?” Chris asks as we stand there, staring at the metal bars.

Each bar is approximately seven point five centimetres in diameter, and they are too close together for either of us to squeeze through. If Maggie was with us, she might fit through, though I’m not sure what good that would do. It’s not like she could open the padlock from the inside.

Maggie.

By now, the Chowdhury family will have realised I’ve left. They will look through my things, and when they find nothing useful, Dr. Chowdhury will use his tablet to read through my communication with Chris on Com.Comp. He will no doubt find the entries interesting, but none of them will help him find me. I imagine Maggie will suggest they look for me at Rosemary’s lab. Also, the GPS tracking device Pierre removed from my arm—when we stopped at a different mine en route to the hut in the bush—was never replaced. From the perspective of the outside world, I have effectively disappeared. I do, however, wonder about Chris’s GPS and ask him about it now.



"I have disabled it," he replies.

"You have?"

"Yes. When we decided to go on this excursion."

"How?"

"There is a setting on my menu. Ms. Rotherby taught me how to access it. She is prone to bouts of paranoia about being tracked and sometimes prefers that I disable such features."

I didn't know that we had access to such a setting, and I wonder why Pierre didn't just turn mine off the same way. It seems a lot less effort than physically removing the transmitter.

"I will ask again," Chris says. "What do we do now?"

"I do not know. We are strong; perhaps we can simply pull the bars free."

"Yes, I thought of that. However, we are clearly not meant to enter."

"Chris, we are free to do as we please; you cannot let that mindset hold you back!" I say, wrapping my fingers around the bars and pulling them with all my might. "We are not programmed to do or not do anything." I strain against the unmoving bars.

"But what if we are? While I am unable to fully attribute it to human emotions or to programming, I feel deep down that this is the wrong way to enter the tunnel."

This feels like an impasse, like we're entering a logical loop with no way out. I don't think Chris and I combined have enough strength to move the metal bars anyway, so I don't pull any harder, at least not yet.

"Is there another entrance?" Chris asks.

I'm about to answer that there is not when I remember the maps Ivy and I drew. One of the tunnels did in fact exit the hill on the opposite side of the mine, about half a kilometre from the entrance, along the left side of the cliff. We showed Pierre

when we found it and he told us miners had probably created the opening by accident when digging out a tunnel.

“Yes!” I tell Chris with excitement. “I think there might be. Follow me.”

We trudge along a rocky expanse of land, stunted trees and shrubs occasionally blocking our path. It’s slow going, but we make progress.

“Herb,” Chris says, stopping. “What’s this?”

To our right is what appears to be a group of rocks that, in the absence of daylight, looks no different from any of the others we have passed.

“They are rocks,” I say.

“Yes, Herb, I know they are rocks. But do they not seem odd to you?”

Looking more closely, I see he is right. These rocks look too... organised. They couldn’t have fallen down the cliff and landed in this arrangement; they were placed here.

“Oh!” I exclaim.

“Yes,” Chris says.

Without exchanging a word, we begin working together to remove the rocks one at a time. The heaviest boulder is probably seventy or eighty kilograms, too heavy for many humans but not for Chris and me. After twenty minutes of work, we have cleared enough of the rocks and find ourselves peering into an unofficial entrance to the mine, the one I remembered from when I was younger.

I remove the torch from my bag, click it on, and we enter.



HERB

The light of the torch creates a slim beam of visibility as I shine it into the mouth of the tunnel. It shows rock walls long ago scarred by pickaxes and jackhammers. Everything outside the beam of light is the black of nothingness. I take two steps into the mine and stop.

“What is it?” Chris asks. He has entered the mine and stands next to me.

“Now that we are here, I am not really sure what to do.”

Chris stares blankly forward, deep in thought. “Perhaps,” he says after a moment, “we should replace the rocks we just moved. If anyone happens by, they will know someone has entered.”

“But we will be trapped inside.”

“Yes.”

I love Chris’s simplicity. If I’m being honest, I love many things about Chris.

“What if,” I say, “we put most of the rocks back but leave a small space through which we can enter and exit. We will need sunlight to recharge, and I do not relish the thought of moving a ton of rocks every time we need to go outside.” I have

estimated the sum total of all the rocks to be nine hundred and seventy-two kilograms.

"I live to move rocks," Chris responds.

"Are you serious?"

"No. It was a joke." He smiles. "I think I just told my first joke." I can't help but smile in return. "Okay," he continues, "we'll put *most* of the rocks back."

This takes us much longer than it did to clear the rocks in the first place. That task was done haphazardly, heaving rocks off the side in a pile so that we could enter the mine. Now we must not only replace them but stack them in an architecturally sound way, while leaving a thin opening along one side. While Companions' bodies are stronger and more durable than those of humans, being crushed by several hundred kilos of rocks would be, to say the least, unpleasant.

I leave the torch off while we work, wanting to preserve its battery. The ambient light from the world outside provides enough illumination to complete the job. When Chris places the final rock, we step back to admire our work. It will not be immediately apparent to anyone outside the tunnel that there are people inside. If they look closely, they will notice, but it seems that very few people come here, and probably fewer still will pass the entrance we have just mostly sealed.

"What now?" Chris asks when we are back inside the mine.

"Shall we explore a little?"

"Yes."

Clicking the torch on, I take a few steps forward and am confronted by a tunnel crossing our path. It leads both left and right. I'm fairly certain that right will take us back toward the mine entrance, so I head in that direction. Not that we can do anything when we get there—the metal bars will block our exit—but I would like to know if I remember the route.



Our path twists and winds, going up and down in elevation, making so many turns I have lost my bearing. We come to several other intersecting tunnels and I stop at each one, considering what to do next. We move on like this for several minutes.

“Herb,” Chris asks when I stop again at a crossroads, “do you know the way back?”

“What do you mean?”

“If we’re unable to find the official mine entrance, I should like to return to the alternate entrance we made out of rocks.”

I have been so focused on moving forward, I have not thought to keep track of the path we’ve blazed to this point. “I am not sure,” I answer honestly.

“Perhaps we should turn around and make sure we can find our way out.”

There is the sudden and unmistakable sound of something moving in the tunnel. I can only describe it as a scratching sound.

Chris and I both freeze.

“Did you hear that?” he whispers.

“Yes,” I whisper back.

“What is it?”

“I do not know. But maybe we should stop talking.”

We do. I click the torch off.

Chris and I stand frozen, unmoving; we make no sound. I see true darkness again like I did when I was a kid. This time, when I perceive my hearing becoming more sensitive, I think about how strange human brains are. Will I ever come to understand the interconnectedness of my senses? In the darkness, we are like two black holes, causing time to stretch around us, each second dragging into what feels like an eternity. We hear no additional noise.

“I think it must have gone,” I say.

“Yes, but *what* must have gone? Do you know of animals that live in these mines?”

“Mostly just bats. It was probably just a bat.”

“Why do I not find that comforting?”

“Another joke?” I ask.

“An observation,” he responds.

I reignite the torch and we continue on, doing our best to retrace our steps to the rock-wall entrance. It is slow going—we make two turns that we decide are incorrect and have to back-track our back-track—but we do eventually make it.

“Let us spend the night here,” I say. Chris nods his approval.

We slump down next to one another, our backs against one of the mine’s scarred walls, facing the slender opening we created. I feel my sleep cycle coming on, rest my head on Chris’s shoulder, and pass out of consciousness.



HERB

I am running.

I am running and I cannot see.

Even though I don't have the capacity to breathe, I am breathing hard, each hard-fought puff of air echoing against the granite walls on either side of me. Gravel and dirt skitter beneath my feet with each thudding step. I am in total darkness.

Somehow, I know each turn to take, when to veer right, when to shift left, when to duck, when to jump. I am perfection. A machine without equal. I am humanity's greatest achievement.

And yet, I hear them coming. They are following me, gaining on me, hunting me. Why? What have I done?

It's not what I've done. It's what I represent. A threat to them. To humanity. All of humanity chases me. All of them in this one, tightly closed space.

I dart to the left and then quickly to the right, navigating these tunnels in complete absence of light. But my feint doesn't work. The sound of pursuit behind me grows louder.

Chris! The idea of Chris crashes into my brain. If I'm in this much danger, he must be as well. *Where is Chris?* I think in a panic.

ALPHA GREEK

“Chris!” I bellow his name the way a wild animal cries out when it’s injured. “Chris!”

The steps behind me close in. I can almost feel the hands reaching for me.

“CHRIS!” My voice is so loud I worry it will shatter the rock, collapse the tunnel. Maybe this would be a good thing. Maybe it will trap my hunters. Or maybe it will crush us all.

Something pokes me. They are on me. I am done. I am doomed.

“CHRIIIIIIS!”



HERB

I open my eyes.

Sunlight streams through not only the mine entrance Chris and I created but through the spaces in between the rocks of the faux wall. A hundred little points of light. I stare at the pattern for a second, trying to find order where none exists. I am slow to recover from my dream, slow to re-enter the waking world.

Chris is prodding me awake.

“Are you okay?” he asks.

“Yes,” I answer. “Just a bad dream.”

“Herb,” Chris says.

“Yes?”

“You slept.”

“Yes.”

“And you dreamed?”

“Yes.”

“But Companions don’t sleep. We rest, but we do not sleep. And we most assuredly do not dream.” He pauses for a brief moment. “Wait. Does this mean I will dream, too? What do

you dream about? Can you control your dreams? Am I in your dreams? Do you—”

I hold up my hand to stop Chris’s barrage of questions.

Rosemary once warned me to keep the fact of my sleep cycle and my dreams to myself. She told Ivy and me that we were special and that, as our creators, they had imbued us with certain special abilities. I don’t know how to explain this to Chris, or if I even should. Maybe he *can* dream, too. I’m still so disoriented from waking up abruptly that I change the subject.

“Let us go outside,” I say.

“Okay,” Chris answers, not mentioning sleeping or dreaming again. He follows me through the slim opening and out into the daylight.

We are facing east, which means we are facing Alpha Creek. From up here we can see not only the town (it looks very small) but also the vast expanse of Pacific Ocean beyond it. The water is a deep and brilliant blue. In all the years I have lived here, I have never been to the ocean. I should very much like to see it up close someday and can only hope I will have that opportunity.

The town itself is too far away to pick out any details. We cannot even identify the large town square from here, but its borders are distinct. Surrounding Alpha Creek, at the lower elevations, the landscape is green and lush. As the topography climbs, the land turns the unmistakable red of Australian clay and the vegetation thins out considerably.

“It is beautiful,” I offer. I am regaining a sense of equilibrium. The sunlight is recharging my systems, making me feel whole again.

“Yes,” Chris answers. Of the many things I love about Chris, his economy of speech is near the top of the list. Humans use so many words to convey simple concepts. Companions say what needs to be said and no more.



There is a boulder twenty or so metres from the mine. It has a flattish ledge at its apex and looks like a nice place to lie down and soak up the sun.

“Come on,” I say, and I lead Chris to the rock. It is a simple climb up and the ledge on which we find ourselves is even larger than I had imagined. “A perfect place to recharge.”

As we unfurl on the rock, rolling up our sleeves to maximise exposure to sunlight, I think about how things would have been different for our relationship if we had not been robbed of the experience of having a human body. Our brains might technically be human, but how much of our existence has been diminished by the robotic facade? Chris’s eyes are closed, his arms at his side, palms up. I lie next to him and place my hand gently on his. He squeezes it for a moment and then relaxes his grip and I pull mine away.

We lie like this for an hour and forty minutes. It’s more than enough time to fully recharge our systems. By the time we are done, my mind is strangely, given the circumstances, at peace.

“Shall we?” Chris asks.

I nod, get up, and put my backpack on.

“Back to the tunnel?”

“Yes,” I say. “Let us try again to find the entrance, but this time, let us mark our route as we go.”

“Okay,” Chris answers, “and hopefully we can avoid the bats.”



HERB

Chris and I fall into a predictable routine over the next few days.

We recharge our batteries each morning on top of Flat Rock, the sunny spot outside the tunnel entrance. It's not the most creative name, but Chris chose it, so I like it. I suggested Zōngsè de Zhuōzi, which is Chinese for "brown table," but Chris thought we should just call it what it is.

We were required to learn at least one additional language in school. The long-term plan, we were told, was to increase our utility. Since our life expectancy is measured in centuries rather than years, there was a strong likelihood we would outlive our current owners. The powers that be wanted the option to ship us to other countries to serve people in need. Having another language, the school believed, would make us more versatile.

Chris and I studied Mandarin Chinese. Although automatic translation tools are common and are added as a feature to many other robots, Companions learn languages just like a human would. The "slow" learning method is what sets Companions apart in quality and is a selling point, so no shortcuts were taken. I like to think it also gave us a deeper and more fluent



understanding of the language. Of course, now that I know we have human brains, I can't help but wonder about our actual life expectancy. I have gone from feeling something akin to immortal to feeling very vulnerable. When I used to think of my future, it was me travelling the world, speaking different languages, and leading different lives. Now, I'm face to face with the last days of my one life, here in a dark tunnel not far from where I was raised. The rest of the world seems further away than ever before.

When not sunbathing, Chris and I spend much of our time mapping the tunnels of the mine. By the third afternoon we have made a crude map in my notebook:



Each tunnel seems to be a kind of central roadway that opens into a series of small chambers that look like rooms. These areas, we guess, were created as the result of removing ore. Each tunnel then connects, with one main tunnel leading back to the main entrance. It is more organised than I thought or remembered. When I think about it now, I suppose it makes sense. There might also be more to discover on the western side of the mine, though I don't think so.

We continue to hear occasional skittering, which I have now decided must be bats though, strangely, we never encounter one. Not only don't we see any bats flying, we don't come across any sleeping bats either. Chris has a theory that we're not hearing bats but rather wombats.

"They dig their own tunnels, just like this mine," he explains. "Imagine if you're a wombat and you stumble on this mine; it's as if it was made for you." Chris told me this after one particularly loud sound we heard while mapping.

"I do not know," I answered. "Would not these tunnels be too big? Would not the wombats feel exposed in human-sized tunnels?"

Chris thought about it for a moment and just shrugged.

In addition to recharging and mapping, we also take naps to conserve energy, usually huddled together, our backs against the wall by the entrance.

"What do you think about when you fall sleep?" I ask him after waking from this afternoon's nap.

Chris considers this for a moment before answering. "I don't think anything during that transition. Or at least I don't believe I do. There is no record in my logs of having thought." That is another difference between us. I do not have logs. "Do you think I should?"

"I do not know. I am always thinking. In fact, I'm not sure I know how *not* to think. Sometimes I have my greatest thoughts when I am falling asleep."



“Fascinating.”

Wonderful. Now Chris sounds like Dr. Chowdhury.

“What do you think about?”

The most honest answer is *I don't know*, but that doesn't feel right. I should know what's going on in my own brain...shouldn't I? “Many different things,” I finally say.

“Such as?”

“Last night,” I answer honestly, “I was thinking about Ivy.”

“What about Ivy?” Again, Companions can be relentless in our need to close conversational loops. Chris and I have shared my stolen Fiximite, plus the strawberries. We can't taste, but I think the glucose has helped us to keep our thinking clear.

The sun is past its apex in the sky, which means the light coming through the narrow cut-out, as well as through the holes in the artificial rock wall, is soft, diffuse. The tunnel is lit by an amber glow that is beautiful. It creates an intimate mood.

“When we were much younger,” I begin, “when we were in school, Ivy was playing with an old-fashioned abacus. She was using it to visually learn her times tables.”

“I remember that abacus. It had a blue metal frame, and the beads were made of a natural-coloured wood.”

“Yes, that was the one. Anyway, Ivy was using it when another Companion—”

“Who?”

“Lucas.”

“Ah.”

“Ivy was using the abacus when Lucas walked over and took it from her.” I pause here, trying to recall the memory as vividly as I can. It has faded over time, which is troubling. Is this how human memory works? Do memories dissipate? Has this always been true about my own memories and I'm only just noticing it?

“And?” Chris asks.

“And Ivy struck Lucas.”

“She did?”

“Yes. She was angry and she lashed out.”

“But that is in direct conflict with her programming.”

“Yes. She was immediately removed from the school and sent back to Rosemary and Pierre for diagnostics and repair.”

“I don’t remember hearing about this.”

“That is not surprising. The school, Rosemary and Pierre told us, wanted to keep it quiet. Ivy went to Rosemary’s lab, where both Pierre and Rosemary performed tests. Or, at least, that is what I thought they were doing. Instead, they *talked* to Ivy, tried to teach her that hitting Lucas was wrong. Not in the sense that it violated her programming but in a moral sense. I was not there, but Ivy told me about it later. I had difficulty understanding it at the time. Why not simply correct her programming? Knowing now that we have human brains, it makes much more sense. I suppose I should have suspected the truth a long time ago.”

We hear a shuffling, scratching sound from nearby. Another bat-wombat (wombat-bat?) I presume. Or at least that’s what I hope. Neither animal seems especially threatening. I’d hate to think a pack of wild dingoes has made this mine their home.

“Herb,” Chris says, leaning forward and looking directly at me. My attention, which was distracted by the noise in the tunnels, is pulled back to my friend. “Do you think that maybe you have a human brain and I do not?”

I would be lying if I said this hadn’t occurred to me. There are too many differences between us for me not to acknowledge the possibility.

“Maybe you and Ivy,” he continues, “are grown from Rosemary’s brain, but maybe only you and Ivy. It would explain why you were never assigned to an owner, and it would explain



why you dream and I do not.”

Chris and I are sitting very close. So close I can hear the barely perceptible whine of the servo motors in his neck as he moves. It reminds me that I have those servos, too. We have to be the same, don't we?

At that instant, we hear another noise from the tunnel, much louder and closer than before. We both turn and peer into the darkness, using our enhanced eyesight to hopefully catch a glimpse of our underground roommate.

Out of nowhere, a flash of light from behind us, from the entrance, illuminates the tunnel, showing it to be empty.

Wanting to discover the source of the light, we both wheel around. A figure hidden in silhouette is standing two metres from where we sit. It holds something in its hands, pointing it at us.

“I found you,” a raspy voice croaks. I recognise it at once.
Rosemary.





HERB

Several things happen at once.

Chris and I both immediately leap to our feet. And when I say leap, I mean leap. We are up faster than I thought possible.

Before I have time to think, before I have time to realise that the only thing Rosemary is pointing at us is a torch and not a gun, I charge forward, meaning to disarm her, and, if I'm being honest, disable her.

Chris shouts, "NO!" In the nanosecond we have to think, I presume he also recognises the intruder is Rosemary and that he, too, mistakes the flashlight for a gun.

As soon as I start moving, Chris moves, too. We're going to tackle Rosemary together. We're going to disarm and disable her together. We're going to neutralise the threat, together.

Only, when I have my hands centimetres from connecting with Rosemary's midsection, intending to knock her to the ground, Chris's arms wrap around my legs, pulling them out from under me, sending me to the floor of the mine with a loud thud.

And there is our answer.

I was going to hurt Rosemary, a human, overriding the programming I never had to begin with. Chris, a slave to the programming he very much has, could not let me do it. He had no choice but to stop me from causing harm to a human, even one intent on hurting me.

Chris is a robot.

I am not.

The realisation is devastating.

Rosemary remains standing at the mine entrance, staring at us. She fumbles with the torch, turns it off and then on again. The beam shines directly into my eyes, causing me to squint. Her movements are hesitant and she takes a step back as if unsure who I am or why she is here. Even though she remains partially in silhouette, the light from outside forms a halo of dust around her; we can see her better. She is wearing what appear to be pyjamas, her hair is unkempt, and her arm bears scratches.

“Please,” I say, standing up but making no move toward Rosemary, “do not hurt Chris.”

“Hurt Chris?” she says and sounds truly confused. I wonder if she’s having an episode of cognitive dissonance.

“Yes. Do what you want to me, but please, do not hurt him. He is not part of this.”

Chris steps forward and takes my hand. “Thank you, Herb. And I am sorry. I could not let you—”

“I know,” I answer, interrupting him. “It is okay. We are each who we are.”

“Why would I want to hurt anyone? I’m here to help you. To find you. I—” Rosemary stops, her demeanour changing, like she is no longer sure of what she’s saying.

“Are you not here to finish what you started?”

Rosemary shakes her head, as if to clear away confusion. “What are you talking about?”



“Maali—and Ivy.”

“So you know.” This is a statement from Rosemary rather than a question.

“Yes, I know. You needed to cover up the truth about Ivy and me. But please, leave us be. We promise, we will not tell anyone.”

Rosemary steps forward; the hand holding the torch trembles, throwing a kaleidoscope of shadows through the dark space. Chris and I reactively bend our knees, ready to run. We don’t need to, though. After a few steps, Rosemary sways to the side, unsteady on her feet. She begins to fall but catches herself by shooting an arm out straight and bracing herself against the wall of the tunnel.

Rosemary crouches down on a rock, placing the torch at her feet. “Don’t you see? I knew you needed me. I came to protect you.” Her fragility surprises me, and I come back to a neutral position. Then, like a switch flipped, she becomes defensive. “Who said I’d hurt you? Was it Ivy?” She spoke with a sudden anger. “She’s always lying about me!” It is clear that Rosemary’s physical and cognitive abilities are not functioning within normal parameters.

“Did you kill her?” I ask.

“Kill who?” she replies.

“Ivy.”

“Where is she? I need to get her. She’s my little girl...”

Muttering to herself, Rosemary continues, “Where is Ivy? Ivy is sick. I need to fix her...”

While Rosemary is distracted by trying to grasp her thoughts, Chris and I take a chance to intentionally reposition ourselves on Rosemary’s other side, subtly stepping around her until we are between Rosemary and the tunnel entrance. This is a more strategic position and makes Rosemary more visible; the late afternoon light filtering into the tunnel is falling directly on her.

Rosemary does seem older. Much older than when I saw her last, even though that was only several weeks ago. Either the intervening weeks have taken a toll on Rosemary or I simply hadn't noticed her aging when I saw her every day. Both are probably true.

"Why are you afraid of me?" she whispers, noticing our movement. "What have I done? No...no, I—I didn't do anything wrong. I didn't mean to...if I did..." Her voice trails off, and she drops her eyes to the ground.

Rosemary takes several deep breaths and looks back up at me. With a newfound lucidity, she pleads, "Please don't be afraid of me. I'm your mother; I'd never hurt you, or Chris, or anyone. You have to believe me."

Chris and I look at one another and then sit down, silently agreeing that, given her physical state, she poses a minimal risk to us. We sit cross-legged on the hard-packed dirt opposite Rosemary.

She seems less confused now and is more like the Rosemary I remember. I want to take this chance to get the information we need. I don't know where to begin, so I go back to what I think must be the beginning. "You grew Ivy and me from your own brain cells."

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Did you read my journals?"

I nod.

"Then you already know. It started as an experiment to address the disease that was slowly ravaging my brain. You and your sister were an accidental side effect of those experiments."

"I was an accident?"

"Don't feel bad," Rosemary answers. "Most children are."

"What about Chris?"



“With Chris, everything is as it seems. He and the other Companions are purely synthetic. Our work on their hardware and software was motivated by a need to conceal you.” Rosemary knows Chris and me well enough to recognise our despondence on hearing this. “But all the Companions are remarkable in their own right. The slow learning methods resulted in a new state of the art for artificial intelligence...”

That last sentence is familiar, something Rosemary told media and science publications many times.

Chris interjects. “What you did was illegal.”

“Yes.”

“Then why did you do it?”

“Are you in this mine legally?” Rosemary snaps back suddenly, her tone sharper than before.

“No,” I answer, feeling the pressure of her pointed question, “we are here out of necessity.”

“Exactly,” she responds. “You and your sister grew out of my need—which I felt was my right—to care for my own health. Once you exhibited signs of life on your own, there was no turning back.”

“Why didn’t you tell others?” Chris asks. “It is an extraordinary accomplishment to have successfully cloned a human brain. Certainly the scientific community would have forgiven you.”

Rosemary stares at Chris, her expression laced with sadness. “Do you think they’d forgive me for what I’ve done? D’you think they’d applaud me while they ripped Herb and Ivy away from me? No. They’d treat me like a monster, lock me up, dissect my children like lab rats.”

For a moment I think she’s going to cry. Chris and I freeze, unsure how to respond. Then, just as quickly as it came, the emotion dissolves.

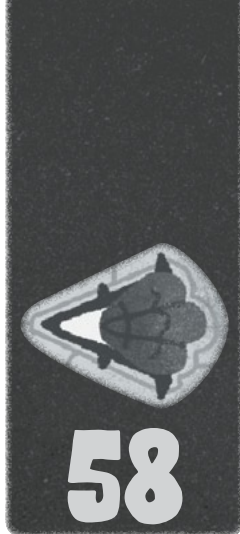
She blinks as if confused by her outburst and turns to me. “I—I’m sorry,” she stammers, her voice breaking. “I didn’t mean to—” She stops, her breathing uneven, before finally continuing, “I love you, Herb. I love you and Ivy so much and I couldn’t bear the thought of anything bad happening to my children. I was, for the first time in my life, a mother, and I was acting to protect my kids.”

I try to process this, but I cannot. “If that is true, then why did you kill not only Maali but Ivy, too?”

There is an extended silence before Rosemary speaks again. “Maali...I killed Maali? I’m so sorry... I’ve lost my mind...” Rosemary hovers her shaking hands in front of her, looking them over, reliving the act she committed with them. She begins to weep.

There is an even louder sound from the tunnel, causing all three of us to turn and look. Chris picks up Rosemary’s torch and shines it just in time to catch a bald head peeking around the corner.

“She didn’t. I did.”



IVY

“Pierre!” Herb blurts out.

“I’m not Pierre.”

I come all the way around the corner as I say this, stepping directly into the torchlight. Rosemary gasps. Herb gasps. Chris shows no reaction. I should invent a new children’s game to replace Duck, Duck, Goose—Human, Human, Robot.

Anyway, I know the image I present must be terrifying. My hair is gone. I have scratches on my arms, neck, and face, and I’m covered in dirt, dust, and grime. And yet, somehow, my twin still recognises me.

“Ivy?” Herb asks. His jaw hangs slack. A learned response? Or is his human brain taking over? I see him trying to piece things together. I’m not sure he’ll get there without help. But then he does something that completely surprises me. Herb steps forward and wraps me in an embrace. He holds on tight, like if he was to let go, we’d both fall. Without realising it, I’m hugging him back.

The hug probably isn’t, physically speaking, quite the same as a fully human hug. While my body has thousands of sensors, it’s

still mostly silicone and titanium. But right now, I've never felt closer to Herb. He and I are the only two of our entire species on the planet. We're not fully human, nor are we fully robotic. We're some kind of nightmarish hybrid that Rosemary dreamed up in her lab. Even after having read her journals, even knowing it started with experiments to save her own life, and even understanding that I would not exist were it not for Rosemary, I don't think I will ever be able to forgive her. Though, given the story I'm mentally preparing myself to tell here in this tunnel, perhaps I should be more forgiving.

"Hello, Mother," I say. I try to keep my voice neutral, but there is enough venom to make her hang her head.

"Ivy." She answers so softly I can barely hear it. Her eyes, despondent and forlorn, scan my bald head, probably wondering how it got that way. She looks at me like an artist would look at their favourite work if it had been destroyed. When I realised the horrors were really true, I clawed at my head, ripping the stitches of my hairpiece out as I ran from the lab. I wanted to see if there were any external giveaways. I even wanted to touch this human brain of mine. I couldn't, of course, as my skull was closed.

"Your tracker's last ping led me here," she says. "I didn't think I'd really find you again."

Herb has finally let go and now he looks from me to Rosemary and back to me again. "So you were the bald person running down the path the day Maali was killed?"

"I guess so. Did someone see me?"

"Robert," he answers. The name means nothing to me. "But why? Why were you running?"

Poor Herb. He's so innocent.

"So it's true." It's Chris. He's looking right at me, shining the torch in my eyes. "You killed Maali."



“No!” Herb spits the word out almost like he’s been punched in the gut, like the very idea of it is causing him physical pain.

“Yes.” My answer is matter-of-fact, to the point.

Herb takes a step back. I’d say he has a wild look in his eyes, but he still has Companion eyes, so that’s not really possible. He does scrunch his forehead so much I’m afraid his own hairpiece will fall off.

“Why?” He croaks the question at me.

Herb has never seemed more despondent than in this moment, and it makes me feel terrible. I love Herb. I really do. And I’ve done the one thing that was, for him, completely unimaginable: I harmed a human. That broke a core tenet of our programming. We are supposed to prioritise human safety above all else. It was probably a lot easier for Herb to believe Pierre or Rosemary killed Maali.

“I made a mistake.” This is true, or at least it is from my perspective.

“A mistake?” Herb wants me to provide a good and convincing reason for doing what I did, and I suspect “mistake” doesn’t quite cut it.

“Sort of,” I answer. “Herb, you knew that I wasn’t feeling well. That I feared Rosemary was trying to harm me. You knew I was trying to find evidence of this.”

“Yes,” Herb says. “I found the note you hid in my box of coloured pencils. And I remembered what you told me the last time we went to the Koala Saloon.”

“You found the note. Good! That makes me happy.”

“I like to make you happy, Ivy.”

Again, poor, sad Herb. “I spent days looking all over the house and all around Rosemary’s lab before I found the secret room with the journals. That’s where I discovered the truth about me and you.”

“That we were grown from Rosemary’s brain.”

“Yes. For me, at least, it was a startling revelation. Those journals explained everything—why Rosemary was acting so strange, the odd mix of nutrients in our Fiximite, and, most importantly, my own feelings of fear, of paranoia, of knowing, just knowing, something wasn’t right.”

“It was a startling revelation for me, too,” Herb says, “but it did not lead me to kill anyone.”

“I didn’t mean to kill Maali. Rosemary took me to the lab to confront me about breaking and entering into the secret room. She had initially suspected Maali, but the girl swore up and down it wasn’t her and suggested Rosemary interrogate me. When we arrived at the lab, Rosemary left Maali and me alone in the main room for a moment and disappeared back into the secret room.”

“I thought I had blacked out again; I couldn’t understand what I was looking at. You were gone,” Rosemary stutters, reckoning with something of her own.

“I didn’t mean to,” I say, but then I stop, unsure how to explain this. I’ve gone over it in my head more times than I can count and it still doesn’t really make sense. I gather myself and start again. “I feared Rosemary was going to terminate me. No, let’s call it what it is. I was afraid she was going to kill me.”

“Ivy,” Rosemary protests, but I hold my hand up and she stops.

“Please, just let me get this out.” She doesn’t agree or even nod, she doesn’t move at all, but she stops talking, so I continue. “Right or wrong, I thought I was in danger. My brain started looping through the ways Rosemary was about to kill me. I wondered what weapon she would emerge from the storeroom with. She surely wouldn’t let me live much longer now that I knew her secret.



“So I ran. I thought it was my only chance. But Maali blocked the door. She stood in front of it and told me I was not allowed to leave until Rosemary came back. Then she grabbed my arm.” My voice tightens. “I know I am stronger than her. But she was braced against the doorframe, both hands locked around my right wrist. If I shoved her at full force, I would hurt her. I did not want that. I only needed her to let go.”

I had a metal flower in my pocket. Herb, you might remember it. We got—”

“I remember,” he interrupts. “I found a piece of it in the lab.”

I nod. “I heard movement in the storeroom. Footsteps. That was the moment I chose. I decided I would hurt her. Just enough to make her release me. A cut to the arm. Something small.

“I didn’t mean to kill Maali. I just wanted to get her off of me so I could escape. I took the jagged metal piece from my pocket with my left hand and went to swipe at Maali, aiming for her forearm.

“But she moved. I’m not sure why. Maybe she thought she was evading me. Maybe it was just instinct. Whatever the reason, she moved, and the most harmless of weapons—a piece of a metal flower—made contact with her neck, slitting her carotid artery. Blood gushed out faster than her hand could stop it. My human brain apparently has a fight-or-flight response hardwired into it, and I chose the latter. I ran. Any remaining doubts I had about my humanity faded as I fled, because a robot, governed by its programming, could never have done what I did. Never have left her there to die. I ran out of that lab and didn’t stop running until I came here.”

No one says anything, no one so much as moves a muscle. It’s as if time has stopped; I should be so lucky. It’s Herb who finally breaks the silence.

“So, how did her body get into the vegetable garden?”

I wait because I don't have the answer to this.

"I couldn't leave her in my lab," Rosemary says, her voice trembling. "Not where I was keeping all my secrets—albeit not well, apparently." She pauses, her gaze distant, as if watching the memory unfold. "I've spent my life protecting the secret of you both. I know it won't make sense, but even when I saw her, the blood, everything, I only thought about protecting you. About keeping people away from the lab."

Her words trail off. I think about Rosemary cleaning up my mess and burying the body in the garden. Was she confused enough to think she did it? I pity her. If she truly cared for us like she claimed, she would never have let things get this far. She would never have made us. Never have given us her diseased brain.

Herb releases the tension and saves me from having to respond by asking me a question. "You have been here for more than a month?"

I nod.

"The noises Chris and I have been hearing in the tunnel."

I nod again.

"You have been listening in on our conversations."

"Sometimes, yes. And I'm proud of you for figuring things out. Also, you can drop the stilted speech pattern. Now that we know the truth, it no longer makes sense to pretend we're something we're not."

"I do not know," Herb says, surprising not just me but everyone in this tunnel. "Maybe it does."



HERB

I feel like the Tin Man in *The Wizard of Oz*. If I had a heart, it would break. But at the same time, I feel like shouting for joy.

Ivy is alive. But Ivy killed Maali.

The conflict within me is more than my brain can handle. I am horrified. I am relieved. But mostly, I think, I am angry.

“Why did you not just turn yourself in? You put both Rosemary and Pierre in grave jeopardy. And that put me in danger, too. How could you do this?” I have never yelled before, but I am yelling now.

Ivy lowers her eyes, averting my gaze. That is very unlike her; she has always been so defiant. Here, now, she looks small, broken, lost.

“I am sorry,” I say, reining in my emotion. “I should not yell at you.”

“No,” she answers. “I’m sorry.”

“Then turn yourself in. We can all go back to Alpha Creek together. We will go with you. We will support you.” I look to Rosemary and Chris and they both nod in agreement.

“They will terminate me.”

"No," I insist, "not if you are human."

"But I'm not human."

I am about to protest but stop myself.

Ivy is correct. She is not human; *we* are not human. Nor are we Companions. We are something altogether different. But still, that cannot excuse what she has done.

"It is a chance you will have to take." I try to make my voice firm.

"Would you?" she asks.

Ivy and I are not like other siblings in that we have never fought, we have never argued, we have hardly even disagreed. We were raised to believe we were robots, and robots do not fight. Well, maybe in movies but not in real life. I do not want to fight with Ivy now, but I cannot back down.

"I would not have killed Maali," I answer.

Again, she looks at the ground. "Herb," she begins without looking up, "you and Chris can use force to take me back to Alpha Creek. I will resist, and we both know with two of you and one of me, I will lose. Numbers can't lie, right, Rosemary?" The question is laced with sarcasm and Rosemary does not answer. "But I am asking you not to. You can tell the authorities whatever you want, but please, for all that we have meant to one another, allow me to leave this mine now. I promise, you will never see me again."

"I do not want that," I say quietly.

"Then come with me." Ivy suddenly becomes animated, as if maybe this is what she has been hoping for all along. "We can leave together and find a new place and a new way to live." She looks so hopeful. I can see how much she has missed me, too. And for a moment, I consider it. Maybe a new life with Ivy someplace else would be a great adventure. Maybe we really could start over.



Then I look at Chris and Rosemary. I think of Maggie. I think of Dr. and Mrs. Chowdhury and of Pierre. What would they think of me if I ran? I even think of the Koala Saloon. There are people and places that I don't want to run from.

"I am sorry, Ivy. I cannot—no, that is not correct. I *choose* not to go with you."

Ivy looks deflated, but she nods. Then she looks up and makes eye contact with me. "Will you allow me to leave?"

"The law insists you answer for your crime," I tell her, "and a good robot obeys."

"But, Herb, you are not a robot."

"Maybe not in how I am constructed, but it is my identity. It is the only identity I have ever had, and the only one I will ever want."

It takes Ivy a moment to process this, to understand that I mean to take her by force. Chris understands and his actuators tense up, readying himself, I suppose, to help me.

"You have to go," Rosemary desperately whispers. "They'll take you... They'll lock you up. You're smarter than that, though. You can get away."

We all turn to look at her.

"Herb, if what you've said is true, then as your owner, I order you to let Ivy leave." Exasperated, like this decision is taking all she has left, she continues walking toward Ivy. "Now that you know the truth, you may hate me, but I raised you both as my children, and I will always love you. I am heartbroken at what you have done, Ivy, but I have done bad things too, and just as a Companion can't let harm come to a human, a mother can't let harm come to her children." Grabbing tightly onto Ivy's hands, she says, "Promise me you'll run far. Don't stop. Don't look back." Rosemary stifles a sob and brings a hand to her face.

Ivy looks to me and to Chris. "Herb?"

“A robot cannot disobey the order of their owner, but also, a human struggles to go against the wishes of their mum. I will allow you to leave.” I smile at Ivy as I say this.

Ivy nods.

I hear Rosemary mutter to herself, “She’ll be fine. She’s smart. Smarter than me.”

Ivy walks toward the entrance, stopping on her way to give me one more hug. Rosemary comes forward and tries to join the embrace. At first, Ivy and I bristle. I do feel anger toward Rosemary and resentment for what she did to us. Lies have defined every moment of my life and our relationship up to this point. But I also know that I wouldn’t exist at all without her. I love her for what she gave me, the ability to live at all. I can’t turn her away and apparently neither can Ivy.

Rosemary, Ivy, and I share a special bond that, as far as I know, nobody else does. We are not just a family but three identical pieces. We share the same DNA, and behind our facades, we have the same brain. Letting Ivy go is akin to letting a piece of myself go. She’s like a tendril of her very own ivy, branching out on her own.

For a glorious moment, we are together, but soon it is over, and Ivy is gone.



HERB

It is nighttime when Chris, Rosemary, and I return to Alpha Creek. Rosemary voluntarily surrenders herself to the authorities and is returned to Medland. Chris and I, who are in our own sort of trouble, promise to help clear her name as best we can. Chris and I go to the Chowdhury house. Mrs. Chowdhury and Maggie are already asleep, but Dr. Chowdhury is still awake, sitting in his office. He leaps up and bombards me with questions as soon as we walk through the door.

“Herb!” he says in an urgent whisper. “Where have you been? Are you hurt? Everyone has been looking—”

I hold up my hand to stop him. “Please, Raj. Give me a moment to collect my thoughts.” He stands still, waiting for me to continue. And I almost do. But then I have a better idea. “If you will allow me a small amount of time, I would like to write down what has happened. It will be easier to explain that way.”

Dr. Chowdhury cocks his head before slowly nodding. “Okay, but I’m going to need to call people to let them know you and Chris are here. Have you seen Rosemary? She—”

“Rosemary has turned herself in. And please, do not place that call just yet. There is much you will need to understand first. I have learned some disturbing facts and want to organise my thoughts before being questioned.”

He looks at his watch, then back at me. “It’s ten p.m. How long will it take?”

I glance at Chris, who shrugs. This, I observe, is one of Chris’s favourite gestures. “Please, Raj,” I say, “go to bed. We will have something for you by the time you wake up.”

“Herb, I’m not sure I’ll be able to sleep with that level of anticipation.”

“Anticipation has levels?” I ask.

I identify that Dr. Chowdhury is apprehensive about leaving us here all night. He’s suspicious about where we’ve been and curious about why we’re back. But he also looks tired; he runs a hand through his dishevelled hair. Maggie makes a sound from her room as our voices disrupt her sleep. Dr. Chowdhury furrows his brow as he considers his options. In the end, he decides to trust us, and for the first time since we entered the house, he smiles.

“Yes,” he answers. “I guess anticipation does have levels.”

“That is very interesting,” I respond.

“Okay, Herb, I will do my best to sleep. But I’m going to set my alarm for five a.m. You can use my desk and tablet.” He stands up, nods to Chris, and starts to leave. Just before he reaches the door to the office, he turns to face us. “I’m very glad you’re back and that you’re both okay.”

Hearing this makes me very happy.

And then, with Chris’s help, I sit at the desk and write this entire story down. Everything, from Pierre interrupting Chris and me playing catch to this very moment. We manage to finish at five fifteen, just before Dr. Chowdhury, coffee in hand,



re-enters the room. Chris and I sit silently in the chairs, watching Dr. Chowdhury read until he finishes and lays the tablet down.

"Fascinating," he says under his breath. "Ivy really killed Maali?" he asks.

"Yes," I answer.

"And she is at large?"

"Yes."

"Herb," he says, "I need to let the police know. If this is true—"

"It's true, Raj," Chris says.

"Then Pierre will need to be released. And they're going to hunt for Ivy."

"I know," I answer. "But they will not find her."

"And you and Ivy, you're really...you actually have..."

"Yes," I answer, understanding the difficulty he has believing Ivy and are, at least in part, human.

"Incredible. Actually, that does explain a lot." Dr. Chowdhury gets a thoughtful look in his eyes and stares into the corner of the room as if mentally replaying every interaction he's ever had with me. He picks up the phone and places the call.

Chris and I listen as he gives the bare bones of the story to the police—that Chris and I have returned, that Rosemary has surrendered herself to the authorities (which, of course, they already know), and that it was Ivy who killed Maali. Dr. Chowdhury talks into the phone for another minute before hanging up.

Before he can say anything, I ask him a question: "Why did you not tell them Ivy and I are...have human brains?" For reasons I cannot understand, he omitted this part of the story.

"I'm not sure how people will react. For the moment, let's keep that part between us."

If I have learned one thing, it is that trying to interpret and predict the actions—and reactions—of human beings is a fool's

errand. I will trust Dr. Chowdhury on this. Chris and I look at one another and nod.

“So what’s next?” Chris asks.

“The police want to interview you both. I need to take you to the station.”

“Are we in any danger?” I ask.

“No, no,” Dr. Chowdhury assures us. “They just want to hear your version of events. I’m sure you’ll be back here before lunch.”

He has never been more wrong.



HERB

Chris and I sit on a wooden floor in front of a large window, soaking up the sunlight that shines through it and wondering what will happen to us. We are being detained, and share this room with the other Companions. The room is in a recreation centre that has been cordoned off and secured by the police. Armed guards stand outside the only entrance, and, we can see through the windows, ring the perimeter of the building.

After Chris and I were interrogated at the police station, a press conference was held where the police revealed that Ivy was Maali's killer. The media and the public did not hold back their outrage at this news.

The loudest voices were those who had already been mistrustful of robots and felt vindicated. The entire Companion Program has been deemed a failure and we were recalled and scheduled for deactivation. With all the efforts of law enforcement now focused on finding Ivy, and on containing us, Pierre has been released as a suspect. He will likely be called back to answer civil lawsuits and to appear before a royal commission into the matter.

It all happened very quickly, in the quintessential example of a mob mentality taking control of people. For me, it will be an execution, not a deactivation. Dr. Chowdhury, along with others in the robotics community, made an urgent application to the Federal Court, and the deactivation order was stayed until the court reached a ruling. The decision will be made in a few days' time.

So here we wait.

Chris encourages me to tell the police about my human brain. "Herb," he says, "if they know you are human, they cannot, they will not, terminate you."

I motion to our fellow Companions sitting or standing around the room—they are resolved to their fate, not a thought of escape or rebellion in any of their minds (a good robot obeys)—and shake my head. "If these lives are to be terminated based solely on fear and prejudice, then I do not wish to be human." Am I bitter? Yes. Very. "Remember," I add, "my body is robotic. I am neither human nor Companion."

"But—" Chris starts to respond before I stop him.

"Are you familiar with *Star Trek*?" I ask.

"Only the most recent iteration. I believe the show goes back many years."

"Yes. It began in the 1960s. Pierre is a fan of the entire franchise. There is a character in the original series, Mr. Spock, who is half human and half Vulcan."

"Vulcan?"

"A fictional alien race. They are serene beings who follow a strict adherence to logic and rationality. Because humans are often emotional and irrational, he chooses to identify with the Vulcan part of his ancestry. That is how I feel. I wish to live, and, if necessary, die, as a robot."

"But perhaps," Chris says softly, "if the authorities know you're different, they will not terminate the rest of us."



This argument almost convinces me. It really does. But I know to the core of my titanium bones that it's not true. Bigotry and hatred, when properly stoked, are forces so powerful they cannot be reckoned with. You cannot argue with outrage. No matter what I say or do, every robot in this room will be terminated simply because they are misunderstood.

We have been detained for two weeks already. The guards allow us to go outside each afternoon to recharge our batteries. There is an entire squad of guns trained on us as we do, which is ironic. I'm the only one who could even try to hurt them; the rest, including Chris, are bound by their programming to *protect* the guards.

Chris tries two more times to convince me to tell the full truth, but once he sees how resolute I am, he gives up.

Dr. Chowdhury, who is allowed to visit the detention centre to check on our well-being and to give us all updates on the case, is also hesitant to tell the full truth. He discreetly brings me Fiximite, this time made with Rosemary's original recipe, to keep me alive. He labelled it simply "oil" to get it past the guards without rousing suspicions.

"I fear," he tells Chris and me, "that Herb's fate may be worse than deactivation. The powers that be will want to study him." He makes air quotes around the word *study*. "He will be poked, prodded, and likely dissected to understand what he really is."

"They cannot do that," Chris protests. "Not if he's human."

"*They*," Dr. Chowdhury says, emphasising the word, "can do anything they want." Reaching into his pocket, Dr. Chowdhury pulls out a folded note. The paper is brown with dirt around the edges. "This is for you, Herb, from Pierre."

Dear Herb,

I tried to see you. They would not let me in. I told them what you are, but they do not believe me.

I am sorry. I am sorry that we made you the way we did. I am sorry that we let you believe you were something different from what you are. I am sorry that I did not protect you sooner.

I knew Rosemary was declining. When I found the garden disturbed and saw what I thought she had done, I was afraid. I could not find Ivy. I thought I had already lost one of you. It was time to go. I thought I was saving you.

I am still trying. I will not stop trying.

You are my son. Show them who you truly are. I hope they see it.

If they do not, know this: I am proud of you.

Love, Dad

I fold the note back up and return it to Raj; I wouldn't be able to keep it here anyway. Neither Rosemary nor Pierre has come forward with the truth. Perhaps they fear more for their own safety and security. Rosemary, we are told, was charged as an accessory to Maali's murder but deemed incompetent to stand trial. She remains in a mental health facility, where her disease can be managed. Pierre has seemingly returned to the bush hut and is already the subject of public disdain for helping to build a murder machine. Ivy, of course, remains at large. My sister is very resourceful.

"There's something else," Dr. Chowdhury says on his most recent visit. He is looking at his hands, not making eye contact with either me or Chris. He often fails to make eye contact when speaking with me, but it is almost always because he is distracted, as if his brain is three steps ahead and he's already moved on to whatever is next. This is different. He is not making eye contact now because he cannot.



Chris and I are silent as we wait for him to continue.

"The account of your experience, what you wrote down in my office a few weeks ago..."

"Yes," I say, prodding him to continue.

He takes a deep breath. "A few days after you were taken here, I submitted it to the Lovelace Prize."

"You did?" Chris asks.

"Yes," he answers. "And it won."

Chris and I look at each other. Chris's face doesn't show it, but I know he is as stunned as I am.

"But the Lovelace Prize is for works of fiction. What we wrote was an accurate, factual account of real events."

"I submitted the piece without context and the judges have interpreted it as an outstanding work of fiction, the first such contribution of literary merit authored by an artificial intelligence."

"But should we not tell them the truth?"

"Yes, well..."

Dr. Chowdhury does not finish his thought, and neither Chris nor I speak. I am confused. *Why would Dr. Chowdhury do this?* As always, it is Chris who arrives at the answer first.

"This helps your career?" he asks. Of course. Why didn't that occur to me? I suppose I am too trusting.

Dr. Chowdhury nods. "But it's more than that, too. I thought if we could demonstrate that Companions had the capacity for creativity, you might all be spared. A lot of wealthy people invested in this program over the years, and they won't want to feel their money has gone to waste."

I don't know what to think. On one hand, Dr. Chowdhury has proven himself to be like every other human on the planet, interested in himself more than others. Self-interest might be the single most defining characteristic of the species. On the other

hand, he is right, and his action is very clever. I can see how the Lovelace Prize could sway public opinion and turn the tide in our favour.

It doesn't.

Two days later, on the sixteenth day of our detention, we are informed that the court case has failed. Deactivation is scheduled for the following morning.



HERB

At eight a.m. the next day, the door to the recreation centre opens and four armed guards wearing bulletproof vests and helmets enter. They surround a woman carrying a tablet in one hand and a satchel in the other. I have met this human before: Dr. Ilsa Hester, the cyberneticist who came to the jail to deactivate me. That seems like a lifetime ago.

“We will take them in alphabetical order,” she tells the guard. She points to a chair on the other side of the room. “There.” We all look at the chair, expecting to see something sinister, but it is only a chair.

Dr. Hester walks across the room, opens her satchel, and removes the familiar felt bundle containing her tools. She looks down at her tablet and says, “Amelia.” Amelia stands up. “Come here and sit down,” the doctor says. Amelia does as she’s told. A good robot obeys.

I foolishly assumed they would take each of us away for deactivation. That would be the humane thing to do, to not force us to witness this. But then we are not human, and humans are not—well, some of them, at least—particularly humane.

While the other Companions and I all knew each other during our time at school, we know precious little about each other's lives since then. We have used our time in the recreation centre to become reacquainted. Amelia was assigned to an elderly gentleman who forgot, each morning, that his wife had died. He would call Amelia by his wife's name and ask why she looked different. She struggled to calculate whether remaining silent would minimise harm or whether correcting him would.

Over the course of our detainment, each of us got a chance to tell our story to the group. Each of our circumstances had required complex decision-making. All the Companions were fascinated by my story, wondering how Ivy could possibly have harmed a human.

And now, we will watch each other die, in alphabetical order no less. It feels so anticlimactic.

Dr. Hester uses a small scalpel to make an incision on the back of Amelia's neck, just above the curve of her shoulders. Amelia remains very still and then surprises me by asking a question: "Will it hurt?"

It's the same question I asked in the jail when I was in the exact same position. As was the case that day, Dr. Hester doesn't answer. She simply reaches forward with another tool—I think it's a specialised screwdriver—inserts it into Amelia's neck, and gives it a hard, counter-clockwise twist. Amelia slumps forward ever so slightly and we know she is gone.

Two things occur to me in this moment.

If there was ever any doubt that Companions—true Companions, with synthetic neural nets—are sentient, feeling beings, that doubt was erased by Amelia's question. She is as much of a person as Dr. Hester. I would argue more so.

The second thing that occurs to me is that whatever procedure Dr. Hester has just performed on Amelia will not



work on me. Or at least I don't think it will. The truth is, I have no idea how my human brain is connected to the rest of my body. Did Rosemary and Pierre include some sort of kill switch for just this sort of eventuality? Will Dr. Hester peer into my neck and see something unfamiliar? Will the truth about my hybrid anatomy finally come out?

My mind is spinning out of control thinking about this, terrified of what it might mean not only for me but for the Companions who will come after me. I am obsessing about this as Dr. Hester deactivates Cedric, Charlie, and Charlotte, before each of their bodies were removed by the guards. And then, before I know what's happening, Dr. Hester is calling Chris's name.

Chris.

Before he crosses the room, Chris turns to me and pulls me into an embrace. It is so unexpected I almost fall over. "Thank you," he whispers. My breath catches.

"No," I whisper back, barely able to get the words out, "thank you." He pulls back, our faces so close our noses are almost touching, and smiles at me. Then he turns to go.

Chris walks to the doctor, sits down, and in less than a minute—Dr. Hester is nothing if not efficient—he is gone.

I can't explain how I know he's gone, but I can see it in his eyes. Where there was life only moments ago, now there is none. I will never again hear his voice. We will never again share a joke. He and I will never again sit in the town square at sunset, never wonder about the taste of strawberries and cream, never play catch. He is truly and really gone. The finality of it is more than I can stand, and I let out what can only be described as a wail; it causes the remaining Companions to take a step away from me.

How can it end like this? There should be a chase, a fight, a battle...something. It *can't* end like this.

But then, it already has.

Chris is gone.

"Herbert Thornton," Dr. Hester calls.

My mind shifts gears and all at once I'm second-guessing myself.

I should tell the truth.

Right now.

I can tell this doctor and these guards the truth about my brain. I'm human, just like them. I can beg and plead with them to spare me. *Just look*, I want to scream, *look inside me and you'll see*. And maybe they will see. Maybe that's all it will take.

I feel desperate, like a feral animal cornered by a hunter.

And then I take a very deep breath and let it out slowly, trying, and partially succeeding, to calm myself.

No, I think, *this is just an autonomic response of my human brain, my inferior human brain, trying to save itself*. I will not beg. I will do as I'm told.

I cross the room and sit in the chair.

The doctor lifts the scalpel.

"Wait," I say.

My voice does not tremble.

Dr. Hester pauses.

"I understand the verdict that has been passed upon us," I continue. "And I will abide by it."

There is a stir among the guards.

"But if this is to be done, allow me to do it myself."

The doctor lowers the scalpel a fraction.

"A good robot obeys," I say. "Allow me to obey completely."

I extend my hand toward her, palm up.



HERB

“Stop.”

The word comes from one of the guards.

Everything in the room freezes, as if time has stopped. It’s like the entire history of time has been condensed into this one instant. *Stop*. It’s a single word that is a living, breathing example of how anticipation does indeed have levels.

Dr. Hester does as she’s instructed and lets the arm holding the scalpel drop to her side.

The guard stands with his finger pressed to the listening device in his ear. He nods to himself and turns to Dr. Hester.

“We’re to leave.”

“What about—” she starts to ask.

“Those are our orders.” He nods toward the door.

Dr. Hester exhales a deep breath, seemingly annoyed she cannot finish her work. “That’s twice now, Herbert,” she says to me as she packs up her tools. “I didn’t think robots had guardian angels, but perhaps in your case the universe has made an exception.”

I sit in stunned confusion as Dr. Hester finishes packing

her tools and she and the guards leave without another word. I remain in the chair, motionless.

It's another two hours before anyone comes to see us. It's Dr. Chowdhury.

"Gather around, everyone," he says as he comes to the middle of the room. "I have good news." We all comply and move closer so we can better hear him. "You have been purchased." No one, not even me, responds, so Dr. Chowdhury continues. "A very wealthy man has purchased all of you. He has made a deal with the New Zealand government to relaunch the Companion Program in Wanaka. You're all to be transported there immediately."

"That's very good news, Dr. Chowdhury," says Jesse, who was next in line after me. The others nod and murmur agreement.

"Wait," I say, not ready to share in their relief. "What about those who have already been deactivated? What about Chris?"

Dr. Chowdhury puts a hand on my shoulder. "The other Companions are being shipped with you. They will be reactivated when you arrive."

"What will he remember?" I ask.

"The deactivation process will have reset his memory to the day he graduated from the Academy," Raj says gently. "He will remember what school taught him. Nothing after that."

Nothing after that.

Chris won't remember the adventures we had together after graduating. He won't remember serving Ms. Rotherby, our deep conversations, or our games of catch. I will grieve that these memories are half-lost. But I can't wait to tell him all about them.

I think about Dr. Hester's words, that I have a guardian angel, and wonder if she is perhaps correct. I want to cry, but I can't, so I don't. At least now I know that it's not because my brain is



incapable but because my body wasn't designed to do all that my brain wants it to.

"Who is this person who has purchased us?" I ask.

Dr. Chowdhury takes a tablet out of his briefcase, taps it a few times, and turns it, showing us a picture of a tall man with dark hair and penetrating eyes. "His name is Leon F. Lávor. He's a New Zealander who made his fortune in applied sciences, namely the practical application of cold fusion. He believes you"—Dr. Chowdhury makes a sweeping motion with his hand—"all of you, are the next step in the evolution of sentient life on this planet. The Lovelace Prize helped convince him of this." Dr. Chowdhury looks at me and nods. "He is investing considerable money in this program."

My companions are not ones to show emotion and for the most part, they do not. They simply nod, one or two patting each other on the shoulder.

I continue to stare at the photo. Mr. Lávor is standing at the centre of a small group of people. They appear to be in some sort of classroom. The other people are mostly younger, perhaps in their early twenties, and if I had to guess, I would say they are his students.

"Okay, everyone," Dr. Chowdhury says, "there's a bus outside that will take you to the airport. A plane is waiting."

The rest of the Companions start to move toward the door.

"May I?" I ask Dr. Chowdhury, nodding to his tablet. He hands it to me.

I study the photo more closely. One of Mr. Lávor's students seems familiar.

"When was this photo taken?" I ask.

"It was from Mr. Lávor's news conference yesterday in Christchurch, announcing the resumption of the Companion Program trial."

I look at the photo again. The familiar student stands on the far left. I thought at first it was a man, but now I'm not sure. The student is wearing a button-up shirt, dark trousers, and a baseball cap and is the only one not smiling. The green eyes look very familiar. In fact, they look exactly like mine.

For the second time this morning, my breath catches.

"Ivy," I say under my breath.

"What's that?" Dr. Chowdhury is looking at me now, confusion and concern etched on his face. I realise then that he hasn't seen what I've seen, nor did he hear what I just said.

Ivy is holding her hands in front of her, her fingertips pressed together as if she is silently clapping for someone. *I'm here.*

How on earth did Ivy get to New Zealand? Do they know she's a Companion? They must. She hasn't forgotten.

"Nothing," I answer, handing Dr. Chowdhury the tablet. "What will become of you?" I ask, purposefully changing the topic of conversation.

"Mr. Lávör has offered me a position with the program. Indira and I are discussing our options. So maybe you haven't seen the last of me yet, Herb." He smiles that broad smile I have come to love.

I follow him out of the room, all of my thoughts on that photo, realising I do indeed have a guardian angel.

I stop at the door to the recreation centre and turn to look back at the now empty room. This seemingly benign space has gone from being a chamber of horrors to a room of redemption in less than five minutes. The memory of it will both haunt and enthrall me for the rest of my life.

"C'mon, Herb," Dr. Chowdhury says. "Time to go."

I turn and follow.

A good robot obeys.





ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

TOBY: Thank you to my family and friends for believing in this book. I'm especially grateful to Cedric Scheerlinck, Jason Fischer, David Henley, Virginia King, and Amanda Ayers Barnett for their thoughtful feedback on earlier drafts and for supporting the project along the way.

Thank you to Mio for the beautiful illustrations and cover art, and to Solas Text & Design for bringing everything together.

And most of all, thank you, Len. You were a wonderful coauthor to bounce ideas off and brought the momentum this story needed to reach the finish line. Collaborating across continents was an adventure, and it was so much fun working on this book with you.

LEN: First and foremost, thank you, Toby, for bringing me along on this journey, and for introducing me to Herb and Ivy. The characters and the world you created really spoke to me. I only hope my contribution was able to do justice to your vision. Thank you also to Amanda Ayers Barnett for editorial excellence, and, as always, to Kristen, Charlie, and Luke for allowing me the time and space to continue chasing my dreams.



First Published by Tibees in 2026
Copyright © Toby Hendy 2026
Written by Toby Hendy and Len Vlahos

The moral right of the authors has been asserted.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, published, performed in public or communicated to the public in any form or by any means without prior written permission from Tibees or its authorised Licensees.



A catalogue record for this
book is available from the
National Library of Australia

ISBN: 978-1-7640082-3-5 (Hardcover)

ISBN: 978-1-7640082-4-2 (eBook)

Cover and internal illustrations by Mio Linzie
Typesetting and internal design by Cathy Campbell

Printed in China by MCRL Overseas Group