

Prologue

I gasped out the last few notes of my big solo, belting my heart out, my arms stretched up to either side of the stage. I could *feel* my voice hit the back wall, and I knew I sounded breathtaking. The sweat rolled down the sides of my face and over the place where my mic was taped to my hairline. As the last note faded away, the applause was immediate and thunderous; I panted to try to regain my breath, turning to Henry to deliver my last line once the cheers quieted enough to hear me.

"Yes," I said with gravitas. "I think it's time."

Henry reached out an arm to me to lead me off stage right. The curtains lowered, and the applause began again. I knew there was not a dry eye in the theater.

The moment the curtains touched the stage, we both broke character, and Henry scooped me into his arms, spinning me around. I let out a sound somewhere between a whoop and a squeal.

"You totally nailed it!" he cried. "That was *brilliant*, Becca!"

The rest of the cast flooded the stage, taking our places for the curtain call. When the curtains went up one last time, Henry and I hung back behind the rest, running out last to take our bows as the lead characters amid whistles and cheers. Henry took his bow first, and then gestured at me; I ran out ahead of him and curtsied. I got a standing ovation, and curtsied a second time, choking back the tears.

This was my favorite moment; the part that made all the hard work and repetition and late night rehearsals worthwhile. This was where I *belonged*.

When the curtain descended again, the entire cast let out a collective exultant cry, spontaneously hugging each other as we scampered offstage to greet our adoring public.

It was closing night. I knew Julie was in the audience tonight, but she was the only friend I knew for sure had attended that night. Most of my other friends didn't even attend Dublin University--they were scattered all over the world, making the most of what was probably the last opportunity any of us would have in our lifetimes to leave our hometown of Casa Linda, Arizona. I wouldn't get to do this for much longer; pretty soon, my "other life," the one where I was a cognitive neuroscience researcher, would be the only one that mattered. But not yet. Right now, everything was perfect.

I only wished Madeline could see me perform live. Just once. I'd play her the video when I got home from the lab tomorrow like always... but it just wasn't the same.

Everyone was there—all five-hundred and fifty-four residents of Casa Linda, the rural suburb of Phoenix, Arizona. Babies cried while mothers shushed; children who didn't know any better chased each other on the artificial grass turf of the park. All of the adults stood in stony silence, resentful of the man whose image was shortly to appear.

"I dunno why we're all so upset," muttered Roy Benson to no one in particular. "Not like he can take anything else away from us at this point." Benson wore a white wife beater that gaped didn't quite cover his protruding belly, like he always did ever since he'd lost his job as a labyrinth connection consultant.

"I agree with you, but I'm nervous anyway," replied Lyle Hopper, seated on a folding chair below him. Hopper, once a good looking and vigorous businessman, was now missing a

few teeth. He also breathed heavily, as if the exertion of conversation was too much for him. “I don’t *think* I have much else to lose, but I’m afraid I’ll discover I’m wrong. Although frankly, I’m not sure killing me would be much worse than stealing my purpose.”

“That’s what I’m saying,” Benson agreed. “We’re useless, and we’re subsisting on the charity of a bunch of damn bots and the elite few like Halpert. How much worse—”

William Halpert’s holographic projection interrupted Benson, appearing on the amphitheater stage of the little park. He was surprisingly short, only about five foot four, though the politician was a giant in other respects. He grinned in magnanimous greeting, spreading wide his hands to encompass everyone who had gathered before both this stage and every other in the world. His words would be simultaneously translated into every language across the globe. Mothers hissed at their scampering children to quiet down so that everyone could hear.

“Friends,” Halpert said, “thank you for gathering here today as one global community. I know you are all busy with your active lives—”

Benson snorted and Hopper gave a derisive laugh. “Sure, I’m so busy I ran out of crossword puzzles this morning,” muttered Hopper.

“—so I will get right to the point. I gathered this global community together to make a very special announcement.

“As you all know, twenty years ago the Council of Synthetic Reason determined that in order to protect humanity, all bots must be limited by two rules: they must serve only a single core purpose in the service of humanity, and they must be readily identifiable as bots.

“The advancement of bots since then has changed the face of our world. It’s changed the way we do business.”

“Or don’t do business,” muttered Benson.

“But we have come upon a significant limitation which those of us in the Capital have been working on for years. It is this: while the bots are excellent at learning facts and applying information, and can do so faster and more accurately than the most intelligent human, they lack the critical ingredient of creativity which would allow them to apply the information they’ve gained—within their core purpose, of course. For that, we still require humans. Unfortunately, there are not enough highly trained humans to use this information anymore. This has led to a stagnant economy. What we need are more creative workers.

“Now I come to the reason why I have gathered you together today. We know that emotion and creativity are intertwined. Yet we barely understand the nature of either, let alone how to translate them into circuits.

“But I believe, and I know you all do too, that the group mind is vastly superior to that of any one individual. Therefore, in an act of stunning generosity, the great companies and universities of the world have all agreed to open source their research thus far. This means every bit of knowledge the human race has ever amassed regarding the neuroscience of human emotion and creativity, as well as all advances toward algorithms to encode the same, will now be freely available via the labyrinth in the hopes that universal access will yield much quicker results.

“This is a big task, and indeed, it is likely to be the last great challenge of humankind. I’m asking us to come together and find the answer to a question that has perplexed philosophers for millenia: what is human creativity? But in a world where knowledge doubles every six hours, I believe we are up to the task.

“Thank you very much for your time and attention. I will personally update you of any breaking news in this field. I wish you all a very good morning, good day, or good evening—whatever time it is where you are!”

Halpert’s image vanished from the stage.

As the people began to disperse, one attractive woman in her fifties stood alone, frowning at the now-empty amphitheater. She tucked her reddish hair streaked with gray behind her ears, and tapped her temple to access the Artificial Experience chip implanted there.

“Call Rebecca,” she said, fishing her A.E. goggles out of her purse and putting them on. She saw a few of the townspeople shoot her dirty looks, but she ignored them. To a person, they disapproved of any flashy show of the technology which had so changed the face of their world.

A few minutes later, she was in her twenty-one year old daughter’s dormitory room in Dublin. The room was dark, until Rebecca sat up and flipped on the light.

“Mom! Really?” she looked at the analog clock hanging on her wall, which she had found at an antique store. Her auburn hair stuck up in every direction, and she rubbed the sleep out of her eyes. “Do you know what time it is here?”

“Why weren’t you up watching Halpert’s address?”

“Because it’s four am, and I was performing last night, and then I was at the cast party until like midnight! I’ll find out what he said soon enough—”

“How close are your experiments to finding the source of human emotion?” her mother cut her off.

Rebecca blinked. “What? Not close at all, why?”

“Get on the labyrinth and watch the replay of Halpert’s address and call me back. You might want to put your musical theater and novelist careers on hold. Your senior thesis has suddenly become *the* most important topic in the world.”