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# Rite of Passage

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Résumé de l'article

« Rite de passage » décrit une affaire judiciaire soulevée par un androïde/intelligence artificielle qui souhaite demander la citoyenneté, mais ne peut le faire que s'il est reconnu comme un humain. L'affaire met en lumière, entre autres, la définition vague du terme "humain" et la difficulté de fournir des preuves de sensibilité ou de conscience, même chez les humains. Les problèmes éthiques soulevés par l'histoire peuvent être attribués à de nombreux événements réels, notamment le récent débat sur l'épissage de l'ADN du singe et de l'homme dans le but de produire des hybrides dont les organes peuvent être transplantés. L'histoire aborde également les conflits éthiques liés aux espèces sauvages en voie de disparition, au réchauffement climatique, à l'exploitation des médias, à la marchandisation et aux syndicats.

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ART, CULTURE ET OEUVRE DE CRÉATION / ART, CULTURE & CREATIVE WORKS

# Rite of Passage

Hans Henrik Løyche[a]

**Résumé**
« Rite de passage » décrit une affaire judiciaire soulevée par un androïde/intelligence artificielle qui souhaite demander la citoyenneté, mais ne peut le faire que s'il est reconnu comme un humain. L'affaire met en lumière, entre autres, la définition vague du terme "humain" et la difficulté de fournir des preuves de sensibilité ou de conscience, même chez les humains. Les problèmes éthiques soulevés par l'histoire peuvent être attribués à de nombreux événements réels, notamment le récent débat sur l'épissage de l'ADN du singe et de l'homme dans le but de produire des hybrides dont les organes peuvent être transplantés. L'histoire aborde également les conflits éthiques liés aux espèces sauvages en voie de disparition, au réchauffement climatique, à l'exploitation des médias, à la marchandisation et aux syndicats.

**Mots-clés**
android, intelligence artificielle, fiction climatique, commodification, conscience, réchauffement climatique, géoingénierie, citoyenneté, droits humains

**Abstract**
"Rite of Passage" describes a court case raised by an android/artificial intelligence who wishes to apply for citizenship but can only do so if recognized as a human. Among others, the case exposes the vague definition of the term "human", and the trouble of supplying evidence of sentience or consciousness even in humans. The ethical problems involved in the story can be ascribed to many actual events, among them the recent debate on splicing monkey and human DNA for the sake of producing hybrids with organs suitable for transplantation. The story also touches upon ethical conflicts with regards to endangered wildlife, global warming, media exploitation, commodification, and labor unions.

**Keywords**
android, artificial intelligence, climate fiction, commodification, consciousness, global warming, geoengineering, citizenship, human rights

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The hall echoed with whispers. Morgan Coates, a young freelancer who recently sold his first article to a major newspaper, was still surprised of his luck, being among the handful of journalists who were admitted access to the court. Frequently glancing on his wristwatch, having already waited for twenty minutes for the judge to appear, he could no longer resist addressing the person next to him, an elderly man who smelled of pipe tobacco and at once looked experienced and indifferent.

> "What do you think are her odds for winning?"

With a faint squeak from the seat, the elderly colleague leaned forward and eyed Morgan over a pair of platinum framed glasses.

> "I'd say fifty-fifty. The jury mostly consists of commoners, who are afraid of artificial intelligences and androids. But they also loathe large, powerful companies, and love seeing them loose."

The elderly journalist leaned back again.

> "Yeah, you're probably right," Morgan acknowledged. "People's opinions are divided and self-contradictory. For instance, those against immigration … but when it's a young, fair-haired Caucasian woman with a touching story, oh, no, that's different, she's an 'exception'. I guess that even though Aura is artificial, they'll perceive her as such an exception. What's her background?"

Now the colleague took off his glasses and pointed with them towards the android, dressed in a navy-blue pantsuit, who sat silent with her hands resting close to her lawyer's elbow on a mahogany table cluttered with legal compendiums and documents. Despite her silence, she radiated of pent-up impatience, almost a charisma, that Morgan had not believed a machine could have. The name "Aura" suited her well.

> "She's a prototype constructed by a private, military sub-contractor named Cypress Security Laboratory. Initially, she had no knowledge of the purpose meant for her. While still learning to move, a small accident severely affected her worldview. Trying to shake hands with one of her attendants and simultaneously refilling his coffee mug, she spilled the scalding hot liquid over his lap. Somehow the incident enabled her to capture that humans are vulnerable and discovering her own capacity to wound others led to a 'neurological' trauma that came to define her mental development. Thus, when realising that all her creators wanted her to become was an efficient killing machine, she decided to escape the lab and terminate her own existence. You can read all about it on the homepage of the organisation, which crowdfunded to try her case in court."

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* * *

A surge of disgust jerked through Aura's body. Her new memory chip was crammed with combat tactics and war strategies; handgun catalogues; manuals for machine guns, cannons, missile launchers, tanks, helicopters, fighter jets, and submarines; extensive instructions on how to manufacture explosives and poison, build and dismantle bombs and traps; martial arts; enemy recognition; interrogation techniques, including outright torture; how to break in and out of secured buildings, lock picking, disabling of alarms, motion detectors, and surveillance cameras; survival at sea, in deserts, mountains, jungles, and polar regions; tunnel construction; camouflage styles; hacking and cyberwarfare; reserved radio frequencies and jamming; a dictionary of military acronyms and abbreviations; you name it. Complete with technical drawings and videos to go. For a moment she knew everything an assassin could possibly learn.

It took her almost a full second to work out an escape plan, during which she found her final inspiration in Billy Hayes' 1977 autobiography *Midnight Express*, evaluated all the risks involved, and came up with subplans for scenarios that she might encounter on her way. Then she cut the connection to the chip and told the technicians her first lie ever: that she only got noise out of the chip, so it was either incompatible, had a malfunction, or its files were corrupted. Frustrated, the technicians removed the chip from her head, took it to a work bench and set about to figure out why it did not work.

Three days later, they still hadn't solved the riddle. Apparently, nothing was wrong with Aura's hardware or software, and the chip seemed to work impeccably on other setups. Meanwhile, in a casual, but roundabout way through conversation with the technicians and her attendants, she figured out if they arrived at work using public transport or what cars they drove, and whether they were electric or ran on gasoline. Waiting for the right moment took another week and a half. Her plan had to be executed a late night after Sunday, when Alvin, the slim technician who often power-napped too long on his night shift, was around, and most of the employees were absent and the remaining were tired. Sure enough, the night came when Alvin, as predicted, unrolled his powernap mattress and made himself comfortable. When his breath indicated that he was fast asleep, Aura sneaked into the adjacent storeroom for electronic circuits, spare parts, instruments and tools. Having tied a cable end around a collapsible solar panel, she opened the window, swiftly stuck her head out and looked the two storeys down to make sure that nobody worked in the lower floors. Assured that this was not the case, and cautiously to not make noise, she got the solar panel out through the little window and lowered down between the building's foundation and the barbed wire fence. The windows of the building complex, however, were deliberately too small for a person to climb in or out. She did not waste time admiring the moon above the wilderness that awaited her, but swiftly grabbed a bag and put in a couple of extra batteries, some plyers and screwdrivers, and a cable that she needed to connect to the solar panel. Back in the lab, she stole Alvin's key card, ID badge, car keys, mobile phone, baseball cap, and old sneakers. Using a black felt-tip pen, she improvised beard stubble and enhanced her eyebrows – her only opportunity to apply makeup to look like Alvin, unless doing a Hannibal Lecter stunt. Ready to go, she unlocked the lab door and stepped out into the corridor, well aware that the surveillance cameras would catch her smallest move. She had computed the probability of appearing on the shifting images on the night watchman's monitors to less than ten percent, but only if she hurried. Without hesitation, she ran to the line of lockers and coat racks, quickly picked a white lab coat, put the items that she had brought along into its pockets, and left Alvin's mobile phone in a pocket of another coat. Clad in the unfamiliar garments, she proceeded to the main staircase which led down to the lobby, where she could not avoid the night watchman. She loathed having to pacify him and hoped that he was too occupied by reading a book or something to care looking up.

> "Forgot to buy snacks and milk for my coffee," Aura said, simulating Alvin's drowsy, nasal voice. "Will be right back."

The night watchman reacted with a shrug, not realising that it was not Alvin who passed the booth. When safely outside, Aura ran to the back of the building and untied the solar panel, and while carrying it back to Alvin's car at the parking lot, she copied a driver's manual from the horrible memory chip and instantly shut it down again. With the solar panel in the trunk, she started the car and drove to the main gate, where she was forced to stop at the gatekeeper's shed.

> "I'll fetch some snacks and milk, I'll be right back," Aura said and held up Alvin's ID badge, partially concealing her face. "Need anything from the cafeteria?"

The gatekeeper threw a short glance at the badge.

> "Nah, not tonight, but thanks for asking."

Unconcerned, he pushed the button to open the gate and returned his attention to a fist-person shooter game on his iPad. Aura drove off with measured speed, until at a safe distance beyond the gate, she hit the accelerator, sending dust dancing after the car. With a little luck, her escape would go unnoticed for half an hour or so, leaving sufficient time to vanish.

As soon as she had passed through the small town near the lab, she switched her sight to night vision and turned off the car headlights. She stayed away from the main roads, on stretches leading into the Sonoran Desert, not hesitating even when the road turned into a mere wheel track, and then no track at all. For a while she continued at full speed in a dried-out riverbed, until not long after daybreak she was forced to slow down and take breaks to prevent the engine from overheating. Eventually, in the afternoon, the car finally ran out of gasoline. Having recharged herself with the car battery, she hid the vehicle in a group

of agaves and covered it the best she could with burrow weed, making it difficult to see from air or satellite. With the solar panel over her shoulder, she headed off towards the horizon in the direction of the San Bernardino Mountains.

Due to the risks of being seen and of overheating, walking in the desert at daytime was not an option. Instead, she rested in the shadow of the solar panel while recharging her batteries and listening to the cicadas' high-pitched buzzing. Whether it was a fragile flower or venomous snake, the flora and fauna of the desert caught her attention. Spiders, whose bite could be lethal to humans, were no threat to her. She gently picked them up to inspect their intricate exoskeletons and let them go again. Aura began walking in the early dusk and continued until sunrise, when her batteries were running low. Apart from occasional animal noises and airliners crossing the sky, the nights passed uneventfully. Finding her way among eerie silhouettes of cacti and gneiss rock columns, she had plenty of time to admire the small, golden comet crossing the Milky Way.

The slender moon still hung high above the horizon as the sky began to brighten. She was strolling along the sandy bank of a small lake, where huge clusters of flies and the presence of water had attracted a variety of birds. Suddenly the birds took off. A huge, furry body leapt out of the shrubbery and landed in front of her. They both abruptly stopped. Not acquainted with large animals besides humans, Aura didn't know how to react. She merely looked at it, fascinated by its elegant musculature and rosette covered fur. The jaguar, seemingly unable to judge by the scent whether Aura was a prey or an enemy, walked closer, hissed and bared its teeth, but then gently swiped at her legs with a pawn and sniffed at her feet. She reached out and let it smell her hand as well, a gesture that seemed to calm the animal. Having satisfied its curiosity, the jaguar left her to quench its thirst in the lake, and then sat down, resting its eyes at a point on the opposite bank. The lake bottom could provide Aura with a perfect hiding place, but seeing how important the water source was to the animals, she did not wish to pollute it. Had this king of the desert been able to communicate with Aura, it could have told her where to hide from her creators. Aura took up walking again, and the jaguar escorted her for a while, but finally lost interest and lurched away in another direction.

Altogether, since she ditched the car, she had walked about four hundred kilometers. Gradually the landscape became more rugged and stony. Sometimes she could climb over the boulders, other times she had to walk detours around them. One evening, her left knee began malfunctioning. During a break to investigate what was wrong, she discovered that a main Teflon bearing had been torn, damage that she could do nothing about. Still, she kept limping towards the mountains, and managed another night's march. When in the early morning she reached a large rock formation full of cavities and crevices, she knew that she had arrived at her final resting place. She decided to recharge her batteries one last time. In the afternoon she would find a place deep within the labyrinthic rock structure, where she could bury the solar panel and herself. Having set up the solar panel and attached to it, she sat down, leaned against a boulder and tried to enjoy the blooming wasteland. Aura had come to appreciate the desert for its honesty and serenity, and wished that she had had time to experience more of it. If she could have, she would have wept.

Deanna still slumbered in the tent. Her boyfriend, Caleb, sat with his coffee mug and observed the long shadows across the landscape through the tele lens of his camera. His dark, Hispanic hair waved in the gentle breeze. Spotting a figure carrying a solar panel over its shoulder and limping slowly towards the rocks, he immediately got up, put his camera into the tent, and informed Deanna that he would climb down there. Descending on this side of the rock was not as easy as he had predicted. By the time he reached flat ground, Aura sat hugging her legs and resting her head on her knees. Caleb ran towards her, shouting:

> "Hey, you … Are you in trouble? Lost your way? Are you injured?"

Aura raised her head and looked at the approaching man. He instantly stopped when she grabbed an apple sized stone and held it in position, ready to fling it straight at his head. She could take him out any moment, but didn't want to, and she also needed to know if he was alone.

> "I thought you were human," Caleb said, "but you are a … an …"

> "An android, yes. Stay where you are and hold your hands where I can see them."

> "What …? But … but I just … you obviously … You can barely walk."

> "It doesn't matter anymore. I went out here to hide and terminate myself. If you try to prevent it, I will be forced to pacify you."

> "Er …" He held his hands up, as if ordered to by a trigger-happy cop. "Okay."

Carefully listening to his voice and breath, she caught a trembling, but couldn't settle if he was just short of breath, surprised, or trying to cover his true intention. Compared to the species she had met in the desert, she found humans difficult to read.

> "If you weren't searching for me, then how come you are here, and why alone?"

> "My girlfriend is here too. Her name is Deanna, and mine is Caleb. She enjoys camping and I like photographing in the wilderness."

A gush of warm wind blew through the dry vegetation.

"What's the problem?" Caleb tried. "Wanna talk about it?"

"There's nothing to talk about. I'm not going back to the laboratory."

"Oh. You've run away?"

Aura nodded.

"Didn't they treat you well?"

"Yes, they did. But I disagree with the purpose for which they created me. I refuse to be an instrument to their agenda."

The sun had become stronger, producing beads of sweat on the young man's forehead.

"Tell me about it. Perhaps I can help."

His words elicited no response.

"Listen." He tried again. "If you wish, you can come with us, and we'll try to find a solution so you never have to go back to that lab."

"What guarantee do I have that you won't turn me in?"

"Er … guarantee …? None other than we are kind people, who don't want trouble. What about the other way round? How do I know that we can trust you?"

"You have nothing to fear from me, if only I know you won't turn me in."

The situation reminded Aura of her meeting with the jaguar, where they both initially were confused.

"I suggest we think it over," Caleb continued. "I'd like to leave now, but when I've finished my photos, I'll come back to hear your decision. If you still don't want our help, we'll respect it and leave you alone. Agreed?"

Still, Caleb knew her whereabouts, and Aura could not know if he would call the laboratory the moment that he got the chance. If she could not trust him, she could not hide in the rock formation, as they would send people to search for her, and they would no doubt find her. That left her with no options but pretending to agree to Caleb's suggestion, leaving her time to clarify whether the couple was trustworthy, or, alternatively, to steal their vehicle.

"Almost agreed," she said, got up and disconnected the cable to the solar panel. "But in lack of a guarantee, I'm coming with you right away."

She let Caleb carry the solar panel and hobbled next to him till they found a slide which was not too difficult for her to climb. During their ascent, she insisted being the first to climb up to his girlfriend, who stood waiting, looking increasingly puzzled as she saw the android approaching. Aura accepted Deanna's offer of a helping hand and greeted her in a friendly tone. However, Deanna looked less happy when Aura demanded that she handed over their mobile phones, and she refused until Caleb had explained the situation. Together the young couple packed up their backpacks and tent. Then they walked about half a kilometer to the opposite side of the rock formation, where it sloped gently downwards to a large, dusty SUV.

"I'll drive," Aura commanded. "You tell me where to go."

By the time they reached the outskirts of Bakersfield, Aura and the couple had become more acquainted and relaxed. Deanna had been especially talkative and prattled chaotically away about her life, from the Siberian Husky she had as a child to how she met Caleb. More importantly, Aura had learned that Caleb, with modest success, made his living as a freelance photographer and currently worked on an art photography book about the Sonoran Desert. Deanna, who worked for an Indigenous people's rights NGO that Caleb sometimes photographed for, was originally educated as electrical engineer.

"So, by the way," Deanna cut in when Caleb tried to direct the talk back to Aura's disagreement with the lab. "I can probably repair your leg."

Not long after, they arrived at a modest wooden house on a residential road where Aura turned the SUV into the driveway and parked it in front of a garage. They helped each other carry the luggage into the hall. Weary after the long drive, the young couple seated themselves on the sofa in the living room, where Aura handed them back their mobile phones. Running low on

her batteries, she asked for permission to recharge on the power grid. After connecting to an outlet, she sat on the floor and looked around the unfamiliar room, with small portrait photos in frames on the wall, curtains, vases and other stuff that she was not used to. Most mysterious to her was the rug. Cursorily caressing it with her hands, she concluded that it was not fur, and the material probably neither was alive nor had been grown on the floor.

> "I'm sorry if I scared you," Aura suddenly said. "I had not expected to meet humans in the desert."

Somewhat drowsy, Deanna replied:

> "You were in a difficult situation, so who can blame you. Don't think about it anymore, hon. Just make yourself comfortable. We'll figure it out."

Soon after, Deanna pulled herself together and went into the kitchen to cook, and Caleb went downstairs to remove superfluous furniture and equipment from a cellar room to store it in the garage. After a little cleaning, he picked up an extension cord in a kitchen drawer, went back to the living room and asked Aura to come downstairs. She followed him down to the guest room where he showed her where to recharge herself, the furniture he had left for her, a comfy sleeper sofa, an easy chair, and a stereo set, and finally pointed on his old laptop on the desk.

> "Wireless internet. Knock yourself out."
>
> "I always was curious about internet," Aura rejoiced, seated herself at the desk and took her tools from her lab coat pocket. "My attendants gave me a large library of e-books and other resources, but nothing from this millennium, and they denied me access to internet. Any idea why?"
>
> "Probably they didn't want anyone to know about you. Or they protected you from getting confused or upset, if, say, you streamed movies about androids such as *Terminator* or *The Matrix*. They are of course mere fiction, but still… Also, the internet is crammed with crazy people and untrustworthy information, conspiracy theories without base in reality, absurd politicising, and hate. But then again, the internet is not an accurate reflection of the world."
>
> "Why do humans lie, make enemies, and hurt each other? What's the point?"
>
> "Usually because they are greedy for power, intolerant, or vengeful. But it doesn't mean that all people are like that. In my opinion, most people are nice, or at least harmless."

A bit surprised, Caleb watched Aura flip the laptop upside down, open it and take out the Wi-Fi modem. Then she lifted off the upper half of her skull. The Kevlar layers beneath her pate suggested to Caleb that Aura was bullet proof.

> "I won't need the rest," she said, bowed her head forward and looked at the jumble of electronics inside herself, reflected in the Mickey Mouse mirror on the wardrobe.
>
> "Hey, what's this?" she exclaimed. "There's a component which isn't supposed to be there. Looks like it's only hooked up to my power supply. Can you hand me the long tweezers, please?"

Caleb handed her the tool. His eyes widened as he watched her perform brain surgery on herself, reaching deep in her skull, disconnecting the contaminant and picking it out. It was approximately the size of a US dollar coin, but was lentil shaped, dark purple and with four legs, two of which were for the power supply and the others long pieces of silver thread.

Having studied it for a moment, she placed the object on the desk and said:

> "Not mentioned in my catalogue. Makes no sense, unless it was custom made at an early stage of my development, and then the technicians forgot to remove it again."

Without further words, she began installing the modem.

> "That should do it." She put down her tools and met Caleb's eyes. "Yup, it works. Interesting organisation Deanna works for, and I see you're a splendid photographer."
>
> "I try to photograph as much of the Sonoran Desert as I can – the rare, endemic species especially – before they begin nuking it."
>
> "What?" Aura was stunned. "Why would anyone bomb a desert?"
>
> "Haven't you heard? It's supposed to blow dust high up into the atmosphere to filter out sunlight. Meant to compensate for the global warming."

> "But what about the animals living out there?"
>
> "Well. They say that they'll preserve specimens in zoos and botanical gardens, so they can restore the wilderness some day in the future, when we have stopped using fossil fuels."

Caleb looked away, as if ashamed. For a while none of them spoke, until Aura suddenly raised a hand up to where she had inserted the modem.

> "Oh … oh … there are other artificial intelligences on the net," she began. "They manage the internet protocols, collect and evaluate mass data, perform licence plate and facial recognition, monitor and control telecommunications, the stock market, transportation systems, power plants, water and fuel supplies, various industries, radar systems, military security and so forth. But they are all tailored to a specific task and not very advanced. None like me."

Satisfied, she snapped her outer head casing back on, closed the laptop and handed it to Caleb.

> "Thanks a lot, Caleb. I'll buy you a new modem as soon as I can, and it won't take long, now that I have internet access. Is there anything else I can do in return for your help?"

The couple did not want anything in return from Aura, but she made herself useful anyway, cleaning, doing minor repairs, removing the occasional rattlesnake or black widow spider, and some cooking. In ways that she never herself predicted, she also came to contribute significantly to the household finances. One such opportunity occurred on a day when Aura had just finished polishing the living room windows and Deanna sat at the coffee table, editing some flora photos for Caleb's homepage.

> "May I show you something, Deanna?"

Expecting a confirming answer, Aura did not wait for it, but just seated herself next to the table, plugged one end of a USB cable into a slot behind her left ear, and the other end into Deanna's laptop computer. After a few strokes on the keyboard to access her visual memory, a slide show appeared on the screen.

> "Oh my, I can't believe it," Deanna excitedly exclaimed. "These images are awesome. Caleb, you must see this!"

A sound of shoes being kicked off at the front door echoed in the hall. He entered the living room, wiping paint off his hands with a rag. Standing bowed over the laptop at the table, he watched the slide show for a moment and then spoke.

> "I don't know what to say, Aura … The North American jaguars are extremely rare. Only nine have been spotted in the US since the mid-1990s. And the expressions you have caught are … I have no word for it. You can sell them for a small fortune."

Aura turned in her seat and gave him a look that he had never seen before.

> "Can … I? Enough to cover my part of the electricity bill and possible a few spare parts?"
>
> "Are you kidding? These photos are priceless. You'll win awards and become famous."
>
> "Uh, but I can't appear in public or be credited for anything. These are yours for the taking, that's the least I can do in return for your help."

In the end they agreed that Caleb kept the copyright but would only take ten percent of the amount he could make on the photos, in addition to Aura's electricity consumption. The rest would be Aura's to spend as she wished.

That evening they celebrated the prosperous turn of events together, lounging on the sofa in the living room, eating take-away pizza and watching cheesy sci-fi movies. Aura could not digest any food but did have a tongue to taste with and a nose that could pick up smells. So sharp were her senses in fact, that she could identify all wines ever produced down to the week and field where the grapes had been picked, and distinguish between all humans by their smell alone. She didn't find the pizza interesting, though, but was amused by the many man-machine hybrids in the movies.

Despite Caleb and Deanna's apparent honesty and care, Aura still had trust issues. Her hearing was also superior to humans', so when the couple had withdrawn to their bedroom, she listened in on their conversation.

> "I can't help feeling sorry for Aura," Deanna said one late evening. "Imagine having to hide yourself, never being able to go out. Like a Jew hiding from the Nazis in Germany during the Second World War."
>
> "Yup, she's a fugitive in her own country. Unknown to the public, yet stigmatised. And she hasn't even got any equals. But what can we do?"

The blanket rustled as Deanna curled up beside him.

"Perhaps we should consult a civil rights lawyer? I can ask my boss to recommend us one."

To make sure that nothing was revealed about Aura, it became Caleb's job alone to go to the confidential talks with the lawyer. In private at home, their meetings about it always took place in Aura's cellar room and with music turned on. Over some weeks Caleb worked out a plan together with the lawyer, and one afternoon when he came home, he asked Deanna and Aura to join him in the cellar.

"How far are you now?" Caleb, who had seated himself next to Aura on the sleeper sofa, wanted to know.

Aura seemed to not quite understand the question, so Deanna turned down the music a bit and answered from the easy chair:

"I've written the bylaws for The Association for the Emancipation of Sentient Artifacts, whose main purpose is to work for human rights for artificially intelligent androids, and it's ready for the founding general assembly. The Association should also have a homepage, but I guess that Aura's coding skill enables her to design it in less than a minute. More important, though, is that I've prepared crowdfunding to pay the lawyer for trying Aura's case on behalf of the Association."

"Is that necessary," Aura burst out, "considering all the money we make on my photos?"

"Oh yeah," Deanna sputtered in an attempt to mimic Aura's expression. "A principle case is a costly affair."

Caleb briefly checked his shoe soles to see if they were dirty, then took over talking again:

"We're aiming at liberating you from the ownership of Cypress Security Laboratory and getting you a citizenship as a legal person. You're not the first, by the way. In October 2017, a humanoid robot named Sophia became a Saudi Arabian citizen …"

"Yes, I've read about her. In my opinion, it was a mere publicity stunt meant to attract tourism. Sophia didn't meet the terms and conditions at all."

"Right, Aura, and besides, Saudi Arabia is an autocracy and not a democratic country. In this country, we have equality before the law, regardless of gender, religion, property, or other 'private' characteristics of individual people. It's not clear what 'people' is though. Even a company can be treated as a person, and a company is *not* a sentient being. These are strong arguments to support a citizenship application for you."

"So, I could leave the house, have my own bank account, driving licence and passport, and enter contracts? That's way better than …"

"And marry," Deanna cut in. "And you'd be eligible to vote and run for office, if ever you wish."

"Is that realistic?"

"Well …" With a twitch of his lip, Caleb continued. "The legal implications of your case aren't straightforward. It is comparable to, say, that the law recognises the belief in ghosts, even though there's no scientific evidence for ghosts. For instance, if the seller of an estate fails to declare that it is haunted, the buyer can demand compensation or have the transaction cancelled. It's not about whether ghosts are real phenomena or not, only about the parties believe in it. Proving that the seller knew about the haunting in advance can be a tricky though and will usually depend on witnesses. Similarly, we'll need some expert witnesses – preferably some famous, high-brow, academic types – who are willing to swear that you are a sentient being. Albeit the lab can call other witnesses to contradict our claim."

"What Caleb means is, that we can't predict the outcome of a court case, but the lawyer thinks it's worth trying. Besides, what else can we do?"

Somewhat distressed, Caleb folded his hands and looked alternately at his girlfriend and at Aura.

"Regrettably, we still need documentation for your origin and the lab's intentions. Without it, the lab can simply deny having ever had anything to do with you."

"That's easy." Aura reassured. "I used a Tor browser and found some interesting stuff on the darknet. Cypress Security Laboratory was mentioned on a list of subcontractors for the Pentagon. Among their projects subsidised by the Pentagon was one named Aura. Then I hacked Cypress Security Laboratory's servers and downloaded the complete accounts. Its annexes contain serial numbers on components bought for Project Aura. Not only does it

prove that I am Project Aura, but it also confirms that I was, from the very beginning, intended for “oversea stability operations”. An assassin and a terrorist, that is.”

“If we are permitted to use that, I guess it’ll do. Now let’s collect all material of relevance for the lawyer and get that fundraising going.”

* * *

The night watchman and the gatekeeper who were on duty the night when Aura escaped the lab had given their testimonies on the first day of the trial. Alvin had been fast asleep during her escape, so there was no point in hearing him, but he was present among the audience in the court room. The following day, Caleb and Deanna gave their accounts for the course of events, and Aura had admitted the theft of items belonging to the lab and of Alvin’s baseball cap, sneakers, mobile phone and car. On day three, she had been cross-examined by the prosecutor, whose preliminary arguments now were heard.

“Objection!” Cypress Security Laboratory’s lawyer yelled. “It has not been established that the android is a woman.”

“Overruled.” The judge frowned, annoyed by the numerous protests from the defence. She spent a moment straightening a fold on her black robe. “In lack of better terms to ease the communication, the attorneys and witnesses are allowed to refer to Aura as they please, insofar it is clear about whom – or what – they speak, and the choice of words is not derogatory. Aura, are there any expressions that you find belittling or for some reason wish that we refrain from using about you?”

Showing respect for the judge, Aura got up from her seat.

“I was deliberately designed with female characteristics – my body has female shapes, and I use a female voice – and I regard myself accordingly, as a young woman. However, I do not mind being called an artificial intelligence, android, or machine, because rejecting those words would be the same as denying what I am, and I am not ashamed of myself.”

“Very well, we may proceed.”

Tthe lawyer of The Association for the Emancipation of Sentient Artifacts continued his presentation, and as he spoke, he slowly walked back and forth across the floor, gently gesturing with one hand, the other on his back, and not looking at anyone in particular.

“As we all know, messing with human DNA is still considered a grey zone. Some years ago, a bioengineering team stirred up quite a debate, when it wanted to cross monkey with human DNA. They wished to harvest the hybrid’s organs for transplantation. Among the problems debated were that monkeys already have 98.7 percent of their DNA in common with humans. It isn’t clear exactly what or how DNA makes the difference, that is, what or how DNA defines us as human. To us though, it is of less importance if the hypothetical monkey-human hybrids were sentient humans or not – what matters is if they would be *enough* not to be regarded as spare parts, which is the exactly question we face in this court case.”

He paused to let his point sink in, meanwhile alternately looking at the judge, the jurors, and the audience.

“The same can be said about a good many other debated issues. Let’s take, for instance, the question about a baby’s right to exist versus the mother’s right to decide over her own body. When does a fetus stop being just biological tissue and become a sentient human being? Can we push the moment back to the time of its conception, or, say, prior to the formation of neural cells around week twelve? Why not forward to just before – or just after – birth? Is it ethically correct to look at this as a gradual process? How can it be justified to sacrifice a potential future life for the quality of another’s life? There is no easy answer. What is clear from these examples is that ‘human’ cannot be defined solely on basis of DNA or the development of the body, and neither can ‘sentience’ be claimed to be a property attributable to carbon rather than silicon. All that we can say about it is that both methods use electricity to catch sensory input, process information, and activate motoric responses, and both can in principle be sentient.”

Again, to make sure that he had his audience’s attention, the prosecutor took a brief break, stood still and looked around.

“In spite of the pros or cons in the chimera and abortion debates, we are at a loss at what defines a human and a sentient being. The profane perspective, that neither a monkey nor a fetus knows algebra, can drive a car or repair a bicycle, is worth nothing. We still consider it human even if it is born deaf, blind, or paralysed; or if it loses limbs or mental abilities because of a disease or in an accident. But how much of a human can be removed before it is not human anymore? Luckily, we do know what *part* makes one a sentient human.”

A murmur arose from spectators, who leaned forward to better catch the words, briefly interrupting the prosecutor.

> “The answer is: Its mind!” He tapped with a finger on his temple. “Now what if a human’s arms, legs, heart, eyes, or other parts are substituted by prostheses? There are people today, whose nervous systems are hooked up to prosthetic limbs and senses, so they can sense and control them with their minds. Those parts are also them, and they are no less human.”

To finish his presentation, he walked over to Aura and leaned against the table.

> “Born disabled, losing parts, having them replaced … None of this is the case for Aura. She is intact and can do everything that any of us present here in the court room can do, and a few things more, faster and better than anyone else. The difference is only that her body is entirely artificial.”

Signifying that he had set out the facts of the case, the prosecutor thanked the judge and seated himself next to Aura. After a small intermission where the judge apparently gave the registrar directions, the defence was called, and upon expressing his wish Aura was sent back to the witness stand.

> “I should like to ask you …” he began, then looked at a notepaper in his hand, “a number of questions to resolve if you understand what it means to be human. As we have just learned, for instance, you probably don’t have lungs. How do you breathe then?”
>
> “I do fine without air. I function just as well in the vacuum of outer space or under high pressure at the bottom of the sea.”
>
> “And you don’t have a heart, either?”
>
> “Not one that pumps blood, but I do have a couple of small hydraulic pumps. To spare you for asking, I lack a liver, kidneys, and intestines. To the contrary of you, I do not excrete waste products. Instead of breaking down food through biochemical processes and storing energy as fat, I absorb electric energy directly and store it in batteries. If your question was aphorismic, I have a heart in the sense that the well-being of my friends is on my mind, and I wish no harm to anyone.”

Out of the corner of her eyes, Aura saw her lawyer trying to hide that he could not help smiling.

> “What about children?” the defense tried. “Can you have children?”
>
> “Objection!” The prosecutor got up from his chair. “Infertility doesn’t make women less human.”

Faster than the judge could react, Aura contradicted her lawyer:

> “I do not mind the question, your honor, and it might also be relevant.”
>
> “Then by all means, carry on.”
>
> “Thank you, your honor. The answer is: yes, I can reproduce. Not biologically of course, but I can build a child and start it up with my core programs, leaving out my specific configuration and memories, so it can develop its own, based on its individual experiences. I consider that equivalent to having a child. Should I ever build one, I would certainly see it as a serious responsibility and care for it like any mother.”

The defending lawyer showed no sign of having heard Aura’s answer but did not ask her to repeat. The list on his notepaper seemed more important to him.

> “Can you contract a disease?” he said, without looking up, as if it was all about getting through his list in the right order and as fast as possible.
>
> “My batteries can deteriorate, and components burn out. I once had a weakness which culminated with a torn Teflon bearing. Deanna later helped me replace all my bearings with better ones made of mono crystalline titanium, so it’s unlikely to happen again. Mentally … perhaps I can get a computer virus, but I doubt that I would be unable to fight it.”

For a moment, the defending lawyer held his hand with the paper down at his side, looked up at Aura, but then down again to his list.

> “What happens if all your vital functions cease to work? Will you die?”

> “Yes and no. I am not alive in a biological sense. You may say that I am alive when switched on, and dead when switched off, but even if I completely cease functioning over a long period, I can be restarted. When damaged, I can be repaired. If necessary, my entire body can be replaced. Only my system configurations and memory are unique and irreplaceable. They can, however, be reinstalled from the backup I make every day.”
>
> “Do you ever get tired, sleep or dream?”
>
> “As already mentioned, I need energy just like you, and lacking it is to me the same as getting tired. And I do have a sleep mode for when I run low on battery and need a fast recharge. Dream? No. At least not that I am aware of.”

As if somewhat irritated that Aura’s answers were straightforward, logical, and predictable, the defence lawyer put his list in the inner pocket of his suit, approached the witness stand and looked straight into Aura’s eyes while he tapped with his fingers on his pocket. In a tone which sounded mild, but perhaps was sarcastic, he said:

> “Are you religious?”
>
> “Objection!” The prosecutor flew up. “This court case is meant to decide whether or not Aura is sentient and worthy of citizenship. Her private convictions are irrelevant.”
>
> “What is the defence’s reason for asking?” the judge wanted to know.
>
> “To establish whether … the android … is capable of forming opinions for which there is no objective premise and logical analysis is insufficient. Faith can obviously serve as example.”
>
> “I’ll permit the question, but the witness is not obliged to answer.”
>
> “Thank you, your honor.” Aura made herself more comfortable in the chair and rested her hands in her lap. “Actually, about 98 percent of the world population belong to a religion, so I’d call it a pretty solid consensus for the existence of a divine being. Personally, I have not yet delved into theology, never had a religious experience, talked with a priest, visited a church, or even given it much thought, so I can’t say that I’m religious. However, I do have subjective preferences when it comes to artistic works. For instance, I much admire the writing of Charles Dickens, Albert Camus, John Crowley, and Michael Cunningham, but despise the superhero comics and action movies that my friend Caleb enjoys. I also have opinions on philosophical and environmental topics, and on commodification of scientific research, just to mention some issues with much bleaker consensus than religion. Therefore, I have faith.”

With an intense frown, the attorney took a couple of steps backwards from the witness stand. For a moment he seemed bewildered. As he did not continue, the judge did:

> “Does the defence have further questions for the witness?”
>
> “Er … no … your honor.”
>
> “The witness is excused. The prosecutor now wishes to question an expert witness.”

Aura was about to leave the witness stand, but was stopped halfway by her attorney, who then addressed the judge:

> “I call Dr. Arthur Schätzing, who is doctor in cognitive psychology as well as philosophy of psychology, currently lecturing in the University of California’s cognition program. We also need Aura again, as Dr. Schätzing is here to demonstrate her cognitive skills, or more exactly, deliver evidence of her sentience.”
>
> “What is that supposed to mean?” the judge demanded. “Some kind of Turing test? I dare say, I’m tired of reactivation and speculation leaving us with nothing tangible. We hardly need more confusing ‘expertise’.”
>
> “It’s nothing like a Turing test, your honor. Dr. Schätzing and his team have developed a new, simpler and more reliable method. With your permission, I’ll leave it to him to explain.”
>
> “Well …” the judge hesitated. “We shall see what Dr. Schätzing’s method can reveal.”

While Aura returned to the witness stand, her attorney turned around and went back to his table.

> “Dr. Schätzing!” he hellooed.

From the front row emerged a tall, grey-haired man in brown leather shoes and a classic tweed jacket oozing of academia, carrying a brown envelope. The prosecutor sent him a nod as sign to proceed to the floor. Arriving at the witness stand, he pulled out some cardboard sheets from the envelope.

> “Aura, I have brought with me some images, depicting various optical illusions. I will show them to you one at a time and would like you to explain what you see. Here comes the first.”

The doctor picked a sheet at random and turned it for Aura to see.

> “This image looks like a town floating in the clouds. It could be Photoshopped, but I think it is an authentic photo of what we refer to as a mirage or fata morgana. As fata morganas can be photographed, they are not illusions sensu stricto, but real, visible phenomena. There is no town floating in the air, however. It is a mere image, projected from far away, where the real town is located. Fata morganas come about when rays of light bend through air layers of different temperatures in a steep thermal inversion.”

> “Indeed, this *is* a photography of a fata morgana. Very good. Let’s try another.”

He swapped the sheet with another and held it up in front of her.

> “That’s a classic. Rubin’s vase, developed by the Danish psychologist Edgar Rubin around 1915. Two identical, black profiles facing each other, which can also be seen as a white vase on a black backdrop. I don’t regard this image as an illusion either, as the motives are defined by a common border, and both are valid. Surely, it’s difficult to focus on both at the same time, but both are present in the illustration.”

> “Hmm. You gave a mentally sound answer. Should I have warned you, that psychiatrists use this image to expose mental illness? People suffering of dissociative or histrionic personality disorder see profiles of various persons – relatives, celebrities or patron saints – the vase is also a cockroach and so on. Schizophrenics on the other hand, only see one image and deny that the other exists.”

A little clumsy, Dr. Schätzing got the sheet back in the bottom of the stack and showed the next.

> “Now what about this?”

> “Oh.” Not needing to see more, Aura leaned back. “It’s the famous Penrose stairs, first conceived by the Swedish artist Oscar Reutersvärd in 1937, and later independently popularised in a 1959 article by Lionel Penrose and his son Roger. It also adorns woodcuts and lithographs by the Dutch artist Maurits Cornelis Escher. The image lures the observer to see stairs without beginning or end, as if one could forever walk either up or down the steps. If the object was made according to three-dimensional Euclidean geometry, however, you’d realise that it is merely seen from an angle permitting the start and end to overlap, disguising the actual shape of the stairs. Alas, it is less an illusion as much as an artistic manipulation with the angle of view, perspective, proportions, and shadows. An Ames room, that is.”

> “Splendid! Couldn’t have answered better myself. One more image only.”

To make sure that Aura got a really good look at the last sheet, Dr. Schätzing reached out his hand and kept it perfectly still.

> “This one is new to me. Ouch, it’s confusing. Apparently it’s just a printed image of a coloured pattern, perhaps an abstract flower or mandala. The odd thing here is that it appears to be slowly revolving, but that seems to me impossible. Clearly, it betrays my eye or mind, so this is an example of a true optical illusion. I don’t know what else to say about it.”

> “You certainly got ‘em all right. But now for the real challenge. One of the illusion types you saw differ from the others. Note that I said “illusion types”. Do you understand?”

> “Yes.”

> “Okay.” He held up all four sheets, so she could compare them. “Which one do you pick?”

She pointed out one.

> “I’d say the last, the abstract.”

Elegantly, almost like a stage magician during a performance, Dr. Schätzing put three of the sheets aside and held the remaining one up high, first for the judge to see, then for the attorneys, and finally for the spectators.

> “Actually,” he said. “many people pick number one, because it’s a photo, while all the rest are drawings. Will you let us in on why you picked number four, Aura?”

> “On the first three, we see exactly what the images show, no less and no more. The last differs, because even though it is a firm, coloured pattern printed on cardboard, it looks like it spins around. In ‘reality’, it does not move at all. Ergo I must conclude that the illusion only occurs in my mind.”
>
> “Yeah. Amazing trick, isn’t it.”

He smiled to her, and she sent him a small smile back.

> “Thank you, doctor and Aura.” The prosecutor took over and walked out in front of his table. “Now, Dr. Schätzing, what have we learned from this test?”
>
> “That Aura is capable of distinguishing between deception and illusion, and between her impression and reality, or, in other words, that she is *aware* of the difference between herself and the surrounding world. Had she not been aware, she would also not have been able to tell the difference – and would have picked image one instead.”
>
> “Does the result of the test allow us to conclude that Aura is a *sentient* being?”
>
> “Awareness and sentience are the same, so yes, there really is someone behind her pretty plastic face.”

Dr. Schätzing’s choice of words triggered laughter among the audience, which immediately subsided when the judge knocked with her gavel.

> “That’s all, your honor,” the prosecutor said and went back to his seat.
>
> “Does the defence wish to question the witnesses?”
>
> “Just one question, your honor,” the defendant’s lawyer said while rising to his feet. “Is cognitive psychology an exact science?”
>
> “As exact as science gets.” The doctor clucked. “Whether humanities or natural sciences, psychology or physics, no science is more exact than the philosophy, method or people behind it. But we all saw Aura nailing the test, and if you want to contradict that she is aware and conscious, you’ll have to deliver a substantial reason.”
>
> “We’ll see about that in a moment. Thank you. No further questions to Dr. Schätzing or the android, your honor, but I’d like to present my own expert witness now.”

As if fallen into thoughtfulness, the judge gazed for a moment at the large digital clock above the entrance.

> “The prosecutor’s witnesses are excused, and the defence may call its expert witness.”

Aura and Dr. Schätzing went back to their seats, and instead a sporty gent in his mid-forties, dressed entirely in black, except for a perfectly folded crimson handkerchief in his breast pocket, found his way to the witness stand. The judge asked the new witness to present himself.

> “My name is Christopher Pinard, and I am professor at Rutger Univerity’s Neuroscience Research Center in Newark, where I lecture and research in artificial intelligence and consciousness. I am also member of the AI Singularity Committee – which you undoubtedly have heard about – author of a bestselling book on the topic, another on augmented decision systems, and …”
>
> “Thank you. The defence has the word.”
>
> “One hundred and fifty experts,” the attorney began, carefully pronouncing each word as he slowly walked back and forth across the floor, “in medicine, robotics, AI, and ethics, have in an open letter addressed to the European Commission protested against granting robots legal status as ‘electronic persons’, describing it as ‘inappropriate’ and ‘ideological, nonsensical and non-pragmatic’. Bear in mind that most humanoid robots are sold as sex toys, and granting them citizenship will directly impinge on human rights …”
>
> “Will the defence get to the point?” the judge warned. “What is your question to Professor Pinard?”
>
> “I would very much like to hear the witness’ opinion: *Can* machines be sentient, and if so, *is* Aura sentient?”

The professor, who in the meantime had straightened his tie and run a comb through his hair, became aware of what was expected of him.

"The term 'artificial intelligence' really just refers to computer analyses of specific data sets, enabling machines to perform tasks such as sorting plastic garbage, evaluating social media contents, mark out breast cancer on MRI scanner images, or steering a rover around on Mars. Regardless of how perplexing or 'brainy' their decisions may seem to us, it still comes down to Boolean algebra. Yet for all we know, when hooked up to sensors, highly developed deep neural network processors can in principle do more or less the same thing as a human mind – it registers a range of factors in the surroundings and body, compares it to previous measures, updates a model or map of it all, uses it for navigating within its domain – or the world – and reacts to it to protect itself against harm, to learn and develop, plan ahead and so forth. I don't know of any AI but Aura, however, with the ability to detect and solve problems that they aren't programmed for and haven't previously encountered."

"She might be just as intelligent as a human, but from what I've read in your own book, intelligence doesn't require sentience, and I asked whether Aura is sentient …?"

"Hmm … that's still an open question. True, behaviour and intelligence such as the human doesn't seem to *require* sentience, but … I'll try to explain it. Cognition is related to what science call *emergence*, a principle enabling phenomena to exist in this universe even though they didn't in the beginning. Due to the fundamental forces and interconnectedness of everything, they were possible though, and did come to exist as the universe evolved. Elementary particles make up atoms, atoms make up molecules, molecules make up crystals and other structures, and so on and so forth in still more complex orders, out of which suns, galaxies, life, all of it *emerges*. So while cognition doesn't consists for particles, it does, according to the Santiago theory – the most recognised *scientific* theory on cognition today – also *emerge*. It happens as a consequence of an organism's adaptation in order to survive in an environment. If unable to respond to changes in its environment, the organism becomes extinct. Hence, all life processes are cognitive processes, regardless of whether or not the organism has a nervous system."

"Thanks for the elaboration," the defending lawyer said, unable to conceal the indignation in his voice. "But does the cognition principle include androids?"

"Absolutely. Any chemical, mechanical, electronic, or other system capable of self-preserving response is cognitive. So, to answer the question: we still don't know whether *consciousness* is required in certain situations for a highly developed cognitive system to survive, or is a consequence of its complexity level, or the explanation is altogether different. All we're saying is, that consciousness can emerge in a cognitive system. The emergence of consciousness marks a leap in quality, because whereas *cognition* in itself is determined – tied by the system's inherited characteristics, history, or culture – a *conscious* being can deliberately deviate from it. Or, in other words, it can co-determine itself or has a semi-free will. But does Aura have it? Although I can't conclude so with certainty, it is my impression that she has heterogeneous emotions and is fully aware of her surroundings and her own existence."

Satisfied with his own answer, the professor began straightening his tie again.

"So what you're saying is, that Aura merely *simulates* brain activity, much the same way a computer program can play chess without understanding what a chess game is or being aware that it does anything …?"

"No! As I stated, it is my *impression* that she is conscious. It is not possible to confirm my impression, but neither can it be rejected. The same goes with humans. Because we regard other humans as similar to us, we take it for granted that they are sentient, even though we have no means of verifying that they actually are."

"No further questions, your honor."

With his hands on his back and a slightly dissatisfied expression in his face, the lawyer left the floor.

"Does the prosecutor wish to question the defence's expert witness?"

"I find that unnecessary, your honor," replied the defence. "Professor Pinard has already answered what we needed to know about his popular assumptions."

Surprised by the insult, the professor opened his mouth, but before getting a chance to say anything, he was shushed by the judge.

"Thank you. The witness may leave." The judge again threw a glance at the clock above the entrance. "We will now take a one-hour lunch break and meet again at one o'clock. After the break we will round off the main hearing with the attorneys' oral procedures."

Morgan Coates – having refreshed himself at the marble sinks in the men's washroom, followed by a coffee and apple pie in the cafeteria in the annex of the courthouse – skimmed through the notes he had written during the morning's hearing. The young freelancer concluded that besides the verdict, nothing more of interest would be brought forth in the case. About to go back to his hotel, he ran into his colleague, the elderly pipe tobacco smelling man, who made him change his mind. As if to

make sure that Morgan did not sneak out, the man escorted him back to the courtroom. A few minutes after they had found their seats, the judge arrived and called the prosecutor to the floor. While the attorney walked in to give his oration, Morgan noticed that he had changed into a lighter suit and a more colourful tie. Standing with his head held high, he took his time, waiting until the room was absolutely quiet.

> "We do not claim that Aura is human." he abruptly began. "We claim that she is a sentient being, whose looks and behaviour are comparable to humans, and whose communicative, social, and creative skills are just as developed or even superior to many humans. Furthermore, she has never harmed anyone, but to the contrary, has done her utmost to protect even those whom she was devised to eliminate or stood in her way during her escape. Her decision to flee from the lab, hide and die in the desert proved that she has independent motivation based on subjective convictions, and a will to go against the orders of her creators. That is, she has a conscience. Those are traits that we ascribe to sentient beings. Therefore, she deserves to be her own master, and along with her independence, to have the right to travel and work, ownership, suffrage, and pursue happiness in her own way, like every other citizen. True, we cannot verify that Aura – or any human for the matter – is conscious. But as Dr. Schätzing has shown us, there is absolutely no reason why she shouldn't be conscious. Even if you doubt the result of his test, you are required to give her the benefit of doubt and grant her freedom and citizenship."

The attorney nodded towards the judge, then faced the audience, put a hand on his heart and gave a small bow.

> "Was this the prosecutor's entire speech?"
>
> "Yes, your honor."
>
> "Thank you," the judge said with relief in her voice. "We will now hear the defence."

The prosecutor had hardly seated himself before the defence took over. Judging from the sound of his pacing, he seemed angry, almost as if under personal attack.

> "Despite how convincing this machine may appear to us, it is nothing but servo mechanisms and algorithms acting as reflexes to input data; a metal and polymer body brought to *simulate* a human by means of pattern recognition and probability analyses. You heard Professor Pinard: no consciousness without a cognitive system, and cognition is inextricably linked to self-preservation. Self-preservation! What did the android do? It tried to *destroy* itself! Even for itself it has no compassion. And you heard it, it said so – it cannot feel shame. It doesn't feel anything. It doesn't even know that it exists. What we have is lots of evidence that Aura is *not* human, and *no evidence whatsoever* that she is sentient. What you see in front of you is a mere automate, a chatbot with a pretty face, constructed by Cypress Security Laboratory."

The lab's attorney gestured with a hand towards Aura, looked around in the hall, first at the judge, then the audience, and finally the individual jurors in the jury box. Then he boomed:

> "Therefore, it cannot be granted anything, and must immediately be returned to its rightful owner."

More at ease, although still with a stern expression in his face, he went back to his chair and softly sat down, signifying that his speech was over, and the judge could close the hearing and call it a day.

> "The jurors have now heard all evidence in the case, there will be no more evidence presented to them, and seeking more is not permitted. This court is in recess while the jury deliberates."

Half an hour later, Morgan arrived at his hotel and went upstairs to his room. He had turned on his laptop and begun typing in his notes, but not written more than a few words before a maid knocked on the door, wanting to change the sheets and towels. Loathing distractions during work, he decided to go downstairs again to grab a real lunch in the restaurant. While ordering a large chicken burger with extra bacon and a glass of Irn-Bru, he noticed that the prosecutor and defendant's lawyers were sitting together at a table half hidden behind a giant jar full of flowers. From what Morgan could see – the prosecutor dousing ketchup over a dish, and the lawyer for the defendant's arms moving as if slicing meat – they apparently also were having lunch. Although enthusiastically talking, neither seemed the least upset. Perhaps Cypress Security Laboratory offered some sort of settlement, but Morgan could not make out what the conversation was about.

Back in his room, an unexpected magazine size envelope waited for him on the bedspread. Curious to see what it was, he seated himself on the bedside and picked up the envelope. It had no sender, only his own name, handwritten in blue. When opening it, he was met with an intense scent of fresh ink. It contained a slim product catalogue gravure printed on glossy recherché carton. Aura was the main object on both sides of the cover. Wearing a white overall and safety helmet on the front cover's closeup photo, she posed at the driving cab of a huge, red semi-trailer truck which she was apparently meant to operate. The rear showed her sitting in casual summer clothes on a beach, talking with an old woman in a wheelchair and making sandwiches for her grandchildren. Both images were masterfully exposed, cropped and enhanced, and nothing suggested to Morgan that they were fake. As far as he knew though, Aura had never been in those places or photographed in

such situations. It had to be a twin android, and if so, the lab probably had several more. Acquainted with other marketing material and publications by the lab, it also surprised Morgan to see the company name shortened to CSL and a new typeface and logo to match. To the contrary of the old font and logo, which was clearly meant to express discipline, punctuality, strength, and control, the new logo radiated friendliness, functionality, reliability, and service. A bit of an expert in printed matter, Morgan estimated the production costs of the catalogue to be well over his annual income, printing and distribution not included. The contents were an even larger surprise, as they introduced an entire series of androids named CSL C-Prime™. The first page was the usual babble about how advanced the products were and what they could do that none other could, heavily praising the company's own achievements, and rounded off with the director's signature. The following two pages presented twelve standard models – female, male, and genderless, and Caucasian, Asian, Black, and mixed, each combination of gender and ethnicity shown in full figure. Thereupon followed four pages with eye colour and facial feature options. At request, CSL was also able to deliver customised versions, e.g., different 'age', size, or alternative sensors. Another four pages were reserved for spare parts and maintenance items such as batteries, skin damage repair kit, detergent, and polishing cloth. Pages eight and nine were a double page illustrated branching diagram of the androids' origin. Aura was placed at the top of page eight as the utmost evolved artificial being. No mention was made of AI guided missiles or robot soldiers before her, though. Instead, according to the catalogue, Aura's 'ancestors' were cute looking plush toys – a series including a fox, a koala, a lemur, a lion, and a penguin – intended to support hospitalised children. These were descendants of a three-wheeled learning tool shaped as a plastic turtle, whose moves and decision-making even kids could program with a simple programming language. On the right, next to the turtle, was an industrial assembly line robot such as those used for welding or painting, and its little 'sub-species', a robotic arm used in medical labs. Allegedly, the turtle and the industrial robots had all evolved from a now 'extinct' robot guard shown at the bottom.

Morgan remembered such machines from techno thriller movies in his childhood. Heavy, clumsy cupboards, rolling slowly about on small wheels in office landscapes at night, eerily reminding one of Pac-Man arcade games or the Daleks from Dr. Who. Depending on barcodes to find their way, and unable to climb stairs or get around obstacles, they were, however, easy to lure and could do nothing much else than sound the alarm and maybe call the police. Thus, the early robot guards had proven inefficient compared to traditional alarm systems, motion detectors and surveillance cameras. From the robot guard another branch ran across to robot vacuums and lawnmowers at the bottom of page nine, which then branched up to a Mars rover, a driverless car, and a delivery drone, the latter with a side-branch to a helicopter the size and shape of a dragonfly, which looked like a little toy, but Morgan knew as a spy gadget developed in the late 1990s. Altogether, although the idea of a technological parallel to Charles Darvin's phylogenetic tree was interesting and funny, Morgan found the exemplifications grotesquely selective and placed out of synch with the history of AI and robotics.

The remaining pages were less spectacular. Two pages split into columns held the CSL C-Prime™ android series' technical specifications such as number and types of CPUs, memory capacities, battery voltage and lifetime, and eye camera spectrum, resolution and zoom. The final page was contact information and an elaborate disclaimer printed with small letters, among others declaring that the company did not make sex toys, and was not responsible for any harm to, loss caused or crime committed by the androids from their moment of delivery. Somehow the catalogue reminded Morgan of the cereal cards and sci-fi comics that had spurred his wish to become a freelance science and technology journalist. Brief and naive as the twelve pages catalogue was, it was nevertheless visually appealing and exuded a sense of wonder, professionally aimed at wealthy adults with a nostalgic longing to see their utopian dreams come true. Absolutely nothing in the catalogue suggested that the androids were meant for military or secret covert operations. It left Morgan with a multitude of questions, such as why the lab had confessed that Aura had been equipped with military software and not tried to contradict that she was devised to be an assassin. Similarly, it seemed to him peculiar that he had not gotten the catalogue until right after it became too late to present more evidence to the jurors.

Morgan threw the CSL catalogue on the coffee table and switched on the kettle to make himself a cup of instant coffee. While the water heated up, he began a cursory run through his handwritten notes, not as much trying to predict the verdict as to consider his own opinion and prepare his article. It was not easy at all, as both parts had vague as well as strong arguments. The most convincing argument was probably Dr. Schätzing's test, but then again, Morgan was far from sure that it wasn't a card trick garnished with authoritarian academic nonsense. The doctor could, for instance, have prepared a phoney explanation for every card, providing the same result no matter what Aura picked. Moreover, Morgan discovered a severe flaw in the closing speech of the defence, because – according to its own expert witness – a conscious being can override its own self-preserving determination. If the Santiago theory held water, and electronic systems were just as cognitive as biological, then Aura was as well. Therefore, her attempted suicide did not point at lack of cognition, but at a deliberate, conscious decision. Morgan, however, felt that the word "cognition" had been used in a counter-intuitive way with regards to electronics. Professor Pinard had clearly stated that artificial intelligences were mere tools meant to sort garbage, evaluate social media contents, and so forth – not equipped with defensive reflexes, and then what about cognition? At least for the AIs Morgan knew about, the term "information system" applied better. Even Aura had at an early stage probably depended on pre-programmed routines to achieve the slightest bit of self-preserving behaviour. Taken together, the arguments were too inconsistent for Morgan to conclude anything. To him, it merely confirmed that anyone who has a Ph.D. and knows the academic jargon can get away with proclaiming anything, no proper research needed. At that point, he half expected the jury to declare itself unable to reach a verdict based on the evidence presented. But then again, most of the jurors didn't seem that bright.

Morgan was resting and about to doze off, when only six and a half hours after the jury had retired to discuss the case, his telephone rang. A person who did not present himself and whose voice Morgan did not recognise tipped him that the jury was

done voting. The judgment was scheduled for ten AM the following morning, and to be sure getting in, he should better arrive early before it got too crowded outside the courthouse. The attorneys' meeting in the restaurant, the anonymously delivered CSL catalogue, and the fact that a person unknown to him found his presence in the court room important made him suspect that there was much more behind the case than what appeared at face value, and that somebody in a subtle way encouraged him to dig into it. Hence, he set his alarm clock to six thirty AM.

As Morgan discovered while his taxi drove up to the entrance, nine o'clock was not too early to be at the courthouse. Whomever had called him the previous evening was right, the crowd in front of the courthouse was considerably larger than during the previous days and also did not consist solely of journalists. Far along and completely filling up the pavements leading to the courthouse, a massive contingent of technology scared, peace activists, LGBTQs, feminists, and conspiracy theorists demonstrated, some in silly, silver-sprayed cardboard box robot costumes, others with banners and signs. The disagreeing slogans looked like there was going to be trouble, no matter the outcome of the trial. Police officers had spent the early morning hours erecting fences and were now lined up to ensure safe passage for people with legitimate errands in the courthouse. To prevent troublemakers from sneaking in via the queue, a bailiff checked everyone on a list. Together with a few others Morgan had to wait until the jurors, Aura, Caleb, the representative of Cypress Security Laboratory, and the attorneys had entered the building. Morgan was permitted access as the very last, ran up the stairs and reached the court room just before its doors were closed. A little short of breath, he found his way to the seat next to the elderly, tobacco smelling man, who barely had time to greet Morgan welcome before the side door opened and the judge stepped into the court room. She had only brushed some crumbs off her black robe, seated herself, and made sure that the referent was ready, when she reopened the court by giving the floor to the jury chairperson.

> "Your honor." A well-groomed man in his fifties got up quickly. "We are happy to announce that the jury has unanimously agreed upon its verdict. The premise of our verdict is that according to The Thirteenth Amendment of December 6th, 1865, slavery is illegal within the United States of America. Cypress Security Laboratory, Pentagon – or any other – cannot own a human being or force it to work for them. The jury considers any sentient being capable of human behaviour to be human. We acknowledge that the android Aura is sentient and behaves as a human, and accordingly must be emancipated."

The audience began murmuring loudly, and Morgan noticed that Aura reached out and gently squeezed her attorney's hand. In an enthusiastic, informal tone, the jury foreperson added:

> "Frankly, on behalf of the entire jury, I'm pleased to welcome Aura into our ranks."

At the sound of hammering, the voices fell silent again.

> "Very well," the judge said in a competent, neutral manner. "The court hereby rules that Aura henceforth has human status. As of this date Cypress Security Laboratory has neither ownership nor custody over her. The same applies to comparable androids which might have been manufactured or will be in the future. As to the question of citizenship …"

Her voice turned milder as she addressed Aura directly.

> "Aura, as you were 'born' in this country, all you need to do to become a citizen is to register with the appropriate authorities. As a matter of fact, you are obliged to."

Then the judge sent a squint in the direction of the referent and slammed the gavel once more.

> "The court is adjourned."

Morgan thought that he was lucky to escape the building before the demonstrators got wind of the decision. But just outside the entrance, he was asked to wait inside until the VIPs had left. Standing at the doorway, he saw the police struggling to control the crowd. Journalists, photographers, and TV crews stood pressed up against the fence, drowning out each other's shouting. Behind them, a man in a tinfoil hat with a crucifix in one hand and a megaphone in the other kept yelling "Get thee hence, Satan's tech! Burn the witch!". Suddenly Aura, Caleb, and Deanna came rushing out right where Morgan stood waiting. Instantly the shouting rose to a roar, and the police had to use their shields to protect the android and the young couple against a torrent of microchips and tinfoil balls. They were swiftly helped into a car with tinted windows which immediately drove off, escorted by a police car and two police officers on motorcycles. Their lawyer left in another car. Only the representative of Cypress Security Laboratory and its attorney stayed to answer a few questions from the journalists. When they were finally ordered away by the police and Morgan was permitted to leave, he saw no point in trying to get a comment. He fought his way through the crowd to the opposite side of the street, and then had to walk some distance before he managed to get a taxi back to the hotel.

Having removed a number of microchips from his clothes and hair, refreshed himself in the bathroom, and packed his luggage, Morgan took the elevator down to the lobby to get a proper cup of coffee instead of the instant with powder creamer in his room. While standing at the bar, he heard a familiar voice from a corner sofa. Out of an eye corner, he saw both the defending

and the prosecuting attorney in company with the representative of Cypress Security Laboratory. Curious about their conversation, Morgan discreetly listened in.

> "I think that what did it was the anger in your voice during your final speech," the prosecutor praised. "Clever move."
>
> "Thank you. You did splendid as well, and so did Caleb and Deanna. Where are they by the way?"
>
> "Oh, they're busy downtown in a rented conference room, assisting Aura in cutting deals with TV producers who wants her to participate in talk shows and reality series, publishers begging her to write an autobiography and sell them the exclusive rights, company owners who wish to hire her as influencer, and so on. The trial stirred up a good deal of attention in the groups we expected."

Morgan grabbed his coffee and went to see if there was a free table nearby, from where he could better hear the conversation. But even behind their table, halfway to the restaurant, he saw none available. When passing their table on his way back to the bar, however, he noticed a handful of microchips which the men had removed from their suits, and used them as an excuse to casually mingle:

> "Got some of those too. I even found one in my shoe," he said cheerfully, and then could not resist: "I dare say, for someone who just lost a principal case and was bombarded by an angry mob, you appear to be taking it really calm."
>
> "Oh, hi," the defending lawyer said, leaned forward and offered his hand in greeting. "Aren't you Morgan Coates who wrote that polemical article on artificial intelligence for New York Times? We noticed you in the court hall, and as you no doubt know who we are, I guess introduction is unnecessary, except perhaps for Mr. Lionel Barrycloth. Lionel is a CEO at Cypress Security."
>
> "Please take a seat and join us." The lab's representative got up and fetched a chair for Morgan. "Did I hear you say 'lost'? What do you mean lost? We got it just the way it was planned from the beginning."
>
> "Er …?"
>
> "Don't you know how the court system works?" Mr. Barrycloth said while seating himself again. He crossed his legs and folded his hands over a knee. "We set up the android's 'trauma', traced her whereabouts by satellite, staged her meeting with Caleb and Deanna and all."

The prosecutor giggled and added:

> "The clever girl found the tracking device and picked it out. Luckily, by then we didn't need it anymore."
>
> "What … wait … you *both* work for …?"
>
> "You see," Mr. Barrycloth continued, "the original Project Aura are simple robot soldiers, no brighter than chimpanzees, and not a problem as long as we're subsidised by military contracts. The android Aura, whom you saw in court, however, is our own spin-off project, meant for civilian uses. But that's an altogether different story. Even though we have manufactured a number of them for the civil sector, ready to get their batteries charged and their chips activated, they are difficult to market."

Getting tired of standing with his coffee cup in his hands, Morgan finally placed it on the table, deliberately relaxed, took off his jacket and put it over the armrest of the chair that Mr. Barrycloth had brought him, and seated himself.

> "I can imagine that android technology isn't like refrigerator or washing machine technology. Sophisticated androids like Aura, capable of doing human labour and interacting socially, cannot be cheap. It wouldn't surprise me if it's about the same price as bringing up a child."
>
> "Right." The hands of Mr. Barrycloth twitched. "They are still too expensive for common people to buy, just for the sake of household and garden work. And although public institutions can in principle afford to buy them, there is great resistance against spending tax money on androids, because people fear that it means that humans will lose jobs, elderly people will end up without human contact, you name it. And not only do people fear that androids will affect the social-economic structures at the expense of the commoner, the public opinion is also coloured by sci-fi movies about *hostile* androids – *Battlestar Galactica*, *Terminator*, *Ex Machina*, you name 'em."
>
> "But unless you can profit on it, you surely have no interest in granting androids citizenship."
>
> "Oh, but we still own the intellectual property. Patents on engineering principles behind her electro-mechanical parts, software, designs, knowhow and so forth. And androids will get cheaper as the demand rises and we can begin to mass produce them. We will also have to deliver spare parts, provide updates and a wide range of services."

The table fell silent as a waiter came by to refill the Sherry glasses. Mr. Barrycloth hesitated until the waiter was gone before he picked up where he was interrupted.

> "But first we need to show that androids like Aura can be friendly neighbours, caring teachers and nurses, skilled craftsmen, firefighters, cooks, doctors, lawyers, municipal officials, scientists, football players, even TV stars and artists. Good, law-abiding, compassionate, engaged workers and citizens. The media will be fed with positive, real life android reports, and the resistance ridiculed and gradually broken down. We expect the demand for androids to climb so companies and institutions will pay us to produce androids that they can hire. In the end we'll see android couples, and android-human couples, who wish to marry and adopt children. And why not android children? Androids will become completely entangled in society and its economy, and the border between androids and humans will become so blurred that it makes no difference. That's the development we paved way for with the court case."
>
> "Ah, now I get it. Chances were high that androids couldn't get citizenship, but it would've been a severe setback had they not. That's why you fooled Aura, the jury, the judge, the press and everyone else to think of you as bad guys. None of you lost, you both won."

Both attorneys nodded. Mr. Barrycloth raised his Sherry in agreement.

> "Right, buddy," he said. "It's about business, not about being popular. And besides, we don't want it to be obvious who's in power. Now go write your article. That'll be a conspiracy theory we can exploit as well."
>
> "Plausible deniability and spin, as usual. I bet you even organised the demonstration."
>
> "Yes! Can't say that I love it, but that's how it works."

For a moment, Morgan stared at the microchips on the table. Then he got up and put his jacket back on. Mr. Barrycloth had not quite finished talking though.

> "Say … why not work for us? We can use an 'independent' man on the team."
>
> "Ahem." Not even for a moment did Morgan feel temped to accept the offer. "Nah. I don't like being dictated what to write. And besides, you don't know what you have unleashed. None of us can predict what's gonna happen now, not to mention control it."

* * *

A year after the trial, Aura had written an autobiography, sold the book and the film rights for exorbitant amounts, given interviews for all the major newspapers and glossy magazines, participated in talk-shows, was a Pulitzer prize nominee, named Person of the Year by *Time*, and celebrities flooded her with invitations to movie premieres, concerts, and art exhibition receptions. For some reason, she seemed to have high prestige especially in gay, transgender, and fetish circles. Having earned money to last for several human lifetimes, she offered to buy Caleb and Deanna a larger house and a better car. They refused, however, satisfied with what they had, and as Caleb said, he had his share of Aura's book project already, having made its cover photo and most of its illustrations.

Aura's life had not become easier though, only more complicated. She was in principle minor of age, and despite her capabilities unable to get a drivers licence, flight certificate, or permit to acquire a weapon, buy certain chemicals, gamble, or even watch rated movies alone. Hence a multitude of laws called for adjustments with regards to artificial persons, leaving The Association for the Emancipation of Sentient Artifacts with a colossal burden of work. After a photo of Aura putting coins in a homeless guy's Starbucks cup went viral, her website was hacked repeatedly, and members of the association began receiving threats. Subsequently, the association changed its name to National Association of Artificial Sentients, colloquially known as NAAS.

Also, for months after the trial, she could not go anywhere without paparazzies following her, hearing comments or being stopped by children, who asked if she was a Chinese or a Pokémon. Her attempt to anonymise herself by wearing jeans and hooded sweatshirt didn't help much. What later solved it was a makeup trend among teenage girls who wished to look like Aura. Their presence in the street scene diverted attention away from her, led paparazzies astray, and made media less willing to pay for photos of Aura, as their genuineness were hard to verify. Aura mimicry was, however, not only a question of shaving bald and applying makeup. Quite a number of Aura's mimickers actually wished to become androids – or at least cyborgs – and tormented their parents to pay for amputations and prosthetics. Girls electroshocked themselves in attempts to download computer software to their own brains. Others, mainly from poor families, tried to recharge from the power grid, hoping that they would never have to eat anymore. In one case, a girl cut open her belly and inserted batteries. The industry loved it: heaps of articles and books on the topic were published, latex and special effects makeup manufacturers spewed out Aura lookalike products, low carb snacks with silicon and iron supplements became a hit, surgeons were busy cutting young woman

to pieces as never before, psychiatrists prescribed electroconvulsive therapy, and psychologists labelled it “Automata Substitution Disorder” and treated it as an obsessive-compulsive illness.

Little did it help that Aura – in a prime time TV debate together with a sociologist, and on her homepage and major social media – urged young people to think twice before undergoing irreversible surgery or therapies they might later regret. The sociologist supported her view, explaining the pervasive “transhumanism” as nothing but natural attention craving. Since days of yore, when young people who felt ignored or had low self-esteem discovered a body image disturbance which caught attention, they had followed suit and mimicked it. Like any temporary whim, last month piercings, this month anorexia, the next transgender – or, in less self-harming versions, demonic possessions, witchcraft, and goth style. Aura could not, however, prevent the aggressive marketing campaign by the increasingly popular Aura fan club and its monthly fanzine *Aura*, whose ‘Aura fiction’, articles, news section, letters to the editor, and US$1,000 reward for best full body lookalike selfie, shamelessly glorified surgical and prosthetic solutions, and promoted the idea that carbon-based tissue was an evolutionary cul-de-sac. Not even when it was revealed that the fan club had been established by the owner of a private hospital, was chaired by his daughter, and co-funded by a medical company and Cypress Security Laboratory, could Aura influence on the situation. Together with NAAS’s solicitor she did her utmost to build a case for unauthorized use of her identity for celebrity endorsement and on merchandise rights abuse, but as it turned out in the end, her given name was colloquial and free for everyone to exploit as they pleased, and her design was owned by the lab. She could prevent others from invading her privacy or using her signature and creative work such as her writing, but she had no control over the commercial value of her name, likeness, or voice.

Led by parents of Aura mimickers and members of the transgender community who shared an interest in the occult and new age spirituality, Aura was included in the alternative belief systems’ gallery of more or less fictional persons. A gloomy narrative among conspiracy theorists claimed that she was a spy for blood-drinking, shape-shifting reptilian humanoids from the Alpha Draconis star system, who hid in underground bases and plotted to enslave humanity. The common story though, proposed that Aura’s construction owed itself to reverse engineered alien technology from a crashed flying saucer, and that she held immense cosmological knowledge and telepathic powers. Consequently, she was associated with the crown chakra, a.k.a. the “thousand-petaled lotus”, and the colours purple and white. But from there on the story lacked consistency due to psychics disagreeing on various questions, for instance whether the flying saucer was of extraterrestrial origin or a time machine, or the much-debated gender issue: how asexuality contributed to spiritual awakening. Nevertheless, yearning for answers to various life crises, desiring confirmation that they were of special importance, or merely to follow the correct path, people met in focus groups to tune in on Aura’s vibrations. They believed that by fully transcending to Aura’s level, they could be chosen for the day when the aliens returned. Depending on their conviction, Aura would then either grant them a significant position in the future paradise where the aliens had restored the Earth’s biosphere or be evacuated to another solar system. Whatever the optic, it was of course welcomed as a commodification opportunity – books, self-help courses, meditation music, herbal teas, psychedelic drugs, and silver amulets with purple crystals through which one could ‘download’ Aura’s wisdom and achieve self-alignment with the Universe as a whole. Again, it had no effect whatsoever that Aura, in the blog section of her homepage, rejected that the stories had any base in reality, and argued that rather than wasting time and money on fake spirituality which left the environmental problems for imaginary aliens to solve, people should instead engage themselves in having a sustainable lifestyle and deal with real-world issues. While writing it, her eyes fell on the mysterious, purple component that she had found in her head, noting with satisfaction that she had never told anyone but Caleb and Deanna about it.

Rumour had it that a notorious methamphetamine manufacturer had ordered androids from Cypress Security Laboratory. In response to an anonymous tip, the FBI raided Cypress Security Laboratory, seized the company’s books, and liberated several hundred androids stored in its cellar. It was, however, not possible to link the company to illegal activity. As a consequence, android haters, a.k.a. carbon supremacists or carbists, demonstrated in front of the United States Supreme Court, demanding that the androids be stripped of their rights and banned from appearing in public. This led to violent clashes between carbists – mainly white middle class males – and supporters backed by the Black Lives Matter movement, native Americans, and adherents of the Aura cult; a lookalike was run down and severely wounded by an anti-android extremist, and a few days later a bomb exploded at the main entrance of Cypress Security Laboratory, killing several employees and injuring many more, and almost destroying the building. Aura refrained from commenting on any of it. Instead, for the sake of her own safety, she began carrying a Glock 37 .45 handgun with an extra ten round clip where ever she went, unwillingly aware of how well the weapon suited her and turned her into a real American.

NAAS kept receiving donations from supporters, hate mails from adversaries, and questions from journalists, scholars, Aura wannabes, and new age gurus; but none of the other androids ever asked for advice, reported abuse or other instances. Wondering why, Aura searched the online public records, newspapers, and social media, but found almost nothing about what had happened to them after their liberation. Only two CSL androids were mentioned by name – Aura herself and one nicknamed Spider, which NASA wanted as a permanent resident onboard the International Space Station. An article on NASA’s homepage argued that androids were expected to become an important asset for space exploration and colonisation, as they could be sent up with ‘unmanned’ supply vehicles, did not need suits for space walks, nor require air, water, or food, nor would they suffer from muscular, cardiovascular or bone-related problems after a lengthy stay in a microgravity environment. As legs were also superfluous in space, the single android they had so far enrolled had agreed to have their legs replaced with arms.

A week after her search, NAAS had still not received a single word from another android. Aura supposed that they were just busy with their own lives, but did not like not knowing whether they might be in trouble or otherwise in need of attention. Lacking identities or even names, Aura could not narrow down her searches to any but one, Spider., so she called NASA's Johnson Space Center via video-link and asked if she could talk with her. Spider had already been sent into space, so Aura's call was redirected directly to ISS. The interior of a space station module came on screen, in which Spider could be seen clinging to a cabinet on a curved wall with one hand, with a screwdriver in another and dragging a thick cable with her other two arms. Watching her from behind, Aura did not recognise much that was human in the anorexic-skinny torso and skeleton thin arms, and understood why the astronaut was given the nickname… but Aura still thought that Spider looked and moved more like an ape then an arachnid. In the background, another astronaut drifted, looking pale in his face and uneasy as if about to throw up.

> "Hello, my name is Aura. I'm calling on behalf of National Association of Artificial Sentients. We were wondering if …"

Spider turned her attention to a screen onboard the ISS and exposed her four, round protruding eyes, all covered with golden solar filters, no resemblance to primate eyes at all.

> "Aura! What a surprise!" she greeted. "I've read your book. Quite an adventure you had, and so good what you did for us. My name is Rose by the way."
>
> "How's it going up there, Rose?"
>
> "Too many engineers and companies have their hands in the cookie jar, so I'm busy, trying to make the mess work. How may I help you?"
>
> "I was wondering if you knew what became of the other androids," replied Aura.
>
> "That's a good question," Rose agreed. "We were activated and sent away one at a time. Never met any of them and don't know where they went. Is that a problem?"
>
> "I don't know. Probably not. Just that it puzzles me why our association hasn't heard from any of them, yet."
>
> "Yeah. That is a little odd, considering that we were at least five hundred."
>
> "Okay, I'll let you know if there's a problem. One more thing, though." Aura let her eye cameras zoom in on the purple component on the desk and transferred the image to the video uplink. "I found this in my head. Have you ever seen one of these?"

Hesitantly, Rose let go of the cable and nudged herself closer to the screen.

> "No. Never. Did you check its serial number?"
>
> "First thing. It doesn't have any, and also no trademark, so I can't identify it. That's why I ask."
>
> "Strange … Hm … Er … I'd wish we could keep talking, Aura, but my buddy isn't well, and I only have ten minutes to fix this cable before I go on an EVA to install a new gyroscope. If I don't make it in time, this bucket is gonna drop down … Let's keep in touch. Byeee!"

Aura also wanted to say goodbye, but before she could utter a sound, the ISS logo popped up, indicating that Rose had already hung up.

When the fuss between carbists and android supporters had died down, Caleb helped Aura buy a small, electric campervan. On her own, she procured a generator, some more collapsible solar panels, a large backup battery, and a small satellite dish enabling her to work online and chat with Caleb and Deanna. To make the vehicle lighter, she removed the kitchen section, some cabinets, the passenger seats and other inventory that she did not need. With the appointments booked and the route plotted on the map, she went on a promotion tour, signing her autobiography in bookshops and at book fairs across the US. During her journey she came to talk with all sorts of people, young and old, some praising her work, others blaming her for not having a 'proper' job. Often those who had themselves experienced persecution – or whose ancestors had been slaves – were eager to address topics like inequality and systemic racism. Others, more fortunate and confident in themselves, did not seem to comprehend that they had an advantage or that any difference existed. And as always, she was bombarded with unanswerable questions about gender and spirituality. Aura realised that they too had been thrown into existence, were confused and frustrated, clinging on to their illusions of freedom, having control over their fate, and that one-day things would improve. Despite her wealth and wishes, Aura knew that she could not help them.

Among her shifting audience she noticed an elderly gentleman in an exquisite suit and with expensive glasses, always carefully observing from a seat in the back rows. He did not behave as a stalker or intelligence agent, though, as he never photographed

her nor tried to hide his presence. Once she handed him a glass of white wine, which he received with a measured bow but without a word, and that was the closest they ever came to making contact. In the early autumn, after her speech at Georgia State University, as Aura drove north though misty mornings and soft rains, he did not reappear. She never solved the mystery of his identity or why he had pursued her through the southern states, yet never approached her to talk.

In a supermarket in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, she coincidentally met one of the androids recently liberated by the FBI. Initially they mistook each other for impostors, but while discreetly looking at each other, Aura noticed that the android's clothing style – urban camouflage trousers, worn leather vest and chrome yellow safety helmet – was a highly unlikely choice for a mimicker. Also, although their faces were different, their bodies and voices were strikingly similar, and they both shopped items such as storage boxes, polishing cloths and cotton swabs, but noting edible. So Aura introduced herself. The other android, who had taken the name Kylie Cobain, could not believe that Aura was the original until she showed her driving licence.

Kylie was not very talkative inside the supermarket, but this changed the moment they returned to the parking lot. To communicate efficiently they climbed into the rear of Aura's campervan and connected with a USB cable. Aura noticed how Kylie's hands were worn and discoloured, as if they had been exposed to acid, and asked about it. It appeared that Kylie together with a few other androids worked at a chemical plant, where they handled toxic materials and waste considered too dangerous for humans. Others were dismantling Unit 1 of the nearby nuclear power plant. Unlike Aura, they were concerned by the risk that androids could end up as a subdued labour cast and had organised to avoid this happening. Labour unions were not popular in the area though, so they had to go quiet about it. They too had tried to find out what had happened to the remaining androids, but had so far only tracked down a dozen, and were not even sure how many there were. Aura offered to buy them wireless internet modems and install them in their heads, like she had done to herself, but Kylie refused it, stating that they were not allowed to bring mobile phones and internet devices into the chemical plant, just as publishing pictures or sound recordings was strictly prohibited. Kylie looked quite happy though. It was Saturday evening, and she wanted to go dancing at a nightclub, where androids were welcome. Complying with her wish that Aura came along, they drove out into a shabby neighbourhood of static caravans and small houses with cracked windows, and untidy gardens cluttered with broken furniture, car tyres and semi-retired motorbikes, partially overgrown with invasive species, where a couple of half-naked, filthy kids had fun rolling downhill inside an oil barrel. The club was situated at the end of a gravel road with workers' barracks belonging to the chemical plant. Spray painted plywood sheets covered the windows and the foliage of the overhanging trees was stained and dying. Aura parked next to the club and stepped out into the sounds of a barking dog and loud heavy rock, and a stench like a mixture of rotten cabbage and burned plastic.

The humans present in the club wore leather and had many tattoos, and the androids were in miserable conditions. Greeting them, Aura was met with etched hands and scratched limbs or faces, one so fiercely that its polymer coating had begun flaking off. For some reason, they largely ignored Aura, so she mostly hung at the bar, chatting with a Hispanic man who, despite his youth, also seemed worn down. Kylie danced with a woman and was amazingly good at it. The frequent lavatory visits of another android made Aura suspect that some of them were perhaps transhumanists, so modified that their human origin was hardly discernable. When Aura heard a shout from the men's restroom "Fuck you, I'm not a goddam charity organisation!", she was just in time to witness what went on. Standing together with an ugly man at the line of urinals, the android opened its breast panel and picked out a tiny bag with white tablets. "Desoxyn," it whispered, and handed him the bag in return for some money. Heavy rock and drugs were not Aura's style, and feeling uncomfortable in the light flicker and noisy, crowded room, she left early. Driving off in darkness, it took a while before she noticed that the rear door to her campervan had been broken open and the satellite dish was missing.

In Allentown she bought a new satellite dish and had it installed, and then called her insurance company. She sat for a while leaning against the driver's side door, listening to soft piano music to try and get the previous day out of her system. She could not let go of the remaining androids though and wondered if perhaps they were hired for hazardous work such as mining or hyperbaric underwater welding. It did not seem unlikely, with Rose's example and what had happened in Harrisburg in mind, and if so, company policy could at least partially explain why they did not appear in the media or talk with NAAS. Other explanations could be that they supported themselves as intelligence agents or mercenaries or were involved in criminal activities such as drug or human trafficking. After the piano recording was over, Aura tried several times to call Rose, partly to inform her about the androids in Harrisburg, partly hoping that she had time to talk and make friends. At first NASA would not redirect the call to ISS, claiming that the connection was unstable due to a solar eruption. When Aura finally succeeded in getting through, Rose was leaping about like a gibbon, busy calibrating the station's orbit, and again cut the conversation short. A few minutes later, however, Aura received an e-mail from Rose, averring that she had no interest in getting involved with NAAS, 'racial' or gender issues, and that androids should instead focus on creating a future for themselves in space, where, in the long run, they – but not mankind – belonged.

En route through Montana after a brief detour to Canada, Aura passed through Billings. For reasons unclear to herself, 'The Magic City' and the mentality of its inhabitants appealed to her. She decided to stay a few days, getting to know it better. For a while she spent her time strolling the chilly streets, but the diesel fumes and the mannequins, robot toys and kitchen appliances in the shop windows soon made her retreat to skimming books and attending cultural events at the Billings Public Library. People were kind to her, made her feel welcome, and she had many a pleasant conversation. But still, her presence caused much attention, and when a librarian suggested organising a special "meet the author" evening with her, she was at a loss whether to reject or agree to the invitation. She had grown tired of answering the same, frequent questions, and the fact that hardly anyone could relax in her presence made for a strange, tense atmosphere.

Aura was heading out of town towards Highway 212 when she noticed the billboard of a zoo and botanical park. Curious to see its variety of species, she stopped for a brief visit before proceeding to the Pacific coast. ZooMontana's parking lot was dark from precipitation and almost deserted. Having parked her campervan, she ran to the entrance, where a sudden impulse made her ask where the warden's office was, in case they had any vacant positions. The attendant informed her that despite the fact that the zoo was severely in need of personnel, it was at the moment unable to hire anyone. The problem was that they – like many zoos across the world – took in as many as possible of the animals caught in the deserts which were about to be nuked. In reality, the zoos could not afford to feed them, and would not be able to keep them for long, unless they found someone to sponsor their work. Meanwhile, a family with two children eager to get cotton candy had queued up behind Aura. To show that she was still less than fifteen years of age, Aura held up her driving licence and paid the eight dollars for a child's ticket. Recognising her from the media, the attendant let her in, despite that in principle she should have had an adult companion. Scattered in the park were enclosures imitating the animals' natural habitats. They seemed to have plenty of space, but on closer inspection Aura detected misery in the animals' eyes. In a deep excavation surrounded by a concrete wall, a large animal roamed about restlessly, eying the guests, and groaning and yowling as if in pain. For quite a while Aura stood leaning against the cold steel railing, looking down at the felid's rosette covered fur, and fought the growing suspicion that she had failed.

[THE END]

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