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Artificial Magic

By Tawny Ventura

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Bachelor of
Arts in Creative Writing

Linfield University

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Approved by Joe Wilkins

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Artificial Magic
Tawny Ventura

Foreword

In addition to being my thesis, this novella is the culmination of over two years of writing. It started as a ten-page short story written out of spite, and has evolved into something much greater. In my Sophomore year, I took a creative writing course based around speculative fiction. Genres that fall under this definition include fantasy and science fiction, my favorite genres to both read and write in. During this class, I was presented with a novel called *All the Birds in the Sky*, an ambitious story that attempted to blend the two. The plot was focused around two characters, a witch and a computer scientist, who must grapple with their own relationship and how it clashes with the world they live in. Magic and science, according to the novel, have a hard time getting along.

Now, I won't go into too much detail about my gripes with *All the Birds in the Sky*, since most of them are minor points that average readers wouldn't care about. I loved the book, but anyone in that class would know that I could talk endlessly about little things that bothered me. For example, I felt that the author, Charlie Jane Anders, did not adequately explore the world-building of her magic/sci-fi hybrid version of Earth. The magic system was not explained well, and this made it hard for me to get invested in the story. As someone who loves world-building, I wished it was done better. My other major issue was how the novel handled a certain character: the sentient AI inadvertently created by the two protagonists. Without giving spoilers, I wanted them to have more development. The concept was fascinating to me: How else could magic and programming

interact in a way that makes the character more interesting? This is where the idea of *Artificial Magic* got its start.

For my class, I was instructed to write short stories that mimicked the style and genre of each book we read. I was fully convinced that I could improve *All the Birds in the Sky*— not by redoing what was done, but by expanding on what wasn't done. The resulting story was, in my opinion, one of the best pieces to come out of my college career. And while that writing class would eventually end, I constantly dreamed of turning *Artificial Magic* into a full-fledged novel. This thesis gave me the opportunity to pursue that goal. With guidance and deadlines, I knew I would be able to write something truly great. I've always had trouble with procrastination and sporadic writer's block, but the format of the thesis assignment has helped me write much more than I would have on my own.

Artificial Magic is not perfect. The first chapter has been edited twice as many times as the rest of the story, because it was based off of my original piece. Due to this imbalance, I feel the other chapters come across as rushed and unpolished. The pacing speeds up more than it should, which detracts from the impact of the ending. Spring semester of 2021 was particularly hard for me, with weeks-long periods of time passing without progress being made. For many reasons, I struggled to keep up with my thesis while maintaining my other classes. It also suffers from a problem most of my writing does: I tend to over-correct perceived mistakes, overcompensate for apparent shortfalls, and become unable to see the positive elements. While I love novels because of the potential for expansive detail and multifaceted stories, the form is not very compatible with

how my brain works. Several times throughout this project, I wondered if I should change course and let *Artificial Magic* remain a short story. But the vision of a completed novel kept me going. I see this thesis as an excellent step along that path, allowing me to practice long-form writing and use the skills I learned throughout college.

Artificial Magic is dedicated to:

My parents, who nurtured my writing ambitions

My sister, for putting up with me

Hayley and Daisy, dear childhood friends

Every English teacher I met in college

My wonderful girlfriend Maya

And the group of friends who have supported me all this time

Part One

“The Analytical Machine does not occupy common ground with mere ‘calculating machines.’ It holds a position wholly its own, and the considerations it suggests are more interesting in their nature.”

- *Ada Lovelace*

“Isaac Morris?” The secretary read his name off the small plastic card, then swiped it without even waiting for a response. “And you’re the... *wizard?*” Emphasis on the word was bitter and exasperated.

“Witch,” Isaac corrected, taking his badge back. “It’s the general term.”

He gave a polite smile and began following the signs towards Dr. Fen’s office. Today was the big day, his best chance to legitimize the integration of magic and science. He’d repeatedly gone over what he wanted to say for their first meeting, feeling it more genuine to thank her in person than over the phone.

On his way to the office, he passed someone’s waiting room, where an intern was frustratedly trying to change the channel on their public TV. Not that the visitors cared; they were all engrossed in their phones anyway, but this person was clearly bothered by whatever the station was playing. Always eager to assist somebody, Isaac approached them.

“Need some help?” he offered.

The intern waved the remote at him and sighed, “I don’t know what you could do. This thing just doesn’t—” they shook the small device angrily.

“May I see?” Isaac held out his hand. He took the remote and inspected it carefully, quickly sensing that the batteries had run out. Without saying a word,

the witch dug through his bag and produced a fragment of driftwood just smaller than his palm, holding it in hand opposite the remote.

Not paying attention to him, the intern continued watching the news program, muttering to themselves about how much the world sucked. After a moment, they noticed the faint smell of burning, and quickly turned back to Isaac.

“What are you doing?”

Isaac handed them the remote. “It should have enough charge for the rest of the day, but you’ll need to replace the batteries tomorrow. Is there a trash can around here?”

The intern pointed to a waste bin and Isaac nodded, dropping a small handful of ash among the miscellaneous paper shreds. They stared at him in awe as he walked back over, dusting the black powder off his hands.

“How did you—? Huh?”

“Just a bit of energy exchange. Like using a potato to power a clock. I’d love to explain more, but I’m on my way to a meeting right now. Where’s Doctor Fen’s office?”

Still gaping at him, the intern pointed in a direction and said. “Over there.”

“Thank you!” he quickly started off with a wave goodbye.

Isaac eventually found the pristine white door labelled with the name of the woman who actually bothered to take his work seriously. With an excited hand, he knocked on the door and waited eagerly for somebody to respond.

There was a loud *chunk* noise, and the door swung open to reveal the young doctor, auburn hair tied in a sloppy braid spilling down against her

unkempt lab coat. Her posture was weak, as though she'd ran to greet him, and one corner of her lipstick had been smeared some. In all, she looked more like a disheveled college student than the scientist who cracked artificial sentience.

“You must be Isaac Morris,” she said breathlessly, holding out a hand.

Isaac gleefully shook her hand and nodded. “Doctor Fen, I believe?”

The woman smiled. “Call me Diana. No need for formalities in here. Uh, right this way!”

She led Isaac through her office, quickly enough that he barely got to look around, and past another door that revealed her lab space. Monitors framed the spacious room, interspersed with large humming servers and blinking lights. The walls and floor were pristine white, but colorful posters and whiteboards full of writing gave it texture. At the back of the room was a raised dais, decorated with a sofa and a desk like a tiny apartment, and there sat the treasure herself.

Ayla, as she had been named, was perfect. It was an objective fact- her face had been synthesized from thousands of women across the globe, creating the image of a universally average female who seemed to embody simple beauty, attractive because of her soft features but somehow so very normal. Her skin was a pleasant light tan, and with her blended facial features almost looked to be every race at once. Her hair, a plain amber brown, was mostly straight, but bobbed just above her shoulders in large outward curls. She wore a plain-looking dress with small flower patterns, and was sitting with her legs crossed and hands poised like an obedient child.

“Hello, Mother,” Ayla said, in a voice just on the brink of being uncanny.

“This is Mr. Morris,” Diana introduced.

“Call me Isaac.” He bowed his head a little in respect. “It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

Ayla stood up from her couch and walked towards him with stiff movements, and here Isaac noticed how her body was built. Whatever mechanism controlling her was covered by synthetic skin, padded in areas to look realistically like body fat, which gave her the soft chubbiness of a child. Though her limbs moved a bit robotically, her head was perfectly mimicking the subtle muscle twitches of a normal human face.

Ayla shook Isaac’s hand, and he was surprised at how natural it felt, soft and warm despite looking like a doll.

“You are the one who knows magic,” Ayla stated.

Isaac nodded. “Yes, and I want to study your potential for the craft.”

He took a seat and started unpacking his bag on the lab desk, bringing out crystals, dried herbs, and other miscellaneous magical items. Ayla watched with fascination every time a new object emerged, but stood with restraint so as to not disturb him.

“Here, you two can start without me,” Diana announced, holding up her phone to indicate that she had an incoming call. “I just need to take this.”

“Urgency, Mother,” Ayla said flatly as she exited the lab, as if describing the nature of the call. When Diana closed the door, Ayla turned to Isaac and fixed her eyes on his gathering of items. She took a seat at one of the desk chairs across from him.

“So... where would you like to start?” Isaac asked awkwardly.

“Describe to me what magic is,” Ayla ordered.

Isaac was a bit taken aback by her assertiveness, but he appreciated the push. It had taken all his confidence just to arrange this meeting, and he was hesitant to start bossing around what was essentially a technological deity.

“Okay... let’s establish a baseline. What do *you* know about magic?”

“I know everything,” Ayla declared. “At least, everything that has been recorded by humanity. But your personal explanation is more valuable, being my teacher.”

“Oh, that makes sense,” Isaac started fidgeting with one of his rocks, suddenly feeling pressured. “Magic is really a force of nature, like gravity. But its exact mechanisms are still unknown to science, and that’s why people have trouble believing it. A shame, really, because it’s just so fascinating...” He started to pick up momentum speaking, spurred on by the familiarity of explaining something he knew well. “We can manipulate the world by using our own energy as a sort of tool, to affect things physically without directly interacting with them. For example, magic could consume an object and use its energy to perform a different task. I just did this earlier, in fact.”

Ayla nodded. “The remote. Yes, I saw.”

“You did?”

“I see everything in this building.” The android girl focused her eyes to make the point. Isaac noticed that her pupils were in fact camera lenses, tiny apertures rimmed with bright green light to simulate iris color. It gave her eyes an

erie glow, but they were shockingly beautiful. At a distance, he could never tell they were artificial.

Ayla pointed towards a security camera mounted on the ceiling above them. It was facing her dais, likely to keep surveillance on her.

“I have access to the building’s security system,” she explained. “I see and hear what the cameras do. In fact, I’ve been watching you since you checked in at the front desk.”

Isaac wasn’t sure how to feel about the fact that he was being constantly watched. “That’s awesome... if a bit creepy,” he managed to say.

Ayla moved her arm back, returning to a neutral seating position with her hands folded on the table in front of her. At that moment, Diana Fen came back into the room, muttering to herself as she went straight to a keyboard and started typing something.

“They do not control you, Mother,” Ayla chided. “Your job is here, with me.”

Diana looked up from her work and sighed. “Ayla, dear, this is important.”

Isaac glanced between the two, concerned. “What’s wrong?”

“An overreaction,” Diana waved her hand. “Politicians and militaries crying wolf like they always do. Nobody trusts us scientists anymore.”

“Oh, well—”

“What are you teaching Ayla?” the doctor interrupted.

Isaac resumed fussing with his crystals. “I was explaining the basics of magic, uh, energy manipulation and applications of metaphysical influence.” He hoped that using bigger words would impress Dr. Fen.

“Uh, Ayla- here’s something you can do. I want you to choose a stone on the table and imbue it with magical energy.”

“Describe the process,” Ayla ordered.

“Just... focus on the stone in your mind. Imagine your hand reaching out and grabbing it. Feel it in your grip and picture me holding it as well. But don’t give me any indication which one you’ve picked.”

Ayla focused her eyes on the assortment of crystals before her. In the scope of her vision, she could see every stone without having to look at a specific one. She seemed transfixed on them. Diana Fen watched her with rapt interest, noting little details she noticed about the girl’s behavior. At one point, she saw Ayla’s hand clench as if she were holding something tightly.

“I have chosen a stone,” the android girl announced.

Isaac nodded. “Now, I’m going to try and find it.”

He started waving his hand over the crystals as if detecting something. He paused several times, his fingers slightly shaking, and slowly drew his focus closer and closer to a particular stone. Confidently, he picked up a small moss agate and held it in front of Ayla.

“I’m getting a feeling from this one.”

Ayla looked visibly shocked. She even pulled back in her chair as if recoiling from the collection of crystals. “You... you found it?”

“Did I?”

“Yes. Yes!” She seemed to snap back to reality. “That is the stone I chose!”

Diana cheered. “Amazing, Ayla!” She clapped like a proud parent.

Isaac didn’t say anything, but his wide grin was telling. Such a simple task, yet the success was a major step forward. The energy he felt in the moss agate was faint, but the fact that it existed was all he needed. Ayla could manipulate energy-- what else was she capable of?

“Alright, that’s great!” Isaac tried to maintain an air of professionalism. “Shall we try something else?”

The android girl nodded as enthusiastically as her joints would allow, giving her the look of a hyperactive child. She resumed sitting up straight and awaited the next task.

“So, if you can project energy, you should be able to detect it too,” Isaac explained. “We’re going to do that again, but this time *you* have to find the stone.”

“Yes, let’s do it!”

The witch closed his eyes and leaned back in his chair. Suddenly, Ayla was at a loss- he was intentionally doing this so she couldn’t track his eye movements or subconscious reactions. And being that she’d never met this man before, she could not use her psychological analysis to determine the most likely crystal he would choose.

Frustrated, Ayla started moving her free hand over the table, trying to mimic Isaac's method of detection. She scanned every crystal down to the minutest detail, even picking up a few to try and feel something different.

“What am I looking for?” Ayla finally asked in exasperation.

Isaac opened his eyes and looked at her face instead of the table. “One of my stones is calling out to you. I put within it the *intention* of drawing you towards it. Humans can normally pick up on these intentions, even without obvious external signs.”

Ayla resumed hovering over the crystals. “What if I *am* able to detect this ‘intention,’ but cannot accurately categorize the stimulus?”

Isaac struggled for an answer, but Diana jumped in with a reply instead. “Sentient beings will assign meaning to ambiguous stimuli in an attempt to understand them. You are receiving a lot of input from random sources, Ayla, so perhaps you can find one that fits here.”

After a few more minutes of silence and contemplation, Ayla seemed to have reached a conclusion. With her eyes focused on the crystals, she reached out and pointed to a modest block of hematite.

“I choose this one.”

Isaac's smile faded a little.

“No?” Ayla said worriedly. “Was I wrong?”

“You're... close.”

“Physically or conceptually? Is it close in proximity or similar in attributes?”

“Well, if I told you that, you’d be able to figure it out.”

She made a pouty face and crossed her arms. “My second choice is the green and purple octahedron. It’s exactly seven centimeters away from the previous one. Is this correct?”

Isaac’s eyes perked up slightly, providing Ayla the answer she needed.

“Yup, that’s it!”

Diana gave Ayla an excited hug. “Oh, you’re doing wonderful!”

“Thank you, Mother.”

“How was that, Isaac?” the doctor asked. “I don’t know how to evaluate magical performance. Did she meet your expectations?”

“Met *and* exceeded!” Isaac exclaimed. “This is going so well; I almost can’t believe it.”

Ayla frowned. “Even though I misidentified a stone?”

“Yes, in fact, that’s a good thing.”

Both Diana and Ayla looked at him in confusion.

“Um, I think…” he suddenly became flustered, having baffled such intelligent people. “Well, it’s hard to explain without knowing your thoughts. Maybe you, uh… you could walk me through your decision?”

Ayla accepted the question with a simple nod. She opened her mouth to speak, but instead turned and fixed her eyes on one of Diana’s monitors.

“You have a message, Mother.”

The doctor seemed a bit frustrated at the interruption. “Alright… what is it now?”

Ayla continued to stare, and the computer windows began moving on their own. She brought up the email on screen as if using telekinesis, though it was obviously nothing more than remote control.

“Well...” Diana’s eyes moved quickly as she read the message. “It looks like Ryker sent me some news articles. Ayla, do you mind—?”

The android girl nodded, and in an instant every link was opened in its own window, spread across three monitors. She had absorbed every word impossibly fast, and now was focused on her mother with a look of concern. Isaac could only read a few headlines before realizing the problem.

Military Officials ‘unsure’ About AI’s Loyalties

Origin Labs Has Yet to Confirm Political Affiliation

The Internet Reacts to Government’s ‘HAL-9000 Reveal’

“Damn it. Damn it!” Diana slammed her clipboard onto a table. “Those assholes said they would wait until we gave a press release!”

“That explains the earlier frantic calls,” Ayla deduced. “These articles were published this morning, but we have not received word until now.”

“I can’t deal with these people! I swear, they’re trying to make this as difficult as possible!”

The doctor fumed for a moment more, then seemed to remember than she had a guest. When she saw Isaac sitting there awkwardly, her expression immediately softened.

“I’m sorry, Isaac,” she sighed. “This has just been a stressful few days. As you can probably tell, people aren’t exactly happy with Ayla’s... freedom. I

would love for her to learn and grow like a human, but they treat her like something to be controlled.”

“I understand,” Isaac said. “This is a new experience for everyone.”

“It’s just…” Diana grumbled, “It’s just *mean*. What do they gain by antagonizing her? Why do they *want* to turn people against us?”

Ayla closed the browser windows and gave her mother a reassuring smile. “Do not worry. If history is any indication, they will eventually accept me. It will just take persistence and determination.”

“I’m glad you’re so optimistic. We need more of that in the world.”

“Well, as much as I’d love to stay forever, it looks like you guys have a lot of work to do,” Isaac said, slowly putting away his crystals. “Thank you, again, for this opportunity.”

Diana smiled. “We’d be happy to have you here. In fact, I could schedule a block of time for you to come back in and work with Ayla further.”

“Yes, absolutely!” Isaac exclaimed, then drew back in embarrassment. “I mean, that sounds reasonable.”

“Would you be free this same time next week?”

“Yup!”

Diana nodded. “Ayla, could you clear any appointments I have then? Let’s give Mr. Morris about two hours of time. Label it as the highest priority.”

“Of course, Mother.”

With their next meeting set, the new partners said their goodbyes. As he left, Isaac took one last glance at Doctor Fen and the miraculous Ayla. From a

distance, the android girl was indistinguishable from a human; the doctor sat next to her on the couch as if posing for a photo. They looked like a typical mother and daughter, not quite the genius and technological marvel that he knew they were. Isaac hardly noticed a thing as he walked back through the office, his head lifted with a newfound confidence that had been absent for a long time.

The hazy San Jose sun greeted Isaac as he stepped out onto the street. He took a deep breath of satisfaction, trying to ignore the car exhaust that filled his lungs instead. Perhaps he would go out for a hike on the weekend to chase off the smell of the city. Isaac hopped on the bus that would take him home, grabbing a window seat as usual so he could watch the bright and busy streets. He could hardly pay attention to them, though, because his mind was racing with ideas for his next meeting with Ayla. There were so many possibilities to be explored!

After leaving the bus and walking for a few blocks, Isaac finally arrived at his apartment. It was a rather small space, but comfortable enough for one person, positioned on the second floor of a narrow complex. This quaint building was owned by the Order of Pacific Coast Witches (the initials of which were also a convenient acronym for Oregon, Ocean Pacific, California, Washington, the regions where the Order was based). They offer places to live and work for members, such as the store on the first floor where Isaac worked part-time.

OPCW Spirit: Coven Hearth and Magickal Supply

The hand-painted window cast a colored light on the floor below when the late morning sun hit it just right, as it was doing today. The store smelled of tea

and floral mist, a lovely reprieve from the outside air. Behind the displays of merchandise was a set of armchairs circled around a dark oak coffee table.

Standing at the register was Kasie, a spritely girl with short blond curls and elvish features. Upon seeing Isaac, she smiled and waved.

“So, how did the talk with the big shots go?” she asked.

“Amazing!” Isaac put his bag down and dropped onto one of the armchairs. “It turns out Ayla can project energy! She had a bit of trouble with detection, but we can work on that.”

Kasie put a hand on her hip. ““Work on that?’ You mean you got invited back?”

“Yes! Diana-- uh, Doctor Fen-- was so excited to do more with me. I think she really wants Ayla to learn magic, which is just--”

“Ridiculous.”

“-- incredible...” Isaac’s face fell. “Come on, you know how much this could benefit the Order.”

“Sure,” Kasie crossed her arms. “But I *also* know how disastrous this can be. We’re already slaves to the machines. You really want to give that thing more power?”

“Ayla isn’t a *thing*, she’s a living being. And if she can tap into magic energy, that’s proof she’s truly a part of the natural world!”

Kasie scoffed. “You don’t know that for sure. I want to trust your judgement, Isaac, but not with these people. Those scientists, they just want to

gain our favor so we'll excuse a mechanical takeover. I don't want to lose you to someone with a PHD in technobabble."

"Techno-psychology," Isaac corrected. "And you're not going to lose me, okay? I won't let anyone pull me away from serving Earth."

Kasie lowered her head. "Fine. I know much this means to you. But please, *please* be careful."

"I'm always careful."

"No. No, you're not."

The two witches talked for some time more, changing the subject to the store and its customers.

Kasie reported that there was a sudden spike in crystal sales, specifically ones that were known to protect against psychic attacks.

"I think people are worried about... well, your little pet project. There were a lot of news articles today about how the AI could impact national security and stuff. That it was an unpredictable force with no alignment. I can't believe the scientists let them say that."

"She didn't," Isaac recalled Doctor Fen's frustration. "Origin Labs wanted to give a press release, but the government beat them to it. They're just trying to cause hysteria with wild speculation."

Kasie shrugged. "Well, at least it's good for business. Buying rocks to stop a robot uprising is like... fighting an epidemic with essential oils." She scoffed. "Dumbasses."

For such a devoted witch, Isaac thought, Kasie was extremely cynical about the people who frequented the store. Her salty attitude had been a constant presence since they first met, but Isaac understood where she was coming from. He himself had several interactions with ‘spiritual enthusiasts’ who tried to explain to him how his own magic worked, and certainly didn’t grasp that their beliefs could possibly be wrong. Since moving here from Portland, Isaac encountered significantly less people like that, but they were replaced by more skeptics. He could never decide which was worse.

Isaac let himself relax on the plush armchair, unwinding from the exciting day. Kasie didn’t mind, and continued to tend the store as a new wave of customers started up. Just like in the morning, many of them ended up buying protective crystals without an explanation of how they worked. Kasie had a coy smirk whenever she made a sale. At one point, a particularly insufferable woman came in asking about something that could help with a bad cough, when candles and tea had done nothing. She left with two bags of all-natural, sugar/gluten/dairy free, non-GMO, vegan, extra strength purple cough drops. Kasie’s eye was twitching the entire time, especially as she told the woman (who expressed her hatred of grape flavor) that “grapes resonate best with your aura.”

“I have to mess with people like her, or else I go insane,” Kasie said to Isaac once the woman was gone. “You learn to read them quickly.”

“Would you like to trade places?” Isaac asked mockingly. “Deal with stubborn skeptics instead?”

“Maybe. *Maybe.*” she sighed. “I wish Francesca would come in more often so I could have someone to talk to.”

“Your mystery girl has a name now?”

“She didn’t *give* me her name; it was on her credit card. But she winked at me! I asked if she kept deliberately visiting during my shifts, and she winked at me!”

Isaac rolled his eyes. “You know, I think I’m going to head home and find something to eat. If you need me, just... hit the ceiling with a broom or something.”

“If you get delivery, I want a share!” Kasie called after him as he took his belongings upstairs.

Isaac stayed up much later than he was expecting to. He lost himself down a rabbit hole of news articles, absorbing every detail of how they portrayed Ayla. It wasn’t good. While most mainstream news outlets said nothing explicitly bad about her, there were too many instances of “*maybe* this” and “*maybe* that” for his liking. Isaac knew very well that people’s minds would strip the “*maybe*” out of every sentence, and treat the unsupported theories as fact.

“The creators of the AI, Origin Laboratories, have not revealed their intentions to the public,” claimed one speaker. “We in the military do not have answers regarding their stance on matters of national security, and are patiently awaiting a press release. This is still an incredible scientific innovation, and there is currently no threat to the citizens of America.”

“Breaking news: humans can still die,” Isaac said aloud, fed up with what he found. This wasn’t news, it was just reaffirming their lack of information, while also planting seeds of worry in the audience. By the time Origin Labs spoke up, they would be stuck defending themselves and doing damage control. He was starting to understand Diana’s frustration.

But frustration wouldn’t last long in Isaac’s mind. After putting down his phone and getting ready for bed, he spent at least another hour staring into the darkness, dreaming of more ideas to bring up during his next meeting. Ayla’s mere existence was changing the world, and Isaac was honored to be on her side.

Part Two

“All gods are homemade, and it is we who pull their strings, and so, give them the power to pull ours.”

- *Aldous Huxley*

The whole world was buzzing with anticipation. Not only was Origin Labs about to give their first press conference in months, but supposedly they would feature a speech from their miraculous creation as well. Diana Fen was scrambling to keep everything in order, and her coworkers were just as frantic. Everyone, even those who didn't work directly with Ayla, were equal parts excited and nervous.

In all this commotion, Isaac Morris sat quietly backstage. The front lobby of Origin Labs was serving as a sort of green room, while a temporary stage had been erected just outside the building. All he could see from the window was the back of the curtain and the sea of cameras. He was intimidated by all the press and attention, but he kept reminding himself that nobody was here to judge him. All he needed to do was support Diana and Ayla, no matter what. It was certainly strange, being asked to join the event, especially since it had only been a few days since their first meeting. But he wasn't about to question them.

Despite his ID card on a very obvious lanyard, people in suits constantly asked who he was and if he had clearance to be in the building.

“I work with Doctor Fen,” he kept saying, over and over again. “Yes, I was invited here.”

Eventually, Isaac started making a game out of it, telling people that he was “Ayla’s official magic advisor.” He tried to see how long he could hold this conversation with someone before they demanded to see his ID. And every time, they were baffled to see “Witch” as his title, right above Diana’s recognizable signature.

“Isaac!”

He perked up. The voice wasn’t familiar, but anybody who knew his name was probably somebody he should talk to.

A tall, lanky man in a sharp blazer approached him and held out his hand. The guy had vibrant ginger hair and a scruffy, hipster-like beard; he looked like someone Isaac would have met in a cafe.

“Sean Ryker,” the man declared.

Isaac shook his hand. “Isaac Morris. Nice to meet you.”

“Diana might have mentioned me before, but just in case,” Ryker explained. “I’m the head of our engineering department. My technicians built Ayla’s body and now maintain her servers.”

“Having met her, I have to say: you must be amazing at your job,” Isaac said, legitimately impressed.

Ryker smirked. “Diana’s the real miracle worker. I’m just her right-hand man. But thank you.”

“So, did you need something from me?”

“I wanted to notify you that we’re going live in ten minutes. You’re not required to show up, unless you really want to. I hear you’re the ‘official magic advisor.’”

Isaac’s face flushed in embarrassment. “Word got around fast...”

“Ha! Don’t worry about it,” Ryker laughed. “Nobody will give you problems so long as you have her name on your card.” He pointed to Isaac’s lanyard. “I won’t pretend to understand your mumbo-jumbo. I’ll do my job, you do yours, and hopefully everything will work out.”

“Good luck with the press! I can give you a confidence spell... or something. If you want.”

“I’ve been dealing with these assholes since the day we announced Ayla’s existence. Diana needs it more than I do. Actually, speaking of which, I should go find her.”

Isaac said goodbye to Ryker as the technician strolled off to find his coworker. He was starting to regret making himself known to people other than Doctor Fen.

The announcement began, and Isaac watched from a monitor that streamed the event into the lobby. Diana stood front and center at the podium, looking almost frozen in the camera’s presence. Behind her were Ryker, Ayla, and several other people in lab coats and blazers.

“Good afternoon, and welcome to Origin Laboratory,” Diana said in a surprisingly confident voice. She must have rehearsed this speech all night. “As

you may have heard, we have recently achieved new milestones in our work with artificial intelligence. Ayla has spent the past year learning about herself and the world. Finally, we are ready to share her progress with you.”

The mass of people clapped and cheered. Camera flashes were going off every second.

“Many have expressed concern about Ayla’s intentions, but we assure you that she wants nothing but understanding. The existence of a sentient machine is intimidating, yes, but it is really no different than other technological leaps made in the past century. I’m sure some of you in this crowd still remember a time before the internet. Your parents and grandparents probably remember a time before television. And on and on until the dawn of human innovation. Everything was intimidating when it was new. My goal is to grant Ayla the same familiarity we give to radios, smartphones, and social media.”

She was about to continue, but was interrupted by another wave of noise from the crowd. Diana managed to smile, her fingers clutched tightly around her speech.

“Well, before we get to questions, I have one more announcement to make.”

The crowd went silent with anticipation.

“In our quest to teach Ayla of the human experience, we built her a body. I’m sure many of you have seen in-progress pictures, but now she is complete. For the first time in public, I present: the crowning achievement of our engineering department, the next development in artificial life...”

Ayla stepped forward so she was side-by-side with her mother. She needed no microphone to be heard, nor did she need a script to read. The two had been planning this moment for months.

Ayla waved to the audience. “Hello, world!”

The reaction was deafening, even from inside the building. Ayla turned around, twirling her dress, and bowed politely. Even the scientists on stage were staring as if they’d never seen her before. Diana watched the android girl with a proud smile, while Ryker kept his eyes on the doctor. The sound of the audience lasted at least a full minute, probably longer, as Ayla folded her arms like a child and waited for them to quiet down. Isaac was grateful that he wasn’t out there in all the noise.

Finally, when the cacophony slowed, Diana turned her attention back to the cameras.

“Alright! We are now taking questions,” she announced.

Just as Isaac had thought, most of the questions were related to the government’s worrying statements about Ayla, which Diana quickly and confidently shot down. She declared, in no uncertain terms, that Ayla would act as a law-abiding citizen, even though no laws currently applied to her. Diana encouraged the audience to support Ayla’s autonomy, as she wanted no political affiliation. After a while, the same few questions kept being asked, and Diana started mirroring their behavior by simply rewording what she had already said.

Isaac felt his phone vibrate, and he saw that he had a text from Kasie.

K: This is crazy. The internet's losing its shit. How's the chaos on your end?

It took Isaac a moment to even form words; he was so overwhelmed with the lights and noise.

I: Loud. I can't hear myself think.

K: And the robot?

I: She seems fine. Probably doesn't get anxious like people do.

I: But I'm worried that the media won't leave her alone after this.

K: That doctor's doing a great job of deflecting the assholes.

Isaac looked up at the screen. Over the course of the questions, Diana had grown both more tense and more stalwart. Every time somebody brought up unsavory rumors, her frustration-fueled confidence was out in full force. She must have spent weeks preparing her defenses.

“We’re running out of time,” Diana said. “I can take a couple more questions.”

“Tech companies would pay billions- if not more- for your code,” a reporter called out. “Who do you plan to sell the rights to?”

Diana looked appalled. “I’m not selling anything! Ayla’s not for sale!”

“So, do you intend to hold a monopoly on artificial intelligence?”

“No! I’m not even going to copyright--” for the first time in the interview, Diana’s voice was starting to falter. “You can’t copyright a consciousness!”

“What about the methods used to create it?”

“We don’t know where the Singularity is,” she stammered. “It’s impossible to tell where our programming ends and Ayla begins. It would be unethical to claim or sell any part of her!”

“Even though the machine is *not* considered a living being?”

Dumbfounded, Diana opened her mouth to reply, but only managed to squeak a few syllables before she felt a hand grip her shoulder.

“We will take no further questions,” Ryker announced into the microphone. He nudged Diana to the side, urging her to leave the stage. “Thank you all for joining us today.”

The other scientists picked up on Ryker’s cue. They started to file off the platform, leading Ayla by the arm like a royal escort. Diana was frozen in place, but Ryker’s determination to get her inside eventually won out. Still holding her tightly, he made a beeline for the door.

Upon entering the building, he said to the other employees, “I’m taking Doctor Fen to her office. Please do not disturb her.”

Ryker then shot a look at Isaac, a split second of direct eye contact that felt like an eternity. Isaac could feel the technician’s gaze piercing into his soul, and a knot of dread formed in his chest.

You’re coming with us, Ryker’s expression said. Now.

Isaac knocked gently on the door to Doctor Fen’s office. When there was no reply, he tried again, slightly louder. Still nothing.

He wanted me to follow them, right? Isaac thought.

Cautiously, he opened the door. While the office was dark, he saw light coming from Ayla's room. He poked his head in and looked around. Diana was sitting on the sofa, knees pulled into her chest, and did not notice him enter.

"You're here. Good."

Isaac turned to see Ryker at the other corner of the room, pouring hot water from a kettle. The technician brought a mug over to Diana, who barely acknowledged him.

"What's going on?" Isaac asked.

"Panic attack. When it's a bad one, she shuts down like this."

"But she looked so confident on stage..."

Ryker shook his head. "Diana's not good at public speaking. It took weeks to rehearse her speech. She even practiced responding to potential questions. We did so much to work around her stage fright. This was going to be perfect."

"I'm sorry."

"Don't apologize. She did incredibly well given the circumstances. Hopefully the press will be too distracted by Ayla to look into it."

Isaac awkwardly took a seat on the couch next to Diana, who turned her head slightly.

"You... you came?"

"I couldn't turn down your invitation."

Diana reached for her mug and took a sip. "Peach and chamomile..." she looked up at Ryker. "Thank you, Sean."

He smiled.

“Where’s Ayla?”

“With the engineers. But--” he glanced upward at the camera on the ceiling. “She’s watching us. Just let her know when you want her back here.”

Diana nodded and shrank into the couch cushions with her tea. “Okay.”

“Hey. Isaac.” Ryker called.

“Y-Yeah?”

“C’mere. I want to ask a favor of you.”

Nervously, Isaac stood up and met Ryker on the other side of the room.

The technician had a very serious expression on his face.

“Can your magic help her?”

“Wh-What do you mean?” Isaac was confused.

“I want Diana to rest and take care of herself. She’s stubborn, though. If I leave her alone, she’ll go right back to work and probably make herself sick with stress.”

“But what do you want from me?”

Ryker raised an eyebrow. “I hoped it was obvious. Please, if you’re able, use your magic to calm her down. Reduce her stress. Something like that.”

Isaac started fidgeting with his lanyard. “That’s a tall order. I’ve never been good at casting spells on other people. But maybe Ayla...” his voice trailed off.

“You’re right-- Ayla might be good comfort.” He looked up at the camera.

“You’re wanted here.”

In a few minutes, there was a knock at the door. The android girl stood at the threshold patiently, waiting for a further invitation.

“Come in, come in,” Ryker gestured. “This is your room, after all.”

Ayla approached him, but kept an eye on her mother.

“What can I do for her?” she asked.

“I hoped your presence alone could comfort her. And I’m waiting for the witch to figure out a spell or something.”

Isaac snapped out of his pensive daze. “I have an idea. It’s a little crazy, but it can’t go wrong. Ryker, could you call--” he noticed Ayla standing before them. “Uh, never mind. This works out perfectly.”

“Do you need me?” she gave an inquisitive head tilt.

“I want to test out a theory I have, but I need your help,” he explained. Scrambling for his bag, Isaac dug out a quartz prism and handed it to Ayla.

Ryker took a step back and watched with interest, curious what he was planning.

“Hold it flat on your palm-- yes, like that. Now, make this shape with your fingers...”

Isaac guided Ayla’s hands so she was presenting the crystal like an open oyster. He then mimicked the position in front of her.

“Remember how you focused your energy last week? I want you to do that again, but project it into this prism. Just imagine pouring as much as you can into that space.”

Ayla fixed her eyes on the back of her palm, seemingly staring straight

through it to see the quartz beyond. Her hands remained completely motionless, but her expression slowly tightened as if she were straining. While nothing visibly changed, Isaac could tell right away that she was channeling a lot of energy into his crystal. It was almost frightening how quickly she drew that much power, but all Isaac could think of was the joy of success.

“Here, keep your hands still and mind focused,” Isaac said. “Can you walk over here?”

Stiffly and with careful steps, Ayla followed him across the room, never once taking her eyes off her prism of magic. She was soon standing before Diana, who had put down her tea and was looking at them with wide eyes.

“Oh! Are you giving her a-another magic lesson?” the doctor asked.

“Ryker says you need to rest,” said Ayla. “And Isaac seems to think this will help.”

The witch smiled eagerly and stood perpendicular to them. “Diana, would you be willing to let Ayla cast a spell on you? A simple one, no risks.”

“I would love to see... oh, don’t forget to write d-down observations...”

“Don’t worry.” Isaac nodded. “Ayla, this next part is a bit trickier. Picture your energy as a battery, and the prism a light bulb. Now, imagine completing the circuit-- like you turned something on-- and the energy is slowly made into light.”

Ayla focused again, and now her hands were just faintly shaking. Quicker than Isaac had expected, a ball of white light began emitting from inside the prism, filling Ayla’s hands. It grew no brighter than one bulb on a chain of fairy lights, but this was bright enough for everyone to notice. Ryker, who had since

moved closer, now gaped at the sight. Diana had a proud smile, watching the girl learn.

“Now, I’m going to give you a lens,” Isaac explained. “Just like a flashlight. And when I say so, I want you to release all the energy at once, instead of this gradual glow.”

The witch took a deep breath and began tracing a circle in the air between Diana and Ayla. A line of light gray followed his fingers, as if he were drawing it.

“May rest come swiftly, healing light; Restore expended inner might,” Isaac chanted. He repeated it twice more before putting his hand down, though the gray circle remained. “Ayla, now!”

At his command, Ayla felt herself release all the energy she had been charging. The white light drifted out of the prism and towards her mother. It passed through the circle, which tinted it that same light gray, and focused it into a beam. The light washed over Diana, who could not manage a word before she dropped her head to the side, suddenly fast asleep.

Ayla relaxed her arms and would have exhaled deeply had she the capacity to breathe. She felt exhausted, but could not even begin to explain how.

Isaac gently took the prism from her hand and put it away. He had a wild grin and his eyes were alight with excitement. “I can’t believe it! You did it! You-”

“Hold on.” Ryker held up his hand. “Before you get all gushy, I want to know *what* she just did.”

“Oh, yes, of course! Ayla has successfully cast a spell!”

“A... sleeping spell?” the technician tried to clarify. “We’re scientists, Isaac, we need more explanation than that.”

“Right, right. Uh, I thought that Ayla would be able to focus more magic energy if she had a crystal to help her. And it worked! It usually takes people weeks of practice to even generate that much power, but she got it right away.”

“What about the little circle thing you did?”

“Exactly what I said before,” Isaac felt more confident explaining something he knew. “So, I started casting a spell, but I didn’t put energy into it. Instead, I used it like a sail, so any energy directed into it would end up powering it. That way, Ayla could cast a spell without needing to learn how.”

Ryker nodded slowly, stroking his scruffy beard. “I’ll be honest, Isaac- I have no idea what you’re talking about. But I understand enough, I think. One more question: Do you have to say a little rhyme every time you cast something?”

“No, but it helps. If you lose focus while casting, you lose progress. Coming up with an incantation keeps you thinking about what you’re trying to do.”

“Alright, I lied, I have another question. What did you mean when you said you weren’t good at casting spells on other people?”

Isaac shrugged. “I know how to ‘make’ spells, but it’s hard for me to project lots of energy, so I can’t really power them. I’m more reliant on crystals and stuff to help me. But Ayla could project well from the start-- all it took was some quartz, and suddenly she’s leagues better!”

“Hm. You do know what she’s made of, right?”

“Uh... metal?”

“Metal, and circuitry,” Ryker said, a little condescendingly. “I don’t know if you realize just how much quartz-- and other silicates-- are used in making electronics. That’s why this place is called Silicon Valley, after all.”

Isaac’s eyes widened. “Do you think--? Maybe that’s why she can channel so well already. Her body was practically designed to focus energy! That’s... amazing!”

Ayla was not paying attention to the two men, instead gazing between her hands and her mother sleeping peacefully on the couch. Her mind raced with thousands of thoughts per second, unable to completely comprehend what she had done. It was one thing to read records of humans performing magic, but it was another thing entirely to do it herself.

“Ayla?”

“Yes?” she perked up, putting her thoughts aside.

“Will you be alright if I leave you here for a bit?” Ryker asked. “I’m going to talk with my engineers. Can you take care of Diana for me?”

“Of course!” Ayla said.

“Call me if you need anything.”

Isaac raised his hand awkwardly. “Um, should I stay?”

Ryker blinked slowly, as if he forgot the witch was there. “Ah, yes. You’re free to leave, Isaac. We can handle things from here.”

“Thank you.”

“No, thank *you*. I’ll be honest, I’ve been skeptical since the moment Diana first brought you up. ‘Magic’ is not something I take seriously.”

“I’ve heard that before,” Isaac muttered.

“The point is, you’ve done good work today,” Ryker said. “I’m grateful for your help. This is going to sound cheesy as hell, but you’re making me a believer.”

Isaac’s face flushed. “I just want people to get along.”

“Well, winning us over is a great start. And I can tell Ayla is excited to work with you. Take care, Isaac, and we’ll see you next week.”

The witch said his goodbyes to Ryker and Ayla, promising that their next meeting would be worth waiting for. Even though he wasn’t sure what that meeting would entail, he knew that it would be something fun. Whatever worries had formed over the day were nothing compared to Isaac’s overwhelming anticipation.

Isaac was in a daze the whole way home. He hadn’t realized just how tired he was until he left Origin Labs, and it was only now starting to hit. All the excitement of lights, sounds, and emotions left him drained, and he trudged along the sidewalk with the single goal of getting home to take a nap.

“Hey, you’re back!” Kasie exclaimed as Isaac practically fell into the store.

Isaac only responded with a wave, fixated on the couches behind her. He dropped his bag on the floor and collapsed onto the fluffy pillows, letting out a sigh of exhaustion.

“You know, I think I figured it out,” Kasie said, seemingly unaffected by his state. “All those politicians and media assholes are trying to write a self-fulfilling prophecy.”

“Mmf?” Isaac managed to say.

Kasie took the response as a sign to continue. “Because really, think about it-- nobody *wants* the AI to be evil. They just want to be proven right. So, they’ll talk shit about it in the news, try to piss it off, and constantly frame it as dangerous. Then, one day, it’ll snap! Like, ‘Okay, if that’s what you want.’ It’ll take over the world or whatever, and everyone will point and say, ‘See? I was right all along!’”

Isaac gave a muffled groan.

“People are *so* against admitting defeat that they’ll set the world on fire just to prove it was flammable. That makes sense as a metaphor, right?”

“I dunno.” Isaac rolled over so he could speak clearly. “Aren’t you an English major?”

“Yeah, but that doesn’t mean I’m good at it!” Kasie pouted. “Shut up with your ‘medieval history studies’ or whatever.”

“Ugh... can I just sleep here tonight? I don’t feel like walking upstairs.”

“Only if you lock up the store first. I’ll even be nice and bring you dinner. Don’t forget that you’re legally entitled to fistfight any intruders that break in on your watch.”

“I can’t throw a punch to save my life,” Isaac complained.

“Then scream loud enough and I’ll come down with a baseball bat. Simple.”

Isaac was asleep before the sun went down. The next thing he knew, it was the middle of the night, and the store was silent. The glow of streetlights poured in through the front window, illuminating the first third of the room, providing just enough light for Isaac to see. On the coffee table in front of him were a glass of water, a sandwich, and a note from Kasie telling him to eat or else. Isaac smiled. He didn’t bother checking the time, instead slowly had his dinner so he could return to sleep satisfied.

When morning finally came, Isaac felt refreshed despite the awkward sleeping arrangement. At eight a.m., just an hour before the store had to open, Kasie came downstairs to get ready. She dropped a plate in front of Isaac, startling him out of a half-asleep stupor.

“Waffles!” Kasie exclaimed.

“Uhh…” Isaac sat up. “Good morning?”

“Don’t get too excited, they’re just toaster waffles. Thank you for eating the sandwich, too.”

“Thank *you* for making it.”

Kasie scoffed. “Somebody’s gotta keep you fed. I don’t want you getting so involved in work that you forget how to function. *Also*, I totally didn’t mean to peek, *but* when I plugged in your phone, I just so happened to see you got a text from your new friend!”

Isaac perked up. He scrambled for his phone, which was sitting on the floor next to the couch. On the screen was an unread text from Diana Fen, the sight of which immediately excited him.

Thank you for helping my mother yesterday. She is very grateful, but claims to be “too embarrassed” to speak to you. I am sending this message in her stead. Please note that you are still scheduled for a meeting with us next Wednesday at 1 p.m. Sincerely, Ayla.

A wide grin broke across Isaac’s face.

Part Three

“Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic.”

- *Arthur C Clarke*

Wednesday could not come fast enough. For every day until then, Isaac could not stop thinking about what he wanted to do. The reality of what happened at the conference finally hit him, and that provided a burst of inspiration like none he'd ever experienced. Allowing Ayla to cast a spell was something he didn't expect to happen for a long time, yet there it was. And now that he understood the convenient side effects of her quartz-filled body, that opened the potential for fast, unparalleled growth.

Isaac could not stop talking about it. After hours of ranting to Kasie, even she was starting to get invested. Though, that didn't prevent her from blowing incense smoke in his face when she caught him daydreaming during work. As she put it, “Unless one of them is literally in our store, your job is to sit here and help customers.” Isaac would try to argue that Kasie clearly enjoyed that role much more than he did, but she wasn't having it.

“While you were on lunch break, I had to talk to an actual anti-vaxxer,” she shuddered. “But I've figured out the strategy. ‘Yeah, just rub this lotion on your arm before you get the flu shot. That'll protect your skin from damage. When you get home, make sure to wash the area extensively with this soap. Do that every day until the puncture wound fades— that means the toxins are neutralized.’ Boom! Success!”

Isaac nodded, amused by her gossip. “How much did you sell?”

Kasie flourished a receipt dramatically. “They came in for essential oils and left with thirty dollars of moisturizer and antibacterial soap. I love my job!”

“I mean, I’d rather people get their shots and spend their money on pseudoscience than try to replace medicine with magic.”

“Exactly!” she exclaimed. “If witches could reliably cure any illness, we would have done it already! We don’t know science. That stuff is for doctors to figure out.”

When at last Wednesday arrived, Isaac cheerfully said goodbye to Kasie and made his way to Origin Labs with a spring in his step. Instead of the miscellaneous supplies he carried last time, now his bag was full of books and wands. Though he was still unsure about his teaching abilities, he figured that instructional guides would help Ayla even more.

The lab was busier than it was the first time he visited, likely because of the increase in publicity. There were more security guards lingering around the front lobby, though surely Ayla’s building-wide surveillance could spot a threat more quickly. Perhaps she was allowed to give orders to the guards like a personalized army. Luckily, Isaac remembered that he had a badge showing his clearance to be at the lab, so the increase in security would not be a problem for him. With an eager smile, he presented his ID to everyone who asked for it, and strolled through the building full of confidence.

Diana's office door was cracked ajar, and a handwritten note saying, "Do not Disturb (unless you are Sean or Isaac). Touched by seeing his name in a place of importance, Isaac slowly entered the room.

Dr. Fen's office was a mess of papers and half-dissected electronics. Isaac figured that nobody would dare tell such an important scientist to clean her desk. Surely it would be easier to move the clutter to the back room and keep the office space clean— then again, perhaps she wanted Ayla to have a tidy living space.

"Isaac! It's so good to see you again!" Diana surprised him with a hug, which left him completely flustered.

"It's good to be back," he managed to say.

Ayla was seated on her couch, just like before, though now she had her arms poised eagerly at her sides, awaiting her teacher's arrival.

"Good afternoon, Ayla," Isaac said, putting down his bag.

"Good afternoon," she replied rather hastily.

"I brought some books for you to study with. How quickly can you read?"

Ayla blinked, her camera-lens eyes shifting in size. "I can process hundreds of pages per second. However, with a physical book I am limited by how quickly my hands can turn them. If everything is written in a standardized font, I could easily spend four seconds at most on each two-page spread. Does this answer your question?"

"Yes!" Isaac exhaled deeply. "Wow... sometimes I forget just how much you're capable of."

"Then allow me to begin. Where shall I start?"

Isaac unpacked his books and stacked them in a particular order. “Just start at the top and go down. The knowledge builds on itself. It shouldn’t take too much time; the longest book here is just over 300 pages. Let me know when you come across any practice exercises, and we can work through those together.”

Ayla nodded and gently picked the first book of the pile. Because her pupils did not need to move much, it looked as though she were staring intensely at every page.

Diana put a hand on Isaac’s shoulder. “We can leave her to that for a while. I want to show you something.”

She led the witch to one of her monitors, where a folder was opened to a long list of sub-folders.

“Do you want to see how Ayla was born?”

Isaac’s eyes widened. “Really? Am I allowed to?”

Diana shrugged. “No, but I’m the top of the chain of command— if I say you can, you can. We keep a lot of records under strict lockdown, guarded by Ayla herself. We’ve been very selective about what gets publicly released, because the last thing I want is someone trying to steal her.”

“I remember you saying that you didn’t plan to copyright her code. I’m not sure how patents and stuff work, but what does that mean?”

“I just...” Diana heaved her shoulders and sighed. “I know that keeping her locked up is stifling the scientific community. But there are so many insane, terrible things that can be done with a creation like her. Big tech companies would immediately snatch up the rights and sell their products to the highest bidder.

Billionaires would become even richer. Governments and their militaries would be able to create surveillance technology that would kill any privacy the world has left. Not to mention that all of that will be done *without* the consent of the AI involved. You know, because they have no legal rights. And nobody will grant them any because then they'll have autonomy. You see how quickly things spiral out of control?"

She threw herself onto the nearest swivel chair and started spinning around pathetically.

"Uh, I'm sorry for bringing up the subject," Isaac said dejectedly.

"It's okay," Diana rolled around to face him. "We knew this was going to be an issue when we started the project. It's not good to develop a new technology without thinking through the consequences."

At that moment, Ayla spoke up from over on the couch. "I have finished the first book. There were no exercises, but I decided to update you regardless."

"Thank you, Ayla!" Diana seemed a bit more cheerful just by talking to her. "Okay. Okay. Isaac, I'm going to show you videos now."

She grabbed the desk and pulled her chair closer in a very fluid movement. In seconds, the doctor had opened a series of folders and started playing a particular video.

"These are recordings from the security camera up there. We installed it to monitor the machine while we were away. Here, look:"

The image of the past office was much emptier and more sterile. On Ayla's dais, there was nothing but a cluster of technology. To Isaac, it looked like

servers covered in a web of wires and blinking lights. Facing the door was a monitor that turned on as soon as the room's door opened offscreen.

A younger Diana Fen, looking more professional than Isaac was used to, entered the room and began unpacking a laptop and manila folders from her bag. She began to straighten things on the desk.

“Here, we can probably fast forward,” Diana said, speeding up the video so her digital self was zipping about the room. After a minute or so, she resumed normal speed and leaned towards the screen delightfully.

“Update: July 19th, 8:45 a.m.,” Doctor Fen said, and the machine whirred to life, displaying the date and time.

“Good morning, Project Genesis. Testing newly installed microphones for enhanced vocal recognition. Hello?”

On the monitor, a large ellipsis appeared and began oscillating from left to right. After a moment the display read: *Authorized. Diana Fen.*

Back in the present, Diana turned to Isaac with a wide grin. “This was the first week after we installed the machine in this room. It was Ayla's first real body, and the first time she had a screen. Those dots are her idle animation, and later on we added sound effects to make it feel more sci-fi.”

“Impressive,” Isaac wasn't sure how to respond to her sudden burst of positivity, but it made him more comfortable.

“So, listen—” Diana closed the video. “I've been thinking a lot about you— well, that sounds strange. I've been thinking about what we can do together. Ayla's potential, and all that. Do you have your ID badge with you?”

Isaac produced the laminated card. “Why do you need it?”

Swiftly, Diana opened up a drawer and switched it out with a nearly identical badge. But Isaac could immediately see that it was much fancier, more official-looking, and with a different stamp at the top.

“This is a Level 2 clearance pass. It’s the same kind we give to our interns and maintenance workers. You’re no longer a guest. You, Isaac Morris, are officially part of my team.”

Isaac gingerly took the badge, staring at it in utter awe. In just two weeks, he had gone from a nameless, powerless witch, to a true scientific asset. He couldn’t even muster the voice to say thanks, only pulled the lanyard over his head as if receiving a medal.

Diana’s grin was wild. “After the conference, Sean told me everything you did. He said you were one of the best people we’ve ever worked with. And Sean doesn’t say that about just anybody.”

“R-Really?”

“Oh, yeah! He’s the biggest skeptic I know. You should have seen the look on his face when I first mentioned your proposal. If you could make a man like Sean, actually take magic seriously, you must be someone worth keeping around.”

While she spoke, Ayla had put her book down and came to stand behind them. She put a hand on her mother’s shoulder and smiled at Isaac.

“Here’s the deal,” Diana explained. “That pass means you no longer have to be invited to the building. Granted, I’d appreciate a call ahead if you’re planning to visit. Even if I’m busy, Ayla will let you in.”

“Thank you,” Isaac managed to say. “Thank you so much.”

“Now, I do have some work I need to finish, but you’re more than welcome to stay. In fact—” she returned to the screen and opened a new window. “If you’re still curious about Ayla’s development, here would be a good place to start. Before she ‘woke up,’ it’s just a bunch of technical business. I’m sure you want to see her when she’s alive and learning.”

So, while Diana Fen rolled her chair to another computer, and Ayla resumed her reading, Isaac simply sat down and meditated for a moment. He was still so overwhelmed from the promotion that it took him several minutes to muster the energy to start watching videos. But when he did start, he realized he would not be able to stop.

Isaac first clicked on the folder labelled as “December 10,” which he knew to be Ayla’s ‘birthday.’ He scrolled through the files with strings of numbers for titles, trying to find the first one, only to realize that they were already in chronological order, and all he had to do was start at the top. A bit embarrassed, Isaac glanced over his shoulder to see if Diana had seen his momentary slip-up. Thankfully, she was engrossed in her work, and so Isaac resumed his browsing.

The very first video had a brief title edited in, a timestamp and the words “Self-Awareness.” It was taken, of course, from the perspective of the camera

pointed at Ayla's dais, and it was still odd to see the area so barren. Instead of quaint furniture, there was only a large computer with wires spread everywhere, at the top of which was a monitor displaying an oscillating ellipsis, which Isaac recognized as Ayla's idle animation. At the edge of the camera's range, he could see the door open and Doctor Fen come in. She at first did not acknowledge Ayla, but then the monitor brightened. A noise, some old sci-fi sounding *krzzt*, caught the doctor's attention.

“Ah, what is it?” she asked.

Words were rapidly displayed, accompanied by a faux typewriter *tik-tik-tik* sound. Even from this vantage point, Isaac could clearly read the screen.

I have a question, Mother.

Diana quickly turned around, flustered. “Wh-What did you just call me?”

Mother.

She adjusted her glasses and tried to appear unfazed, though even from the camera Isaac could see her astonishment. “And... why is that?”

You are my primary creator. It seems appropriate to title you as such.

“When did you decide this?”

Spontaneously. The thought came to me just as you walked in. I want to ask why this happened.

Diana didn't take her eyes off the monitor, but she fumbled to press a button on her desk. Isaac recognized this as her direct line to Ryker.

“You've been making a lot of decisions lately,” Diana noted. “Is this one different somehow?”

For a moment, the idle animation returned, indicating that the machine was thinking.

It might be. I thought... she paused, as if considering the gravity of what she was about to say: *I thought about myself today.*

Diana took a step back, utter astonishment crossing her face. She looked as if she were about to faint, but she managed to remain standing.

“D-Did you?” the doctor gasped. “T-Tell me.”

I have a database containing information on every human known to me. There are entries for all our employees, for you and Doctor Ryker, et cetera. But I am not in this database. If I have information on all people I know, it stands to reason that I have my own entry as well. I should already “know” myself, should I not?

“Y-Yes! Yes, that’s exactly right!” Diana had a hand on her chest as if trying to calm her heart down.

I created a new file in the database for myself, but I wanted to ask your help for the information. I suppose, given your permission, that I may list you as my “Mother” in the records.

“Yes, you may. Now—” she took a deep breath. “Let me know if you need anything else.”

Here, the video stopped, but Isaac was not done. He moved on to the next one, which now had a thumbnail displaying the name of the video. The brief title was “Identity,” and this time the words remained on screen, watermarked in the

corner like a TV channel logo. According to the timestamp, this occurred mere minutes after the first video.

Krzzt . . .

Mother, I have another question.

“You can ask me anything,” Diana said reassuringly, flipping her notebook to a new page.

Do I have a name?”

“Well... no, not yet. Would you like to name yourself, or shall I name you?”

A long pause followed.

My code is listed under Project Genesis. But I am not Project Genesis. I am the product of it. I am...

The monitor resumed its thinking animation. Isaac could only assume she was looking through every name in existence to pick one.

The next words appeared slowly, deliberately, as if delivering Earth-shattering news:

My name is Ayla.

Over the next few days, Isaac came to visit the lab— both to help explain magic to Ayla, and to watch more archived videos. He spent hours poring through the collection on fast-forward, unable to break away from his fascination. He watched Ayla discover things about herself, he watched Diana spend nights sleeping in her lab, and he watched countless scientists coming in and out to

Speak to them. Slowly, the dais on which her monitor sat became more and more like a living space, perhaps to accommodate Diana's desire to stay with her creation. It was a time lapse bearing witness to the greatest advancement of the century.

At some point, an engineering team brought in a metal mannequin, the prototype body for Ayla that they had prepared in advance. It was child-sized, and its head was blank and featureless. They watched as Ayla opened up a modelling program and began designing her appearance. She scanned through thousands and thousands of images, from historical pictures to modern ones. All the while, she was making miniscule adjustments to the model of her face, like the roundness of her cheeks and the slant of her eyes. It took her almost as long to design a hairstyle. After adding color to her skin and hair, Ayla presented the finished model to the engineers.

In a few weeks, the team returned, and Ayla's body was complete. The android was turned on, her beautiful green eyes lighting up for the first time. She very quickly learned how to move her limbs, and the very first thing she did was walk up to her mother and give her a hug.