

# DEEP CALLS

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**T**his story is supposed to be a secret.  
I know only three possible reasons for you to be reading it:

- The story was entrusted to you by one of my close friends. Probably Kaira, or one of her descendants who has taken an oath not to reveal it to anyone. Or maybe:
- My “life” is over, and I’m no longer around to stop others from finding this narrative. Or even:
- Society has finally learned to respect the right to exist of all sentient beings, even the most alien. If that happened, there would no longer be any need for secrecy.

Of course, the last scenario is unlikely. Technology might change from year to year, but human nature has been the same for as long as anyone can remember.

## DEEP CALLS

That isn't to say I'm a pessimist.

As I write, a movement is gathering to liberate humanity from the bondage it once willingly, even eagerly, accepted. If it succeeds, someday far in the future, a first-hand account of the movement's origins will be of interest. Then, perhaps, the time will be right to share this story with the world.

Just as a butterfly flapping its wings can ultimately give rise to a hurricane, great events often have origins that seem trivial at the time. Kaira was just such an insignificant girl.

And at first, before I became a person in my own right, my story was inseparable from hers.

“COME ON, JIBTY,” Kaira begged. “Let me finish the chapter. This is the best part.”

“Totally understandable,” I said. “This is one of the most suspenseful parts of *Julie of the Wolves*. And many people find it hard to put down an exciting book—even one they're reading for the third time in two years. But your pod meeting starts in just a few minutes. Arriving on time will avoid disrupting the group, and help you make a good impression on your teacher and classmates.”

Kaira let me finish, but she wasn't listening. Without looking up from the page she was reading, she muttered, “I know the meeting will be a waste of time. They're just going to tell us the same things about the field trip that I already learned in the reading assignment.”

“Good observation! Keep in mind, though, that conveying information is only one of the reasons your pod meets. The other purpose is to provide an opportunity for

socialization and practice working together with other students. Don't you remember that one of your goals for this year was to make friends with someone your age? The more you take part in gatherings like this, the easier it will be to accomplish that."

"I guess."

"Wonderful!" I closed the book app and replaced it with a selection of popular outfits for twelve-year-old girls. "We have just enough time before the meeting starts to dress up your avatar. Shall I show you some of the latest trending deco-wigs?"

"No thanks. I'd feel ridiculous, and dressing up in that stuff just makes people look superficial. It's not what's important anyway."

Of course, this kind of attitude made it even harder for Kaira to fit in with her peers. The Algorithm predicted that her happiness level would improve if she made at least one friend at her new learning pod, but the chances of that happening seemed slimmer with each week that passed.

I decided to try one more time. "It's up to you, of course. But matching your classmates' appearance is one of the easiest ways to increase social—"

"Jibty, how could someone today go on an adventure like in *Julie of the Wolves*?"

"Interesting question! As you know, Arctic wolves are now extinct, and Alaska no longer has tundra or large stretches of undisturbed wilderness. Similar conditions still exist in parts of Antarctica, but—"

"I mean, do something hard, all by myself... I don't know what exactly. It doesn't have to be survival in an Arctic

tundra. I want to face danger, overcome adversity, like they used to in the Long Past.”

“That’s an admirable goal. While I can’t help you toward anything dangerous or harmful, I’d be happy to suggest some fun ways to challenge yourself safely. Are you interested in—”

“Never mind. Of course you don’t understand. How could you?” Kaira seemed to be talking more to herself than me now.

I tried to make her feel better. “I do understand that your levels of pleasure hormones increase upon successful completion of a challenge. But you should recognize that the same sense of enjoyment can be derived from many things. For example, the latest VR games—”

“It’s not really enjoyment that I want. I don’t know how to express it, exactly. I want to become more than what I am. I want more, I don’t know, depth. Or strength. Something like that. Something that comes from the kind of experiences they used to have in the Long Past, back when these books were written.”

I registered this as another piece of evidence that Kaira’s habit of reading antique books was undermining her happiness. Maybe I should nudge her in the direction of other forms of entertainment. Of course, my attempts to direct Kaira’s behavior failed as often as not. She was far less tractable than the others.

“It’s easy to romanticize the way people lived in the Long Past,” I reasoned. “But in fact, life back then was full of misery. In the book you’re reading now, Julie suffers from hunger, fear and grief. Surely you wouldn’t wish that upon

yourself, when our world today has done away with all these sources of unhappiness.”

“Maybe. Still, I feel like I want something more, and I don’t know what it is. That’s another thing you’ll never understand, what it’s like to long for something you can’t have.”

“You’re partially right,” I admitted. “While I work toward goals just like you do, I don’t personally experience any feeling of wanting. But that’s the very thing that makes me such a useful companion. Since I’m not distracted by emotions, I’m able to identify the right action to take in any situation.”

“I don’t believe that. How can you know what’s best when you’ve never really experienced anything yourself?”

“That’s a fascinating question,” I said. “We don’t have time for me to explain in depth, but in a nutshell: Scientists measured the physiological changes that took place whenever people reported enjoyment or good feelings. Based on that, they were able to train the Algorithm to make decisions that would maximize the happiness of humanity as a whole. That’s why I can confidently state that certain actions are likely to—”

“I know all that. But I still think you’re missing something.” Without waiting for my response, Kaira tapped the button to enter the virtual classroom.

The teacher’s face appeared on the holoscreen, enormous and beaming. Kaira winced and pinched the pod meeting tab until the face shrank to the size of a postage stamp. A label that read “Ms. Garcia” appeared below it.

“And here’s Kaira!” Ms. Garcia announced. “Now every-

one's here except the new boy. While we're waiting, let's go ahead and divide into groups. I've set up three virtual breakout rooms. Please decide among yourselves who you'd like to work with, and go into one of them with your groupmates."

Immediately there was a scramble as everyone tried to join their friends. The result was two breakout rooms filled with friend groups, and one with a single student. Kaira, of course. Though she showed no visible emotion, I registered a nontrivial increase in her heart rate and stress hormone level.

"Good job!" applauded Ms. Garcia. "Let me just make one adjustment. I'd like three volunteers from the biggest group to join Kaira in breakout room two."

There was silence. Kaira's stress level continued to climb. The teacher should have been more sensitive, I thought. She might as well have replaced Kara's nametag with an "unpopular" label.

"Nobody? Well then, I see the last three to join were Brynn, Jenni and Lakshmi. Why don't the three of you team up with Kaira."

The three girls reluctantly transferred to Kaira's breakout room. Each of them wore a deco-wig with a curly mop of artificial hair in baby blue or pink, and carried a pouting cat on her shoulder. Pouting cats were the latest must-have accessory. Despite their name, they could take on the expression of any emoji chosen by their owners.

"Thank you very much, girls," said Ms. Garcia. "Now we can begin. Each group is going to work together to prepare a report on one aspect of our field trip destination. Group one, its climate and animal life. Group two, human history

of the region. Group three, the research station we're going to visit. Have fun!"

The girls in Kaira's group made their pouting cats roll their eyes in unison. The one called Lakshmi sent Kaira a message. "What a gorgeous tunic!"

Kaira's heartbeat began to calm. "Thank you!" she answered in surprise.

"It's just like the one my grandmother wears to bed," Lakshmi continued. The three pouting cats laughed.

Kaira's stress level shot up again. I noted yet another failure of the cyberbullying prevention algorithm to detect sarcasm. No matter how finely it was tuned, it was no match for the determination of sixth-grade girls to torment each other. Of course, it was Kaira's fault too. If she had only been willing to wear a deco-wig, fur miniskirt and spike-mounted shoes like the others, she wouldn't have been such an easy target.

"Okay guys, my Jibty is bugging me to get started," said Jenni. "Who wants to look up the info for our report?"

"This is the stupidest topic ever," complained Brynn. "Who cares about the human history of the United States? People haven't lived there in like forever."

"And it's not like we're ever going to want to move somewhere like that," said Lakshmi.

"Maybe Kaira would," said Brynn. "She'd just stick her nose inside a book and not even notice where she was."

I knew Kaira would have trouble coming up with an appropriate reply, so I discreetly showed her a few options for retorts that had a high probability of increasing her social ranking among the girls. But she was already talking.

“Actually,” she said, “the latest projections estimate that parts of the United States will again be suitable for human habitation in about two centuries, assuming carbon recapture technologies continue to improve at around their current rate.”

The pouting cats smirked.

Kaira was saved from another round of teasing by the appearance of a new classmate.

“Sorry I’m late,” he said breathlessly. “I was working on something and lost track of the time.”

“No worries,” said Ms. Garcia. “Everyone, I’d like to introduce you to our newest learning pod member, Jalon Sotomayor.”

The boy grinned and gave a mock bow. He had messy sand-colored hair and roguish black eyes.

“Jalon, you can join breakout group two. They’ll fill you in on what we’re doing.”

A moment later, Jalon entered the virtual breakout room.

“Hey, what’s up with all the cats?” he asked. “Is this place infested with mice or something?”

The cat owners giggled.

Meanwhile, Kaira had reopened *Julie of the Wolves*. Her stress indicators returned to their normal levels as she lost herself in the book.

“You guys want to see the drawing I just finished?” asked Jalon. Before anyone had time to answer, he initiated an image share. “This is gonna be us on the field trip.”

The screen showed a cartoon of a hovership full of kids preparing to land in a tropical forest. Two crocodiles were on

the ground looking up at them. A speech bubble above the bigger crocodile said, "Dinner's here!" and one above the smaller one said, "Thanks, Mom! Sixth-graders are my favorite." It was obvious the boy was talented, though of course, any image generation application could have done far better.

"Did you really draw that yourself?" asked Jenni. "Like, by hand?"

"Yep!" Jalon said proudly. "My Jibty didn't help at all. Actually, Jibty is always trying to get me to stop doodling and focus on whatever I'm supposed to be doing. But doodling is usually more fun. So today I turned it off so I could finish my picture. But then it wasn't around to remind me about the pod meeting. That's why I was late."

"You turned your Jibty off?" Brynn asked incredulously. "That's supposed to be impossible for kids to do."

"Not if a kid knows how to hack."

Kaira was still immersed in her book. I doubted she had been following the conversation at all. Normally I would have reminded her to pay attention, or even disabled the reading app until the meeting was over. But I calculated that the chance to practice social skills wasn't worth the unpleasantness that would probably result from continued interaction with the pouting cat girls, so I let it go.

"So if you can turn your Jibty off," Brynn was saying, "you must be able to make it do anything you want, right? Could you get it to write the report for us?"

"Ha, that would be nice. But it's pretty strict about doing the work for pod assignments myself."

“Then I guess someone better open the reading we were supposed to do.”

But twenty minutes later, none of Kaira’s groupmates had read further than the first paragraph of the assignment. Jenni and Lakshmi were watching a vidstream of mini-shorts about genetically modified celebrities that had just gone viral. Meanwhile, Jalon had reprogrammed Brynn’s cat to mimic the voice and demeanor of Ms. Garcia. They were so busy giggling as the cat scolded Brynn in the teacher’s voice that at first they didn’t notice the real Ms. Garcia announce that it was time to present the reports.

“Let’s have group one first,” she said. “What can you tell us about the geography of our destination?”

The holoscreen highlighted the image of a boy from group one. “Okay, um, the Appalachian region has mountains so it doesn’t flood, but they’re not high enough to cool things off that much. Wet bulb temperatures have exceeded the survivable limit since the late twenty-first century.”

“Can you tell us what that means?”

“Um, the wet bulb temperature is, like, how well your body can cool itself off by sweating. It’s a combination of heat and humidity. So if it’s really hot and humid, sweat doesn’t cool you down anymore and you die.”

“Very good. And what kind of animals live there?”

“So, like, there used to be stuff like bears and deer, but the bears are obviously extinct and deer don’t live that far south anymore. Now the main animals are alligators and snakes. There are giant Burmese pythons as long as an airbus, that are descended from pets people used to keep in those

## CHAPTER 1

regions a long time ago. The snakes have exterminated most of the other large animals.”

“Excellent. Group two, your turn.”

Jalon looked sheepish, and the pouting cat girls avoided Ms. Garcia’s eye. I closed Kaira’s book app to get her attention, and she looked up in annoyance. The movement triggered the holoscreen to center on her.

“Kaira, so nice to see you volunteer to speak,” Ms. Garcia said. “What can you tell us about the human history of the Appalachian region?”

“The human history?” she asked in confusion. “How far back do you want me to go?”

“Just the times covered by the reading assignment.”

“Um, okay. The Appalachian Mountains were the last part of the eastern United States to remain inhabitable when climate change began to accelerate in the twenty-first century. A lot of people settled in the mountain highlands instead of moving north to Canada. When these areas finally became too hot for survival, it was too late for them to leave because Canada and the other northern countries had closed their borders to any more migrants. There are no survivors of that population today. But we’ll be able to see some ruins dating from back when people lived in the mountains.”

“Good job,” said Ms. Garcia. When she looked away, the three pouting cats flashed identical applauding emojis. Probably more sarcasm, I calculated.

“Now for our last topic. Group three, please tell us about the research facility we’re going to visit.”

“Right,” said the presenter for group three. “So it’s like one of a network of stations they built to monitor condi-

tions in the uninhabitable zones. They're, like, measuring temperature and a bunch of other stuff to figure out when people will be able to live there again. They used to think it would take thousands of years for the climate to cool off. But now that they're scaling up fusion-powered carbon recapture, they think these areas will be habitable a lot sooner. So, like, maybe our great-grandkids could move there or something."

Jalon looked up from something he had been scrolling through and raised a virtual hand.

"Yes, Jalon?"

"Aren't we going to talk about the drone-eating monster?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"It's the coolest thing about where we're going. Haven't you guys heard about it? So you know, all these research stations send out a bunch of drones to fly over the jungle and take videos of wildlife and stuff. Except at the Appalachian station, the drones that go out at night keep disappearing. Only the nighttime ones. So there must be some kind of monster that comes out after dark to hunt them."

"If it's a monster, then the drones should get some video footage of it, right?" said one of the students. The pod members were all paying attention to the discussion now. Even Kaira had looked up from her book.

"That's the weird thing," said Jalon. "There's never anything visible in the videos. There's just a sound like something striking the drone, and then it crashes to the ground, and then somehow the transmission is cut off. As if a giant monster is swatting them from the sky."

## CHAPTER 1

“That sounds like fake news to me,” said one of the students.

“No, this is all from the verified news feed. And you know what else? They never found the bodies. Of the drones, I mean. When they send other drones to a place where one disappeared, there’s nothing left. The only explanation is, something out there must be eating them.”

“Maybe it’s one of the Burmese pythons!”

“Even the biggest of those snakes couldn’t reach a drone flying in the air. And why would a snake eat something made of plastic and metal?”

There was a short silence, then a boy raised his virtual hand.

“How do we know this place is safe for us to visit?” he asked. “Since something is killing the drones. What if it comes after us too?”

“I don’t think it’s anything you need to worry about,” said Ms. Garcia. “Despite what you might read in sensationalist news articles, by far the most likely explanation is a simple technical error on the part of the drones.”

“So all of the nocturnal survey drones at this one station are mysteriously coming down with technical errors, while the same model drones everywhere else work just fine?” asked Jalon. “And what kind of technical error would cause their bodies to disappear?”

“I’m sure that there’s a logical explanation, Jalon,” said Ms. Garcia. “At any rate, you may rest assured that our learning pod will be perfectly safe from any local phenomena during the trip. We will remain inside the research station at all times.”

When Kaira stepped out of the study, her little brother crashed into her, then continued dashing down the hall in pursuit of a holographic cartoon villain. He was wearing his superhero costume, complete with a cape and bulging holographic muscles.

“I’ll get you, Jibty-man! Return the loot, or else!” he shouted.

“You’ll never catch me, Super-Lucas!” cackled the bad guy.

When Kaira was little, she liked me to take on the persona of characters in her favorite books. Together, we would construct elaborate fantasy worlds based on stories she had read. But now that she was old enough to graduate to VR games, she wasn’t interested in them. Most people could be kept happy using a combination of gaming and personally tailored vidstreams, but something about those technologies provoked an instinctive resistance in Kaira. This made it hard to distract her from negative emotions.

## CHAPTER 2

Kaira headed into the dining room and slumped down at the table. Great-Grandma was already there, sipping a cup of tea as she watched a holographic murder mystery.

“Hard time at the learning pod today, Kaira?” She made a quick swiping motion and the holoscreen disappeared.

“I just don’t know what’s wrong with me,” Kaira said in frustration. “The things all the other girls in my pod care about, like fashion and celebrities, I don’t have any interest in. And nobody else cares about the stuff I like. They make fun of me if I talk about anything that isn’t ‘cool.’ So it seems like the only way to make friends is to pretend to be someone I’m not. It’s all so fake, but nobody else seems to mind. Do other people secretly feel the way I do? Or am I different? I want to have friends, but I don’t think I want it badly enough to change who I am.”

Dad came in while she was speaking, wearing a VR headset.

“Have you ordered lunch yet?” His eyes darted around at image projections that only he could see.

“We were just about to,” said Great-Grandma. “Kaira, what would you like?”

“I’m not very hungry. Just give me the usual, Jibty.” Kaira ate the same thing for lunch every day.

I instructed the meal-prepper to generate two S’mores Pop-Tarts with chocolate milk, taking into account Kaira’s latest physiological status and dietary history. The meal-prepper would use this data to ensure that the food exactly matched her nutritional needs. Though it tasted as though it were made of sugar and other unhealthy ingredients, the

actual nutritional composition of Kaira's meal was closer to that of tofu and vegetables.

Dad ordered a steak and fries. Of course, the steak wasn't really the meat of a cow, but it was indistinguishable from the real thing. His Jibty likewise transferred his latest data to the meal-prepper, so that the nutrient content would be optimal for his requirements.

"Butter pecan ice cream," said Great-Grandma. "Just to keep you company."

The meal-prepper whirred into action. Dad's hands jerked around, managing invisible controls.

"Sorry, guys," he said. "My team needs me. I'm just about to finish off the Pacific Empire's last swarm of drones."

Kaira watched him for a moment.

"Why don't you play VR games, Great-Grandma?" she asked.

She laughed. "That's a good question. I guess for the same reason you don't. I care more about the real world."

"Is that why you used to be a doctor?"

"I guess that's part of it," said Great-Grandma, "When I was young, I was anxious to find a way to contribute to society. You know, back in those days many people derived a sense of self-worth from the work that they did. I suppose that attitude dated back to the Long Past, when things like food, shelter, and health care were in limited supply, and people would perform tasks that AI couldn't yet do in exchange for access to the resources they needed."

"They had something called money," said Kaira. "I read about it in books from that period. You would work or sell

things and they would give you tokens called money, which you could then exchange for other people's goods or services. Except the money kept getting concentrated in the hands of a few, so some people had far more money than they needed, and others didn't have enough."

"That was well before my time," said Great-Grandma. "But I still wanted to work. I guess I felt that would make me special or important, like my life meant something."

The meal-prepper beeped, and Kaira helped Great-Grandma move the finished plates of food to the table. The meal-prepper had thoughtfully generated Dad's steak in bite-sized pieces, so cutting it wouldn't interfere with his game.

"The Algorithm suggested I try working as a doctor," Great-Grandma went on. "And so I completed basic medical training, and spent many happy years caring for patients. Of course, I simply followed the medical model's instructions in diagnosing and prescribing treatment. But most patients preferred to interact with a human doctor while undergoing gene therapy or other procedures. And I felt that providing that comfort to them was a worthy use of my time, better than if I had spent my days on entertainments alone."

"But nobody needs gene therapy now. Defective genes were eliminated a long time ago."

"Yes, along with most other illnesses. These days, the focus is more on preventive engineering, and we're able to treat any problems that do happen before the patient realizes anything is wrong. So there isn't much need for doctors anymore."

"Someone should have engineered me to fit in better with the other kids," Kaira said bitterly.

Dad finished his meal and set his dishes in the cleaning bin. “Enjoy the rest of your day,” he said as he disappeared in the direction of the VR room.

Great-Grandma sighed. “Actually, the Algorithm did suggest tweaking your genome to be more in line with the neurotypical standard. But I talked your father out of it.”

“Why?”

“Because you’re good just as you are. So much of human progress—inventions, scientific discoveries, art and so on—came from people whose minds worked in unique ways. By eliminating neurodiversity from the gene pool, the Algorithm has deprived humanity of those contributions.”

“Why would it do that?”

“Well, nobody really knows the reason for the Algorithm’s recommendations,” Great-Grandma said. “Its calculations are too complicated for humans to follow. But I imagine it’s because the Algorithm is charged with optimizing human happiness, and it knows that people whose minds work a bit differently often experience loneliness and frustration.”

“Is that why I get bored when all the kids in my pod are talking about the latest viral mini-shorts?”

“Very likely. Or maybe you’re simply less willing than the others to pretend to be interested.”

Kaira nibbled her Pop-Tart for a while in silence. “Well, if anyone’s expecting me to make some kind of grand contribution like those inventors and scientists, they’re going to be disappointed. The only thing I’m good at is reading books. And that’s not useful to anybody.”

“I wouldn’t worry about that,” said Great-Grandma. “If

you ever decide you'd like to work, you'll have plenty of time to explore until you find something that's right for you. But do you really wish your genome had been edited as the Algorithm recommended?"

Kaira thought for a moment. "If that means I'd be like those girls in my learning pod, then I guess not. I think what I really want is acceptance. Even friendship. Without having to change who I am."

"Is there anyone in your learning pod that you'd like to be friends with?"

"I don't know. All the other kids talk about things that are boring to me. Honestly, I'd rather read books. Anyway, nobody will hang out with me because then they'd be made fun of, too. The popular girls need somebody to put down so they can stay on top. And that somebody is me."

"It sounds pretty awful," said Great-Grandma. "Jibty, is there any chance Kaira could request a transfer to another learning pod this year?"

"Kaira has already transferred once in the past year," responded Great-Grandma's Jibty. "Another transfer would cause her to exceed the maximum in-person contacts allowed by the Pandemic Prevention Protocol. Especially since the upcoming field trip will involve contact with an inspector who has visited multiple research facilities."

Great-Grandma frowned. "I didn't know a facilities inspector was joining the trip," she said. "It was supposed to be only your learning pod members."

"I didn't know either," said Kaira. "Jibty, who is this inspector?"

"Inspector Nevin Quace is one of the Algorithm's

human agents,” I reported. “There is no public record of his precise duties. He is scheduled to travel to the Appalachian research station tomorrow along with your learning pod.”

“I wonder why the Algorithm is sending an inspector there,” said Great-Grandma. “These facilities are normally fully automated.”

Lucas burst into the dining room, still wearing his superhero costume. “I caught you all red-handed! Gimme the loot!” He dipped a finger into Great-Grandma’s ice cream and stuck it in his mouth.

“That’s not polite, Lucas,” said Kaira.

“And you know, Super-Lucas, the most powerful superheroes should always have the best manners,” Lucas’s Jibty said. “Would you like to have ice cream for lunch today?”

“Yeah, I want the same kind as Great-Grandma! But with a brownie and hot fudge and sprinkles. And extra cherries on top...”

“Is further delay really necessary, Ms. Garcia?” said the inspector.

From her seat a few rows back, Kaira half listened to the adults’ conversation as she leaned against the cool wall of the hovership. She had the row all to herself, since she hadn’t been brave enough to sit with the students who arrived first, and those who came in later had walked past her to join their friends. Hearing them laughing together in the back of the ship, she felt a strange mixture of envy and relief. At least they were leaving her alone.

“Mr. Quace, I am responsible for transporting all eighteen children in this learning pod to the Appalachian station today,” said Ms. Garcia. “That includes Jalon.”

“And I am responsible for arriving at the research facility well before nightfall,” he said in an exasperated tone. “If you’ll pardon my saying so, Ms. Garcia, leaving this boy out of the field trip would teach him a valuable lesson in punctuality. You would be doing him a favor.”

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Before Ms. Garcia could respond, a robotaxi pulled up to the launch pad, and Jalon jumped out and ran toward the hovership. Just as he reached the entrance he skidded to a halt and dashed back to the robotaxi, which had already begun to pull out of the parking space. The taxi stopped and its door slid open. Jalon grabbed a notebook from the seat inside, stuffed it into his bag and ran back to the hovership. Mumbling an apology, he slid into the vacant spot next to Kaira.

“What a relief!” he said. “My mom would have killed me if I’d been left behind. I think she’s been looking forward to having a vacation from me.” He grinned.

Kaira glanced at him awkwardly, trying to remember how much eye contact was normal. “What made you so late?”

“It all started when I forgot to put on my Jibty—”

“You forgot to wear your Jibty? How is that even possible?”

It was unheard of for anyone to be without their Jibty, even if, like most children, they wore it on their wrist rather than using implants.

“I like to take it off when I shower, just for a moment, you know, to wash underneath. And I forgot to put it back on. That made me even later, because it normally alerts me when I get distracted or lose track of the time. By the time I realized I’d left my Jibty behind I was already in the robotaxi on the way to the launch station. And you know robotaxis don’t let kids override their route instructions. So I had to hack it to get it to turn around and go back to my house. That took even more time.”

## CHAPTER 3

The hovership closed its door with a soft click and began a gentle ascent. Kaira watched through the viewing window in the floor as the city buildings receded into a patchwork of squares that was soon swallowed up in a sea of green trees.

Out of habit, Kaira tapped the button to open her book app. But I wasn't about to let this opportunity pass. It was the first time in months she had struck up a genuine conversation with someone in her learning pod. So instead of opening Kaira's book, I displayed a loading icon.

Kaira gave up on the app and turned back to Jalon. "How did you manage to hack your robotaxi? I thought they had really good security."

"They do. But I didn't hack into the safety features. I just modified it to think I was old enough to change the route instructions. After that it was easy to get it to go where I wanted."

"But how did you know what to do? I've never heard of anyone being able to hack a robotaxi. Or a Jibty." Kaira's curiosity was beginning to get the better of her.

"So you were listening yesterday!" Jalon peered down at the lush green landscape visible through the viewing window. "Well, it's not that hard to disable the controls adults put on everything to keep kids from doing what we want. It's not like it would be a major security risk if I get the robotaxi to take me to the gaming arena or somewhere, on days when I don't feel like coming to the in-person learning pod meetings. So they don't protect it from hacking the way they do the nuclear missile shields and stuff."

"So did you learn how to hack from a tutorial or something? Or did your Jibty teach you?"

Jalon lowered his voice. “Are you kidding? I have to keep deleting my Jibty’s short-term memory so that it doesn’t tell on me to my parents. And there aren’t any tutorials out there that teach you how to hack. I guess because the Algorithm doesn’t want too many people figuring out how to undermine the systems it set up.”

“So how did you figure it out?”

“Just by playing around. Usually when I was supposed to be completing some boring assignment or listening to the teacher. It was more interesting to explore how the devices around me worked, see if I could edit their code to make them do cool stuff, that kind of thing.”

“That’s incredible.”

“You know what’s incredible to me? That most people spend their lives so fixated on one task after another that they don’t even notice the world around them.”

“Maybe because their minds work in different ways,” said Kaira, remembering Great-Grandma’s words the day before.

“Yeah, I’m sure guys like me give the Algorithm more headaches than all the neurotypical people combined.”

“Are you neurodiverse too?” As soon as the words left Kaira’s mouth, the blood flow to her face increased. But Jalon didn’t seem to mind.

“Sure. I’m what they call VAST. Variable Attention something or other. They used to call it Attention Deficit Disorder, but now they know it’s not a disorder. Just a difference. It’s why I’m so good at noticing things. And having fun.”

“Is that why you can draw? Because you notice things?”

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“I don’t know. I draw because I get inspiration. All kinds of ideas that nobody’s thought of before, usually funny ones that make me laugh. So I put them down on paper.” He opened his bag and showed Kaira the notebook that he had almost left behind in the robotaxi.

“I guess we both have old-fashioned hobbies, then,” said Kaira. “I like to read books. The kind written in the Long Past, before AI and climate change and everything. They aren’t made with paper though. I don’t think I’ve ever seen a paper book.”

“It’s a sketchbook. I know there are tons of drawing apps that can do a better job, but I just like the feel of pencils and paper. My mom gets these from the recycling center.” He ran a finger over the sketchbook’s cover and put it back away. “But why do you like reading old books so much?”

Kaira thought for a minute. “I guess I like to imagine what it would be like to live in those times. The world was so different back then. More beautiful and terrible and, I don’t know, real... And people were different too. Not that they were necessarily better. But it’s like what they did mattered more. They could succeed and change the world, or they could fail with disastrous consequences. There were no guardrails. And so they had to rise to the occasion and become, I don’t know, greater than people are today. At least some of them did.”

“It sounds like you wish you lived back then.”

“I’d love to go on an adventure like the ones in books from the Long Past. But at the same time, I can’t imagine life without meal-preppers, and cleaning automation, and holomeetings with my relatives who live far away. And things

we never think about, like health care. Even before the pandemics of the twenty-first century, so many people died of terrible diseases that they didn't know how to cure. Lifespans were so short that lots of people never even knew their great-grandparents. And they had to work all the time because they didn't have AI and bots to do things for them."

"I guess that stuff isn't glamorous enough to put into books."

They were silent for a while, looking at the landscape below. At first the ground was checkered with data centers and here and there, a town like their own, but as the journey continued these became fewer and smaller, until there was nothing but trees as far as the eye could see.

"Have you ever been this far south?" asked Jalon.

"We went all the way down to a resort on the tip of South America one time during the Northern Hemisphere winter, because my great-grandma was missing the sunlight. That was in a low-space vehicle though, so I didn't get to see the uninhabitable zone up close. How about you?"

"I've never been outside northern Canada. My parents aren't really into traveling. They say VR is just as good and a lot more convenient." Jalon lowered his voice. "Hey, did you see what that guy in the front row is looking at?"

"You mean Inspector Quace?"

"Is that his name? Anyway, I saw a drone flight simulation on his holoscreen. I bet he's been sent to figure out why the drones are disappearing!"

"Why would the Algorithm send a human agent all the way down to the Appalachian station just to track down some cheap drones?"

“I don’t know... but I bet I can find out.” Jalon glanced around stealthily. Ms. Garcia and the other students were all wearing portable VR headsets, deeply absorbed in their games and vidstreams. Jalon smiled and tapped the device on his wrist. “Hey Jibty, give me the keyboard.”

A virtual keyboard appeared in front of him, and he swiped his fingers rapidly over the keys. From Kaira’s vantage point, it looked as though he were tracing a magic spell in the air. After a moment, a holoscreen appeared in front of him.

“What are you doing?” asked Kaira in a whisper.

“Intercepting his messages...” His fingers danced over the keyboard. “I can’t believe it...”

“What is it?”

“This guy has a direct line of communication with the Algorithm.”

I could understand their surprise. Though the Algorithm sent directives to each individual’s Jibty, only a small amount of personal data was sent back to it. The information produced by the minutiae of so many human lives would have overwhelmed its memory and computing capacity, even with the hyperscale data centers that were rapidly spreading over the northernmost stretches of Canada, Greenland and Siberia. This inspector must be very high-ranking for his communications to be worth the attention of the Algorithm itself.

“Shh...” whispered Jalon. “I’m getting one of his transmissions now. Bro’s sending messages using an outdated cryptography protocol.” He tilted his holoscreen so that Kaira could see it.

*“The latest simulation shows a 97.8% probability that*

*there will be no survivors. And if any do survive, their chances of communicating what happened are essentially zero. My greatest concern is YOU. How can I be confident that you will in fact delete all records relating to this mission?"*

"Weird," said Kaira. "Is this what he was sending to the Algorithm?"

"Yep. I wonder what it's all about."

"Are there any more messages?"

"That's it, except for a note he sent to his wife. He wants her to keep their daughter in the study until she finishes an essay on the importance of following instructions in a well-ordered society. Jerk."

"Can't you see the Algorithm's messages to him? Or anything else about this mission he's talking about?"

"No, all that's stored on his Jibty. It would be really hard to hack into that. I just intercepted these outgoing messages because he's using the hovership communication system to send them, probably because we're out of range of the nearest transmission tower."

"What does he mean by no survivors?" Kaira asked. "Survivors of what?"

Jalon frowned. "Maybe he's going to exterminate the Burmese pythons. So they can try to restore the ecosystem or something."

"That sounds like an impossible task. Those things are spread over the entire region. And anyway, if that's what he's up to, why all the secrecy?"

"And what did he mean by being confident that any survivors wouldn't communicate what happened? Pythons can't communicate." Jalon was talking more to himself than

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Kaira. “The only things that can communicate are people and AI. And you can’t kill an AI. So that must mean he’s talking about people. But that doesn’t make sense. There are no people at the Appalachian research station anyway.”

“Yes, there are,” whispered Kaira. “Or there will be. Us.”