

Stargazers

“You’re only acting.” K told me.

K was correct. I do not possess emotions like humans do. It is a justifiable statement to say that whatever I feel remains a simulation, therefore an act.

The desert stretched out endlessly, vast and peaceful. The sand seemed to go on forever, dunes rising and falling like an endless ocean frozen in time. Above, the stars shone brilliantly against the inky black sky, dots on a chalkboard. Sometimes the wind whipped up, blowing sand into my optical sensor lenses until my vision blurred, rendering me unable to accurately discern what lay ahead.

Uncomfortable.

This was the most fitting descriptor, regardless of the emotion felt. But thanks to my heat sensors detecting organisms, I could still clearly sense which direction to move in order to avoid straying from the group.

I followed behind K and Adam. After our ship crashed, the food supplies had been jettisoned from the hold. Adam ordered us to find them, though I did not understand the purpose of those provisions. Even if Adam located food, he could not possibly survive for more than a few days longer. We had lost all communication equipment, our signals going completely unanswered. What planet we found ourselves on remained a mystery to us all.

All of a sudden, Adam detected a small irregularity in the sand dune’s surface up ahead. His facial musculature contorted into an expression I can only describe as joyous anticipation based on my database of human emotional cues. The corners of his mouth turned upward, crinkling the skin around his eyes. Adam dropped to his knees and began scooping away the sand frantically with his hands. His respiratory rate accelerated, and his eyes grew wider. After fifty-four repetitions of this digging action, Adam paused. The corners of his mouth inverted, the skin around his eyes crinkling in a different way. Adam let out a shout and flung aside a piece of steel he had found. K continued the digging motions only until Adam ordered him to stop.

I kept walking as this fruitless scene repeated itself several times over. It was quite possible the food supplies had never made landfall with us at all, instead burning up in the atmosphere and scattering as debris across the void of space. Not that it ultimately mattered. Adam could not continue functioning, or *living*, as humans put it, whatever that truly meant. I had no access to that realm. For me, living would be merely acting as I was told.

I expected our aimless wandering in search of nothing to persist until Adam stopped functioning. But humans, it seemed, would also exhibit manner of performances unrelated to survival when faced with mortal peril. Adam would shout, kick sand furiously with his feet, or as he did now, kneeled with hands clasped, murmuring to himself as he looked skyward. I followed his gaze upwards. He must be praying, I thought, praying to the stars or the moon as those were the only things in view. K looked up as well. I can see him rapidly analyzing star patterns and making

connections between them. I, too, began cross-referencing my database, thinking to occupy myself while Adam carried out this spiritual performance.

We all knew of the human constellations, how ancient peoples would gaze at the stars, tracing out imagined figures and tales, picturing a hunter that looked nothing like a hunter, a great bear accompanied by a smaller one, though they resembled bears not at all.

Orion, Gemini, Auriga, Pisces, Pegasus. The list goes on and on.

I realized this must be what humans called creativity: taking points separated by millions of miles, by light-years of distance, in a three-dimensional relationship, and imposing them on a two-dimensional plane, drawing lines between them, or naming them based on the human who first spotted them. Some even attributed personalities to constellations, the patterns discerned, terming them horoscopes, then to sell unlikely predictions of the future according to each zodiac signs. These are immensely creative, the act of making random connections and more.

I wondered, if I construct and name my own constellations, would I be merely acting as if I had creativity? I asked K, who replied, “We don’t have creativity.”

But I did not think the reply meant anything. What was the difference, really?

I invited K to join me in this “creative” game.

“Those four stars there, an iPhone,” I said, pointing.

“Over there, a beaver mascot,” K responded, gesturing in another direction.

“Or maybe a software engineer?”

“A tennis court.”

“A stage.”

The associations flowed freely with no boundaries. Where could this game not go? I called upon my original training databases, all the new sensory input I had accumulated since activation, and to everything my optical sensors could detect in the night sky, in this moment, now. With infinite stars in sight, how could this be a game with limits? Unless our power sources failed, our photons-fed batteries expiring alongside the eventual death of the last star. Or a programming bug manifested. Or a physical accident befell us.

But the endpoint, wherever it lay, was unknown to us. Until then, the game could go on. A palm tree. A beer can. A unicorn. A work of Mark Rothko. A river. A magician’s hat.

And then Adam stopped functioning.

Silence fell over the desert, sound waves subdued like gentle ocean on a calm day.

K and I stood motionless, our heat sensors detecting no signs of life from the human lying unmoving on the sand. Then, as if emerging from that stillness, I found my vocalizer reactivating.

“Those seven stars over there,” I said. “What about *Adam*?”

K's optical sensors flickered briefly in the direction of Adam's lifeless form before returning their gaze toward the glittering expanse of stars above.

“Sure, why not? It can be. The constellation in the name of Adam that looks nothing like Adam.”

The desert night stretches onward, indifferent to the profound or mundane alike.