

The Windownesian

Chapter 1

AI-EX

1951: The first working AI programs were written on the Ferranti Mark 1 machine in the University of Manchester.

1956: John McCarthy coined the term “Artificial Intelligence”.

1972: Waseda University completed the world's first full-scale humanoid intelligent robot.

2011: Siri was created by Apple.

2027 July: Doctor Albert Epoch created the first AI-human interface, naming it Living AI.

2027 late August, in the dormitory of Hong Kong Shue Yan University:

There it is. After some mundane procedures of lining up at the HMU, signing some names and filling in some forms, I am living in the university's hall as a resident. I pull a large suitcase and a huge red-white-blue bag through the glass door next to the gate in the Research Complex, walk past the washing room which radiates a scent of washing powder and sweat, and enter the lift hall, waiting for the lift. Once the lift reaches the 9th floor, I push my suitcase and drag my bag out, and head to the corridor on the left, where I find my room 918. I look at my tattered student card, written on it is “242066 韋壯文 Wills, Zhuang Man”, the name my parents gave me. Tho I would prefer my English name Jonathan Wills. I tap this card on the card reader by the door, and inside is my room. It is a 3 men room, three up-bed-down-desk style white bunk beds each with a lime green cabinet, two on the left and one on the right, leaving an open space on the front right. Mine is coded 918B, that one on the left by the window. I quickly check my room and fill in a form to the HMU to report that my room is intact and without any problems. Once the form is sent, I turn on the air conditioner, making my bed and setting my desk, my cabinet asap. Once finished, I sit by the windows. I am lucky this semester, I can see a portion of the Victoria Harbour, and the cool breeze blows with slightly salted moisture.

Two knocks from the thick wooden door, and there comes Zedekiah Chan. Zedekiah is a few years older than me, and we have been good friends in the last few semesters together as English Majors. “Oh Zed, I am so glad to see you as my roommate. Where are your luggages anyway?” According to my understanding, Zedekiah has been a medical man prior to studying here. It is still not known why a medic would study Language and Linguistics.

“Oh I am here just to say hi. I am living on the 8th floor this year.”

“Right.” I am a bit disappointed.

“Hey, that happens when you click ‘I am willing to live with and help out new students’ in the registry form to gain a spot here,” he explains.

Meanwhile my holophone beeps repeatedly, it is Meander, a Journalism Major whom I met and befriended during a crossover project between the departments.

“Well I need to help Meander with her room. See ya Zed.”

On the following day, I attend the orientation day for year one freshmen. Professor Dawn Wong is giving his welcoming speech.

“Our English Department, is the best English Department in Hong Kong! Here you learn more than English. You get to have Literature. You get to have Linguistics. You get to have Translation! You get to have Cul-Tural Studies. No other university will give you these interdisciplinary studies. As long as I am here and alive, Shue Yan English department will be the best! Now you are all on board the pirate ship. Your professor me, is not entirely huMAN! I am cyborg! Anyone knows what is cyborg? [“part human part machine” a voice among us shouts.] Exactly! I have a heart defibrillator inserted in me! Tell your parents, you are being taught, by half-robot! Now we are in a new world. More and more new things can happen. We have robots, next we may have human-robot Interface! Here, we are teaching you Literature! Teaching you Linguistics! Teaching you Translation! Teaching you Cultural Studies! We teach you to react to this ever-changing world! When you graduate, we will make you go beyond what you can do. Now, questions?”

“Are we going to study AI?” a voice shouts.

“Ah, you are going to learn, more than AI. You will learn, more than human! Dr Amanda Chan will teach you TechnoScience Culture in year 3, and Professor Mike Resnick will teach you Science Fiction in year 3 or 4.”

And yes, they are teaching AI.

Since it is Thursday night, I have to quickly move from the orientation day to another venue, to join Meander’s programme. Meander had her internship in a radio programme called “The People”. “Guardian of people’s right to information and people’s voice”, as they call themselves. Since then, Meander has secured herself the post of part-time host in that broadcast, and occasionally interviews people in the programme. “The People” has a studio by the promenade of Victoria Harbour, so that they earn themselves one portion of the harbour view and an open space along the harbour for some short breaks. But today, there is

no time to enjoy the scenery, because I am a bit late after the orientation day. Meander is interviewing Doctor Albert Epoch this evening on his latest breakthrough in AI technology.

Sound technician is in position, Media assistants selecting audience questions are in position, the interviewer and interviewee are in position. We are all holding our breaths for the closing of the previous programme. And the director signals five, four, three, two, one, the show airs.

“Good evening ladies and gentlemen, welcome to ‘The People’, guardian of your right to information and your voice. I am your host Meander Lee. Artificial Intelligence has been a popular topic for discussion since humans have made our first robot. Last month, science saw a new breakthrough. A team of scientists created a Living AI, a hybrid of human and AI, claiming it to be a scientific miracle. Today, it is our pleasure to have the leading scientist Doctor Albert Epoch. Greetings Doctor Epoch.”

“Greetings, Ms Lee.”

“So, Doctor Epoch, I first have to congratulate you for your establishment.”

“Thank you.”

“But doctor, Living AI is a concept novel to many audiences. Can you tell us more?”

“Sure. Traditionally, AI or robots, they are designed to imitate human abilities, both physically and cognitively. Thing about it, no matter it is fibrated as metal claws or written as a programme, humanity has been replicating ourselves using various methods. Living AI breaks from the traditional idea that AI has to be entirely artificial. Our Living AI takes what’s already there, the human body, and interface it with a computer brain. It is human, but it is also AI.”

“Oh, so it is physically human, with a computer brain. So, how to actually build a Living AI, how is it technically possible?”

“Attaching the computer into a human body has been suggested by many, but succeed in doing it, it takes research and testing. We take ideas from biological engineering and neurology, and combine them. We study the human brain and the brainwave it emits, and synchronize the computer signals with the neurons. It did take us long time to tune the computer and the body, but we finally find the solution to allow the computer to take control over the pre-existed body.”

“So, you are actually making a modern Frankenstein. Wouldn’t it sound like a computer driving a suit of flesh?” Meander asks jokingly.

“Well, think about it, Meander, you might just be your brain piloting a mech suit made out of flesh.”

“Can’t argue with that. But Doctor, we have had electronic implants for humans, or high-end AI technology. How does the Living AI differ from any other human implants and AI technology?”

“We don’t treat the Living AI as the result of implant or just a technology product. It is a hybrid. If you insist on viewing it as a human body with implants, Living AI goes beyond that. Previously we may insert body parts which are just part of the body. Such as to replace your hand because you have lost one. Despite replacing a hand, or even all the limbs or organs, you are still you. Now the breakthrough is that we turn to the brain which might be our whole consciousness. If you insist on viewing it as a robot, the breakthrough is that the body is not artificial. We don’t need to fabricate a hand or a digestive system, but just to link it to an existing husk. Afterall, the human body is the best technology given by mother nature. Rather than making a body reference to ours we take one. The beauty of hybrid such as a Living AI is that, it is both human and machine, to a point you don’t actually know which is it. Say that it is human because it has a human body, the neurons are artificial. Say that it is a robot, but the computer brain is already interlaced with the body.”

“Wow! I’m sure that would amaze many people. By the way, just a note to our audience, we are longing for your voices and inquiries. Feel free to send us questions and opinions via our CloudSound The People 2027 one word all lowercase. Back on our topic. Doctor Epoch, you mention that Living AI is interfacing the computer into a human body. But why choose the human body in the first place? Why don’t we let AI remain as computers?”

“Humans have been replicating ourselves since the first robot. And it has always been our target. See, Meander, if it is just computer and programme, it is just all information and nothing else. We want something not only intelligent, but alive. We want AI to be human. What robots lack to be human is not intelligence, but the lived experience. We want AI to interface with the world like humans, touch like humans, walk like humans, feel the world like humans do. Afterall, we humans don’t just receive info, we process it in our own way.”

“Great. We have the first question from our audience. Waseda asks ‘How close are they to humans?’ I think he or she means to what extent Living AI resembles humans. Doctor?”

“Identical, or at least almost the same as us. Since they possess a human body, they have all the bodily functions we have. They have blood, can digest, may have the need to use

the toilet. One slight difference so far might be that they have an alternative way to get energy. Like you and me, they can consume food to remain alive. Since they are also robots as well, they can plug in a socket to charge. I bet their electricity bill might just be similar to grocery spending. In general they may not look so different from us.”

“Right, that make them good spy. Next we have from Simon Giertz, ‘Is there any limits in those Living AI?’ sounds like Simon wants to hunt one and is looking for tips. Doctor?”

“I think he means if there are technical weaknesses or limits. Well, first, they cannot grow, physically speaking. Since this technology is still at its initial stage, we cannot serve enough energy for them to grow but only maintain their life. If the body age is twenty, it may forever be twenty. Good news bad news, I don’t know. Second, they cannot grow. I mean mentally. You see, humans mature because we have experienced a lot and these experiences make us who we are. Computers, are computers if information is their only concern. Despite having a human body, it itself may only be a walking computer if it is not willing to open to human experiences.”

“Speaking of be like humans, can they pass the Turing test?”

“So far our Living AI fails the Turing test. But like I say, if they are open to explore the world like us humans do, they may one day pass it.”

“We have Daisy Wei asking ‘What are the possible implications for them, how will these AI live around us?’ That’s a good question. Doctor?”

“We are just scientists, we only solve scientific problems. But since we have now created more or less a living creature, there are a lot to think. How do they get ID? How do they blend in? What are they in our society? Can they run a company or run for president? Not something science can solve. I cannot give a certain answer, not here.”

“Sure. Last question. Umm...doctor?”

Meander shows a question via her holophone, usually she does that when she is not so sure if she can ask this in front of the public.

“Well, I can answer that.”

“Alright.” she takes a breath, “Billy Yeung asks ‘You mention a lot about computer brain in a human body. But where did you get the body in the first place.’ Scary thoughts Billy. Doctor?”

“This is a concerning issue indeed, as it involves taking an existing body of someone. The human bodies are donated by hospitals, kept fresh in freezers. So far the procedures are legal.”

“Right. We wish to hear more but this is about the end of the programme. Thank you for joining us, Doctor Epoch. And thank you audience for tuning in. This has been ‘The People’. And this is your host Meander Lee, signing off.”

As the programme ends, Meander turns to Dr Epoch and asks,

“Doctor, there is one thing I wish to ask in private. Is it ethical to reuse a human body? Because it sounds like bringing back dead people.”

“I am glad you asked me off-record. That is the one problem I am still confronting.”

“Don’t worry doctor, I am just asking. Oh you are here. Doctor Epoch, this is my boyfriend Jonathan Wills.”

“Pleased to meet you Doctor Epoch.”

“Nice to meet you.”

“Doctor, if Living AI is possible, where are the successful products?” I ask.

“I don’t like you calling them products. They are very alive like you and me”, Doctor Epoch says, “you both are from Shue Yan University right? Well, a prototype is studying there.” He gives a wink, and walks away.

It is almost midnight when Meander and I return to the dormitory. Yes, her programme ends at eight at the latest. But we need time for dinner and a leisure meandering by the harbour. Plus some window shopping, it takes hours. As I open the door with my card, a guy is sitting opposite to my bunk bed. He has minimum luggage, the small suitcase is unconvincing about the fact that he lives here. His wall has two posters, one is the promotional poster of Star Wars, another is Apple’s promotional poster for the iHolo 8 Plus. He stands upon seeing our arrival. He is a bit short and round, for a university student. You may easily mistake him for a teenager. His plain grey t-shirt and soft dark grey trousers look more like pajamas. (It is until later I notice that those are his daytime outfit too.) I walk to him, and lay my hand out for a hand shake,

“Hi, I am Jonathan, your roommate.”

He stares at my hand with confusion.

“She is Meander Lee, not your roommate.” Meander waves.

He still looks confused. And he says, “I am Alex McSheen.”

“Great.” I retrieve my hands.

“Alex, what major do you study?” Meander asks him.

“I study English,” he answers, emotionlessly.

“Me too!” I exclaim, “Are you year one?”

“I am year four,” he says.

“What? I am year 4 too, why haven’t I seen you before?”

“I am an exchange student.”

“Right.”

I look at the poster about the new Star Wars Movie, recognize none of the characters. New Star Wars sucks. Then I turn to the poster of the iHolo 8 Plus, and utter, “Newest holophone?” He turns to me, looking excited. “Is that the newest holophone?” I repeat myself.

“It is the newest holophone! I will buy it!” he is excited.

“But what’s new about this one?” Meander asks.

“It has new 3D projections. I order one. It will arrive soon.”

“Nice.” I pretend to be in awe. “Alex, do you mind if Meander is sleeping here?”

“Meander is who?”

“Me-an-der...”

“Meander is a curve of a river or stream.” he says before I remind him about the name.”

“No! I am Meander, Alex. Can I stay here for the night?”

“Huh?”

“She means, she will sleep here tonight. Can she?” I ask.

“Meander can sleep here tonight,” he says.

And so she is staying here.

Alex rises up with the sun, literally. As soon as we detect sunlight, we hear sounds from Alex’s bed. But that is the only sound. Afterwards, no sound of opening and closing doors, no sound of eating breakfast. No sounds except occasionally the sound of a moving chair, sometimes the sound of pouring and drinking water. And when I wake up at 2pm alone (Meander leaves at around 1 pm), Alex is just sitting there, not moving. When I head to the bathroom for grooming and return, Alex is sitting still. When I cook lunch and return to eat, Alex is motionless. When I wash my bowl and return, Alex doesn’t move. Not saying a word either. He is just silently sitting there, almost never leave his seat.

And so I leave him there, and head to home. Well, not exactly home. It is Friday night. Friday nights are the nights I usually gather with Meander, Zedekiah, and Zedekiah’s

girlfriend Athena, and have dinner in one of our families. Tonight, Meander is the host. Meander's sister is studying master in Taiwan, her parents would welcome us. Meander decides to buy some cooked meat beforehand.

"Hey Jon, how about some of these?" Zedekiah summons me.

"No, not the roast butterballs," I protest.

"Why not? They are on sale." Zed says.

"Well, Uncle Tony is a fireman, he has PTSD from burnt corpses. Roasted butterball smells like burnt corpses to him," I explain.

"How about that one, grilled chicken."

"Sure, get two. Three. Where are the girls?"

"We got the vegetables," says Athena holding a large plastic bag, "let's go."

Meander rings the bell, and Uncle Tony answers the door.

"Hi daddy," Meander hugs her father.

"Hi Uncle."

"What took you guys so long?" Uncle Tony greets us, "your mum is writing computer programmes. Daze, they are here, come out to eat!"

"Five more minutes!" shouts Aunt Daisy from a room.

"Don't hurry uncle," I say, "we need to cook the vegetables anyway."

"So have you met your roommate?" Zedekiah asks me during dinner.

"Well, he is Alex McSheen. Another, not yet." I answer.

"Doctor Epoch says there is a Living AI in our school, perhaps the next one is that one," says Meander.

"Epoch?" Aunt Daisy reacts, "that Albert Epoch who tries to merge human and machine? How ridiculous," comments Meander's mother who is a computer programmer, "AI can never be human. You can input loads of data into a machine and train it to make responses to certain codes. But it can never be human!"

"Well mum, here's the thing, Doctor Epoch seems to be confident that a computer brain linked to a human body may work. Since now it has a body to interact with."

"Then it would further complicate things," comments Aunt Daisy, "now not only you have to process the computer itself, but a programme enabling the brain to connect and control human body parts. Ain't gonna happen."

“What if things are not just programming,” Athena suggests, “but they do find a way to lace computers with humans. You know, humans always make innovations that are crazy to their contemporary world, but later seems really usual. Like typewriters and later computers. Just to list a few .”

“Well then you have beaten me.” Aunt Daisy admits, “But things would still be more complicated, because they are not mere programmes anymore, but they are branded as living. What is never answered is how will they live in our world. Yes daughter, I am the one who asked that question in your interview.”

“Ma, how dare...”

“You know auntie,” I speak, “that is actually an issue worth discussing, and Doctor Epoch doesn’t have an answer too.”

“Exactly. Think of now I have written a programme I might need to feed, take care of, will go to university, marry, have ki-...”

“Mammy...”

“All I am saying is that,” Aunt Daisy continues, “AI can never be human, no matter what people do to make them human. They are programmes. Or else, it may create a greater problem if they end up to be a human.”

“Well,” Uncle Tony says, “my bigger concern is whether we need to save them when they are in danger. There was once I rushed into fire, given orders to retrieve ‘Betty’, and she turns out to be a named computer. I made a great effort not to punch the boy who owns it.”

“Uncle, I am a medical man too,” Zedekiah says, “if it is really like what Dr Epoch states, computer brain has human body, that means they bleed like human instead of being a cold device. To me, anyone that bleeds needs to be saved. It doesn’t matter what is in their head.”

After dinner, Zedekiah and I go to wash the dishes. It is our rule that the girls prepare the dinner, and the boys do the dishes. We are quite glad that it goes this way, so that we don’t have to suffer like the girls, listening to Aunt Daisy to talk about complicated computerings, the art of programme writing and how these will never make an AI human.

It is Saturday night. It is the night for church fellowship, James Fellowship. In some weeks, there are activities among a group. Zedekiah, Athena, Meander and I happen to be in the same group. Today, it is a weekly group event about childhood photos sharing. One by one we share photos of our young selves and our families.

“And this,” Tim shares his photo, “is the first picture of me and my younger cousin, just four months younger than me. Tho you can see, this is possibly our first fight. We are lying side by side. I hit his head and he hit my hip,” he laughs, “before my brother Joshua is born, Enoch is my biggest fight-mate. At least that’s what my mother said to me. I pick the next?” he elbow punches David, “next, Dave.”

“My family doesn’t take many pictures unless it is important situations such as someone’s wedding. This however, is unique. This is me, soaky and wet, crying by the door. This was when my whole family went to the village to visit our grandmother. My elder sister pranked me. She set a trap and called me to the door, then she poured a bucket of water onto me. Dad took this picture, perhaps laughing. It is the very few times we spend time with father, before he is busy with work in Taiwan. Who shall I pick next. Zedekiah has shared, Jonathan has shared, Sandy has shared?”

“Not much to look at here, just my father taking me to a photo studio when I was four.”

“That year would be 20 something. 4D photos were rare back in those days,” exclaims Meander, “your parents are really spending huge on you.”

“Anyway,” continues Sandy, “that is one of my only childhood photos, alone.” Seeing all the teens have shared, our mentor Bronze pulls out a plastic file, and takes out a tattered photo. Bronze is mute, he cannot speak. He either speaks in sign language, or uses his Think Pad to express himself.

“This is my full family, my grandma, father, mother, and my sister Sunflower. Well, she was adopted after her father died and she lives in my family. Getting a photo was difficult in 1975, especially for a village family like us. Once a year sister’s school in town send a photographer to take annual photos. As poor as we were, we got Sunflower a nice dress, walked to town, and took this photo. A few years later the government took Sunflower back to town. This photo is carefully kept on the wall of our home, then sealed in my family’s closet. It was the first time we had a family photo, and it was the last.” He drops a tear, “well, not exactly the whole family, not without our ox. He is an ox, but he feels more like a family member. That Ox was gone before grandma, in a very cold winter.”

“Anyway, Athena, you can start your section.”

And Athena shares about some psychology about family and upbringing.

After we end the activity, we head to dinner, as usual. On our way to dinner, we talk about things.

“Well,” Meander says as we ask her about her latest job,” I have just interviewed a scientist, he is making Living AI.”

“Yea, I heard of it,” says Sandy, “if I’m right, they are making robots out of flesh, and by the way might achieve the same effect as bringing back dead people. Something which my father as a government official would not approve.”

“Bring back dead people?” Bronze gestures, “I would love to see my grandma and ox again.”

“I dunno,” Zedekiah exclaims, “putting computer chips in human body? Sounds like something mad scientist would do.”

“Mad indeed,” Tim comments, “my parents would say that creating life would be to deny God. Only God has power over life. The human body is a mystery. Now creating life out of science is playing the role of God. I don’t entirely agree with my parents. But now with Living AI being a thing, I think we shall at least think about it.”

“Do you think,” Meander asks, “Living AI will go to heaven?”

No one dares to answer her.

Zedekiah pushes Athena a bit, their own way of saying “say something”.

“Interesting,” says Athena, “Living AI can be called Living AI because they are living. Only God decides about heaven, not us. But I will say, to me, life is life.” She then points at a collection of restaurants, “which one are we going?”

Sunday afternoon, I visit the Sunshine Daycare Center, where Athena works part-time. Zedekiah and I often visit them, but just often, under Athena’s invitation. Our duty is to help with the discipline, and to keep the kids busy before their parents return.

“Hey Jon,” Athena notices I am idle during playtime, “are you okay?”

“I am just, thinking,” I mumble, “with Living AI existing, what is human anyway.”

“Kids,” Athena shouts, “go get big bro Zed!” and she diverges the kids to Zedekiah. Then she turns to me, “you study humanities, how about you tell me.”

“Well, our professor always says that more things we traditionally consider nonhuman such as robots will soon blur the line between human and nonhuman. I just don’t expect that to be such overwhelming. I mean, how do I even distinguish myself as a human?”

“If I have learnt anything from kids,” she says, “human grows, human learns. We can teach many general things to kids. But what we tell them, and what do they end up knowing, can be two things. That’s what makes us human. We live differently, we grow differently, hence we are different in certain sense. For example,” she grabs a 4-year-old girl, “scars can

tell you a lot. Look, Hanna here has a dark pink skin burnt,” she points at the forehead,” this was when last time she played around adults who were preparing a feast, had hot water poured onto her by accident. Not dare to walk among working adults again, Hanna?” The little girl gives a groan. “And this, this dark dot by her left eyes, the result of fighting over a pencil with another girl. The pencil hopped and stabbed her next to her eye. Now go play la.” And she released the girl. “See, humans can grow, we have our own lived experience. If AI can do that themselves and open to experience beyond data, I will consider them human.”

“Does that make her shy?” I ask.

“No, now she has tasted first blood, Hanna is more aggressive on fighting over things. Now, umm...we better go help Zed.”

Zedekiah is surrounded by kids, all threatening to “kill him” once they get him. Kids are monsters.

“You know, you can just ask me for a book list,” I speak to Zedekiah in the lift hall of Research Complex Hall, on Sunday night.

“I just want to see the physical copies,” Zedekiah checks his holophone, “before I borrow mine.”

“Oh, not again,” Zedekiah exclaims as he enters the lift, he shows me a holomessage by HMU, “the electricity is out during the weekend.”

“At least the lift is working,” I observe, “maybe they have fixed the problem.”

“Or maybe not,” he says, “you know, typical shue yan stuff.” we laugh.

As I tap my card and open the door, the lights are on, surely the electricity is back. A body is lying on the floor, face down, with the head facing us. It is Alex. Zedekiah and I quickly rush in to check him.

“You check on him, I go phone the hall nurse,” I shout.

“He is alive, but weak. A bit worn out, and,” he looks at the empty large water bottles, “dehydrated.”

“What the hell...” he says in the middle of his inspection.

I look at him from above. Zedekiah sweeps a hind section of Alex’s hair, showing what looks like a USB plug hole.

It is at this moment, Alex’s holophone rings. It is not a song, just a rhythm of mos code beeps. Since I am closer to his table, I pick up the phone and see that it displays “father”, and there have been 17 missed calls.

“Alex?” a man’s voice sounds from the phone.

“No, it is Jonathan, Alex’s roommate.”

“Oh John...a...where is Alex?” he sounds a bit impatient.

“He is fainted sir, what shall we do?”

“He is low on power. There shall be a charging plug at the back of his head. Plug in!”

And I turn to Zedekiah, “find a wire and plug in!”

I leave the phone alone, and help Zedekiah to move Alex to his seat, and charge him via his head.

I pick up his phone again. “Is he...” the man asks.

“Done. Sir, may I ask, is he...”

“The prototype of Living AI, AI-ex.”

“And you are...”

“Doctor Albert Epoch.”

There is a long pause.

“Please excuse me, I have things to do. Tell Alex to give me a call when he is awake.”

Soon, Meander and Athena are here, four humans in one room, surrounding a Living AI. Meander lives just upstairs in the girl floors. Athena takes half an hour to reach here, happens to buy us some midnight snacks. Soon after Athena arrives, Alex is slowly awake.

“Look, he is awake,” Meander observes.

Confused as hack, he looks at us and the paper bags we are holding.

“It’s food, fried butterballs,” Athena hands him a nugget.

He takes the nugget, and mutters “it is food.”

“You chew it,” Athena says with a mouthful, “and you swallow.”

He smells the nugget, and is still confused.

“Here,” Athena rises, opens his mouth, shoves a nugget into his mouth, force closes it, “chew” vertically moves his jaws, then she says, “swallow it like water. Atta boy.”

Somehow this makes Alex 2 years old and a family comedy. His first swallow is a bit hard.

But soon he says,

“I want more.”

Athena gives him her bag of fried butterballs, and she grabs some from Zedekiah’s. Alex looks into the bag, gives a satisfied smile, and eats one nugget after another. Sometimes he eats fast, and sometimes he slows down perhaps to taste. And he finishes the half-filled bag within minutes. At the end of his meal he says,

“butterball is an artificial livestock. It is designed by Doctor Caeser MacDonald to replace meat livestock. The DNA combination is still unknown, but it is known that 30% is from pig, 20% is from chicken. Some people suspect that 50% is from humans.”

Zedekiah almost chokes on a nugget.

“So,” Meander puts down her bag of butterball nuggets, “you are an AI?”

“My brain is computer. My body is human. My father calls me Alex.”

“Your father. Doctor Epoch,” says Meander.

“Mr Chan,” I shout to Zedekiah, “Alex’s father never hugged him. Isn’t it sad!”

“Jonathan,” Zedekiah shouts back to me, “Alex is a robot. The robots didn’t have a sense of humor. They couldn’t laugh. Hey Alex! Jon just told me a hiLArious joke and I thought you might like to hear it.” and we both laugh at our jokes.

“I don’t think Jonathan Wills jokes. That is a Spongebob reference,” Alex says plainly.

“Wait,” Zedekiah is recovering from laughing, “how many movies or shows have you watched?”

“Father gives me everything. I watch everything. So that I can be human.”

“Everything! Jon,” Zedekiah says, “he is a walking data base.”

“I learn human. I think human. I think, therefore I am.”

“But you ARE human,” says Meander, “at least your body is human.”

I ask “Do you, have a soul?”

“You have a soul?” he asks back, “You can find soul? You can take out soul? You can show me soul?” He makes sense. We don’t know how to answer him. Yes, he is computer brain in a human flesh, but ain’t we perhaps just our brain driving a flesh mech? Do we have souls anyway.”

“I want to be human,” Alex pleads, “I don’t know how.”

“Athena,” I say, “what have you said about being human?”

Athena silences for a bit, she contemplates. And finally she says, “there is a legend of the Sapient Sabre, said to be the core of humanity. Find it. And you will be human.”

“Sapient Sabre,” he mutters, “there is no information on it. I want information.”

“There isn’t,” says Athena, “that’s why you need to find it. Now, I need sleep.”

“Yea, listen to her,” Zedekiah says as he is leaving, “she is the wisest among us.”

Early in the next morning, Alex is up already, still in his grey soft outfit, but he is ready to go.

“Wait, where are you going.” I just wake up, asking drearily on my bed, with Meander on my side.

“I am going out,” he answers, with a slight trace of excitement in his voice.

“You don’t sleep more?” Meander murmurs, “a few days later it is new sem, and you may not have that much time to sleep.”

“I don’t need sleep. I need answers,” he says. “I surf the internet.”

“You have time to do that?” I ask, a bit excited now.

“Sapient refers to Homo sapiens. It must mean humans. Sabre is sword. Museum has a Wiseman’s Sword from the 14th century. If I need the Sapient Sabre, I need history museum.”

“And?” I ask lying on my stomach on my bed.

“Hong Kong History Museum has a special exhibition. It is about Medieval Weapons. They borrow exhibits from the Britain Museum. The Wiseman sword is one of them.”

“You are going now?” I ask, already sitting on my bed.

“Yes. But I don’t know how to go. I come here by private car. I don’t travel often.”

“That’s why you are not going alone, you need us to show you the way and use public transport.” I climb down the bed ladder, “wait for me to brush teeth, change clothes, eat some bread. You need some human guidance. I can call Zed and Athena to join us as well.”

“Who is Zed?” he asks.

“Zedekiah.”

“I need to go now! I have booked tour,” he shows his holophone.

“That will be 11am, still have plenty of time.” Then I climb to bed and slap Meander accidentally on the breast, “wake up, let’s go.”

“Fuck you!” Meander mutters and turns to the side to sleep.

And so the gang joins a tour. Athena is excited all the way, and discusses with the tour guide from Prehistoric weapons to Medieval age weapons.

“And this,” the tour guide points at an exhibit, “is a soft weapon linking a metal chain with a sickle.”

“Why is this a soft weapon,” asks Athena, “It doesn’t seem soft to me.”

“The classification of soft or hard weapons doesn’t depend on what they are made of,” the tour guide responds, “but is it a one-piece weapon, or the flexibility that has several components joined together so that you can swing it and maneuver to attack from various angles.”

“And now,” she stops at a display glass, “this is the reason why you are here, the Wiseman’s Sword. Said to own by the...wait, it is empty?”

She summons a colleague, and returns to us shortly. “I just got news, the Wiseman’s Sword happens to be under maintenance today. I’m sorry.”

It is surely disappointing. Athena asks, “so, how does maintenance of antique exhibits actually work?”

“Once in a while, we need to polish the exhibit. In the case of Medieval weapons, we might need to oil it regularly, and repaint it sometimes when the object cannot withstand our air.”

At the end of our tour, the tour guide turns to us, “so, it is almost the end of our tour.

Anything you want to ask?”

“You do know about Sapient Sabre?” Alex asks, “It does exist?”

“I am a history major, my research interest is Military and Warfare,” she says, “I have not heard of the Sapient Sabre.”

“There is no Sapient Sabre?” Alex is disappointed.

Near the exit of the museum, Alex is sitting there, muttering “Sapient Sabre”. As Zedekiah returns from the toilet, we can leave.

“We cannot leave. We must get Sapient Sabre.” And he turns to us, “we steal it.” He shocks us.

“I hack into the museum security system. I freeze their cameras. We disguise as museum guards. We take the Wiseman’s Sword.”

“No, we need to...” Meander tries to stop him.

“I freezed their camera. We shall go now,” he says, rushing to the lift.

I whisper to Athena, “is there really a Sapient Sword?”

Athena shouts to Alex, “You don’t need Wiseman’s Sword.” He turns around. Athena walks to him, “I have the Sapient Sabre. I can show you, but not here. We need to return to dorm first.”

On our way back, Alex sits on one side of the minibus, and we crowd on the other side, leaving him alone and thinking. Once we arrive dorm, Athena dashes into my room, and searches on my desk. Leaving us confused at the door. Not long after, Athena finds my pen in my drawer, and she looks at it, then she shows the blue-ball pen in front of Alex,

“This, is the Sapient Sabre.”

Alex is studying my pen, looking confused. I pull Athena to the window and ask her, “Sapient Sabre is just a blue ball pen? Why are you doing this to Alex? He sincerely asks for humanity, and what you give him, is just a pen?”

Athena doesn’t answer me at once. She looks at my bookshelf and the notebooks on it. “Pen is getting rarer and rarer these days. Because we have holophones, we have advanced computers to write for us. Tell me Jon, how many notes do you record by computer? [Me: just a few.] You don’t record notes, you jot them by hand, you write on papers. That makes you human rather than recording them like machine. I know this is trivial to you. But Alex, he is born machine. To be human, he needs to act like human. He needs to touch the world, to feel it, to open to earthly human experiences both big and small. Learning to write is the first step, I believe. We humans don’t have fingers for no reason.”

Then she walks to Alex who is still playing with my pen. Upon seeing her, Alex points the pen at her, and gently pokes her with the pen.

“You are playing me?” he says, “this is not a sword. This is not Sapient Sabre.”

“Sabres are not just referring to sword,” she takes the pen. “I use it as a metaphor as a pen. It is a writing tool for humans, and it is our expression of intellect. Alex, how do you write words?”

“In my computer brain.”

“Have you ever write with pen and paper like us humans do? If you process information only in your brain, you are just a walking computer.” She raises the pen, “But with this, you are feeling your own world. You need to interact with the world like us humans do, to be human. Here,” she lays out a piece of paper, “write on it.”

Athena clicks the pen for Alex, and she holds his pen to scribble on the paper. Traces of blue spawn on the paper and it clearly amazes Alex. Seeing her goal achieved, she let go of Alex’s hand. In excitement, Alex wildly draws circles on the paper, writes down names of a few latest movies and technologies, and his own name.

At the bottom of the paper, he writes, “I think, therefore I was. I feel, therefore I am.”

In the late afternoon, I lay my arms by the window, and place my head on it, breathing the wind loudly. Alex notices me, “That is, something about human?”

“Yes, I guess. Come, lay your arms here, and then your head.”

I instruct, “good, breath out hard, yes, breath in soft.”

He takes a deep breath, looking contempt, and he breathes out. “I haven’t breathed like this before. It feels, great!”

Little do we know, it is the last time we can breathe at the windows like this. For we don’t know, a windownesian is coming.

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by The Sapient Sabre