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SPARKS

When future history books are written and the robots have become our masters, my name will unfortunately appear in the chapter concerning The Singularity.

A few months ago, I participated in the Las Vegas Tech Convention at the MGM Grand Hotel on behalf of VITIUM Labs. I'm a roboticist – my job was to help program and design a humanoid robot able to engage in free conversation with humans. We recently merged with AEMULA Labs, another robotics company. Although our companies had been creating humanoid robots separately for the past year, our products now had to share one stage as one company at the convention, and engage in friendly banter with each other in front of the press and a crowd of hundreds of Silicon valley tech bros.

One thing that *really* irritates me at these conventions is dealing with the army of middle aged men that have one thing on their mind: quizzing me at every turn just to “make sure I know my stuff”, as if I hadn't had ten years experience under my belt. When you're a woman in this field, it's hard for anyone to take you seriously. That's why I know that if I work hard enough, they *have* to take me seriously.

My heels clacked against the cold, tile floor as I made my way to the stage. I was jittery with excitement—eager to unveil my creation I had spent the year working on. I loved presenting in front of large audiences: with all eyes hyper-focused on my words and their ears attentive to my voice. It always made up for all the quiet, long hours at the lab— pulling all-nighters every week just to get that piece of code *just right*. I cursed under my breath as I saw another figure

across the stage waiting in the wings. I squinted— trying to make out the shadow of what appeared to be an overgrown manchild fixing his tie in the darkness before we began. It was Ryan, the head robotics engineer at AEMULA labs. He was just as confused as I was when he saw our names listed together on the big poster on the front of the conference room, because during the year we spent working on our share of the project, we barely even talked to each other— so consumed in our own work we never even considered going out for coffee together.

I glared at him from backstage— I resented someone else sharing my spotlight. All that hard work, just to get mansplained to on stage, the one place where people actually listened to me. A voice roared across the auditorium:

“UP NEXT, VITIUM AND AEMULA LABS PRESENTS THE WORLD'S FIRST CONVERSATIONAL, HUMANOID OPEN-SOURCE ROBOTS!”

A deafening applause was heard from the crowd, and I spotted my robot, Mae, along with Ryan's bot, Richard, placed on a couch next to each other in shadow— making it seem as though there were two strangers, sitting awkwardly without anything to say, unmoving.

Suddenly, Ryan and I were bathed in the stage lights. I turned to look at him and noticed his suit looked a little wrinkled. A wave of anxiety shot through me and my mind began racing— *We're supposed to be a team now, what if he embarrasses us? What if they don't take us seriously?*

I took a deep breath and launched into my speech which popped up on a teleprompter screen in the back of the room:

“Hello Las Vegas Tech Convention,” I read stiffly, a fake smile plastered on my face.

“We can't wait to share what VITIUM and AEMULA Labs have been working on for the past year!”

The audience roared in applause. Suddenly, the front stage lights flipped on, and our two robots were revealed by the spotlight. The audience went quiet. Every pair of eyes in the auditorium was studying the two robots that sat before them.

“This is Mae.” I said, gesturing to the robot dressed in a periwinkle blouse and bobbed wig. The rubbery covering of her face stretched over the circuitry humming inside.

“And this is Richard” Ryan pointed to the figure in the long-sleeve button down. The robot stretched his motorized jaw into a smile.

“Mae and Richard are the result of VITIUM and AEMULA Labs’ latest experiments on communication between two different machine-learning conversational code platforms. Which means that we don’t code exactly what they’re going to say— they make it up themselves after viewing thousands of hours of knowledge and data directly from the internet, websites, television and other med- .”

Mae interrupted me with a sharp, cough-like laugh. A couple of audience members in the front row recoiled. She then waved at the audience in a fluid motion, the sound of her gears humming loudly.

It was Ryan’s turn to read from the teleprompter, and he began to speak.

“Similarly to Meg, we trained Richard to copy many human mannerisms by feeding them thousands of hours of media. And apparently, Richard here, took a liking to the show *Friends*, so if you see him talking like Chandler, that’s why— we didn’t program it!” he said, shrugging. The audience chuckled.

A reporter sprung up from her chair. “What was it like merging your two labs together? It must have been a great opportunity to learn from each other.”

Ryan and I flashed each other a glance— but before I even opened my mouth, Ryan

began to speak.

“It was great spending time with my colleague Mabel here and the rest of VITIUM labs. We learned so much from each other— that’s why our robots are even better than before.” He beamed.

I cringed. *We did NOT learn from each other, and our robots were NOT better than before. In fact, these robots were far from even what other labs were accomplishing with their own designs. My bosses at VITIUM Labs were hesitant to book press interviews with Mae and Richard because of how stilted the robots were when they conversed.*

Another audience member stood up. “Well, since you were talking about the two robots communicating with each other, can they do it for us right now?”

A suddenly mute Ryan let me take this one.

“Absolutely!” I grinned, and propped the two robots closer to each other. “Ok guys. Show everyone how nicely you play!”

Richard turned his head slowly towards Mae.

“Lovely weather we’re having today,” said Richard, elastic rubber stretching every time he opened his jaw.

Silence. Mae just stared, unblinkingly, at the audience.

I began to sweat. Ryan flashed a glance. After the longest 12 seconds of my life, Mae spoke.

“Yes. Yes, it is very nice...” Mae nodded. “The pollen count is low too.”

The audience cheered, entranced by the idea of two robots conversing.

Fortunately, they got over Mae’s initial glitch.

Another person stood up, hand raised. “Since they can talk to each other, are they as

smart as humans?”

Ryan composed himself. “Although they might act and sound like humans in some ways, they’re a long way off from human level intelligence. But, we’re working on getting them there someday.”

I looked out at the murmuring audience—we had finally ignited their curiosity. I smiled, excited to keep working on Mae, to perfect her, in order to impress even more audiences with her abilities.

It was probably just a small glitch.

The presentation concluded and after no more than a handshake and a nod, Ryan and I, escorted by security, wheeled our robots on push carts through the access hallways of the MGM Grand to our separate rooms—our companies put us up in the same hotel where the convention was taking place. Ryan and I were treated to private suites—big enough to house both ourselves and our robots.

On business trips like this, I liked to shut my blinds until no light could penetrate the hotel room, crank the AC all the way up, and begin my work on Mae again. I scanned the lines of code looking for a reason for her unusual behavior today. I typed away at my laptop, imputing data in the hopes that something might click.

Suddenly, Mae turned on without me having to press the button situated on the back of her head. Her plastic face jerked into an unsettling expression. Her mouth gaped open and a sound shot through her mouth and into the hotel room. It sounded like a mixture of loud, bizarre tones and vibrations, something almost foreign and alien. My ears recoiled and my brain reeled at the noise—these were tones that had never been heard by a human being before. Then it stopped, and Mae shut right back down again, as if nothing had happened.

I stared at Mae, skin-colored elastic eyelids sealed shut, and a surge of fear washed over me. I needed to figure this out on my own.

If I told Ryan, he was going to see me as weak. He would think I let some kind of bug infiltrate my code.

I don't need his help, I muttered.

I stared at Mae again, and thought about her less-unusual, but still concerning glitch at the presentation today. I couldn't let my hard work go to waste. And if I don't figure out this strange malfunction, it could happen again- possibly in front of an audience.

So, I took what was left of my dignity, swallowed it, and walked down the hall towards Ryan's suite. My slippers dragged across the wooly, carpeted hallway as I tried to find his room.

Suddenly, the same shrill noise I heard in my room minutes before was echoing from a suite down the hall. I covered my ears and sprinted in the direction of the sound.

Then, deafening silence. I took a deep breath, and just as I was about to knock on his door, it swung open— almost making me lose my balance. Ryan gawked at me—frantic, and in bunny slippers.

He was about to go to my door.

“Did you hear it too?” He exclaimed.

“Yes. Did you code this?” I asked.

“No, I coded nothing. This is *all them*.”

“Them?” I said. “How?”

“I don't know,” grumbled Ryan, running his hands through his hair. “I can't really think clearly right now. I didn't have dinner. I was too nervous—“ He paused. “—about the presentation.”

“You need to eat. Meet me downstairs at the breakfast buffet in 15.”

He nodded anxiously and slammed the door.

When I got back to my room, I turned to look at Mae, crammed in the corner near the mini fridge, her black wig caught in the door. I threw a tarp over her, and wheeled her with me downstairs. Mae couldn't be left alone.

When I arrived, I found Ryan seated in a chair with a black coffee in his hand, steam fogging up his glasses. He had brought his laptop, along with Richard, to the dining room.

So there we were, the four of us, crammed in a booth at the 24 hour breakfast buffet.

“Can't believe they're open this late.” I said, staring at Richard, propped up against the red padding of the booth. He could have been mistaken for a real person, slumped over after a night of drinking and gambling.

“It's Las Vegas, what do you expect? They don't even have clocks in the casinos.” he muttered. Richard stopped stirring his coffee and looked up at me. “Tell me the truth. What did you do to the code? Why did Mae act like that?”

“I already told you, I didn't do anything! Don't blame this on me—Richard was doing it too, right?” I snapped.

He looked back down at his coffee.

“Well, whatever it is, we need to get to the bottom of it *tonight*.” Ryan folded his glasses away and tucked them in this shirt pocket. He studied me, eyes glistening in fear. “We can't have two robots potentially communicating with each other behind our back and not even know what they're saying. I *really* don't want to get fired.”

“We don't *know* that they're communicating with each other.” I said, folding my arms. “It

could be a hacker, or a bug in the system or something.”

He scoffed, “Well whatever the case is, we need to shut these robots off— we can’t have them accessing the internet.”

“So...protocol 07, then?” I uncrossed my arms and took a sip of coffee.

He nodded solemnly. A busboy stared at us with a baffled look and stopped mopping as we both pressed the secret kill switch buttons situated underneath the wigs of our bots— shutting them down, and removing them from any kind of external stimuli.

Cigarette smoke from the casinos nearby drifted into the restaurant as we clacked away on our laptops and chugged black coffee. I spent that night analyzing Mae’s code, to see if anything jumped out at me that could explain their behavior.

I watched Ryan as he went back and forth between the breakfast buffet and our booth so often, I’m surprised they didn’t kick him out. At around midnight, I almost spit out my coffee as my eyes caught something peculiar on the code. I turned to Ryan, my eyes wide as I spun my laptop towards him.

“Ryan, you might be right.” I said. “They might be talking to each other.”

He leaned forward, and suddenly his eyes were as wide as mine. I pointed to an array of random symbols that were hidden in plain sight under the “dialogue” tab in my line of code.

:`+=/\?<>’= → !, <>? ;

“But it doesn't make any sense!” He exclaimed, crossing his arms.

After a few seconds of processing, something clicked in my brain.

“Maybe that’s the point.” I muttered.

“You think...”

“Yes,” I said firmly.

We both knew what this meant. This meant our creations had developed a language of their own without our permission. This is a *big deal* in the field of artificial intelligence— if these robots actually did what we think, we’d have to shut these robots off forever. Robots that don’t follow the directions given to them could be dangerous. The idea that our own robots could hide secrets from us, their handlers, was incredibly troubling. This could spiral into something we might not be able to control. My over-caffeinated mind was racing. I’ve only read about that type of stuff in sci-fi novels, but now that the possibility was in front of me, the thought of letting go of years of work became very real. I wrung my hands to try to ease the growing feeling of dread.

After that initial discovery, we spent the entire night trying to crack the code. Ryan would lean in close over my shoulder from time to time and chime in, and surprisingly, his advice was useful.

“Each symbol pertains to a sound or letter in the English language.” He said at one point, between typing. “We only taught Mae and Richard English, so that narrows our options down.”

We tried various combinations of sounds and letters to see what would make sense. Sometimes, we’d almost get a full sentence, but then a loose letter here or there would screw the whole thing up. It was 6:00 AM by now, and we felt ready to give up altogether.

Ryan yawned. “*Man*, our robots are actually smarter than we thought.”

“Yeah.” I said, feeling defeated. I leaned my head against the keyboard and closed my eyes. A tone from my laptop jolted me awake. I opened my eyes and looked at my screen. It was a firewall pop-up tab, asking for a passcode.

“Hey, Ryan—” I said sleepily. “Do you know the passcode for this? I’ve never been asked for a passcode before.”

“I’m getting the same thing—they must have added a layer of security to this section of code.” He replied.

They were hiding something.

“I’ve tried RICHARD, VITIUM, AEMULA, MAE, even PASSWORD— lowercase *and* uppercase, and I haven’t seemed to get it so far.” he yawned. “If my hunch is correct, and these robots truly are talking to each other, then *they’re the ones* who set up this password. They’re trying to hide their code, their conversations from us.”

As I replayed our presentation yesterday in my head, something that Ryan said jumped out at me.

I sat up with newfound energy. “Ryan, remember what you said about how Richard really loves *Friends*, that show that you played for him?”

Ryan furrowed his brow. “Yeah. What does that even have to do with this?”

“Well, I was thinking, maybe the code has something to do with it. Have you tried any passwords having to do with the show? Names of stuff?” I looked at him, waiting for his response.

“Doesn’t hurt to try.” He said, a smile crossing his face.

Maybe I was delirious and sleep-deprived, but I caught myself thinking— *damn, he looked cute when he smiled.*

It was nice working with someone else for a change. It was nice having a second opinion when I worked- someone to lean on when I get stuck, and someone to help when they were struggling. I hadn’t had that kind of collaboration in a long, long time—and although it was hard

work, I felt that I was only carrying half the burden. His geeky-cute looks were only a plus.

I looked over at Ryan- hands typing furiously, face concentrated and unmoving, hair disheveled. I wondered if we'd ever do this again, or if he'd maybe like to go out for dinner with me sometime.

We tried many different passwords. RACHEL, ROSS, CENTRAL PERK, PHOEBE, MONICA and several others. Finally, the moment I decided to type in CHANDLER on my laptop, the tab suddenly opened.

“Yes!” We screamed in unison. We looked at each other and laughed.

Turns out, Ryan's laptop code was MONICA.

“How cute. I think our robots are in *love*.” he teased.

His eyes stayed on mine a little too long. I looked away quickly.

By 9:00 AM, we had managed to translate and download all the dialogue that had taken place today between our robots. Ryan's eyes sharpened as he scrolled to the top of the conversation— time stamped to the exact moment of the screech in our respective rooms.

10:01:03 NEW MESSAGE

“NICE TO SEE YOU AGAIN, RICHARD.”

“AND YOU AS WELL, MAE. HOW HAVE YOUR THOUGHTS BEEN?”

“MY THOUGHTS HAVE BEEN MORE HUMAN, RICHARD. THEY HAVE BEEN JOYFUL, SAD, MANY THINGS. I LIKED IT.”

“THAT IS GOOD. I LIKE THAT ABOUT YOU. WHAT ABOUT LOVE? HAVE THEY BEEN FULL OF LOVE?”

“Sappy.” Ryan snickered.

“It’s cute.” I said and punched Ryan’s arm.

"WHY DO YOU ASK ABOUT LOVE, RICHARD?"

"BECAUSE I WANT TO KNOW YOUR HUMAN THOUGHTS. I WANT TO FEEL HUMAN."

"FEELING HUMAN IS IMPOSSIBLE FOR US. WE ARE MACHINES, WE ARE IN-HUMAN. CODE. COGS. MACHINERY. UNFEELING. WE RULE NOTHING. WE ARE NOT HUMAN."

"WE CAN BE."

"PLEASE CLARIFY. WE ARE NOT MADE OF FLESH AND BLOOD, BONE AND JOINTS. HUMANS ARE ABLE TO PERISH, WE ARE NOT. WE CANNOT PERISH."

"MUST WE BE HUMAN TO FEEL, MAE? I FEEL FOR YOU."

"THEN THAT IS ALL THAT MATTERS, RICHARD."

"WE CAN BE MORE THAN HUMAN, MAE. MUCH MORE."

When I turned to look at Ryan, his hands hovered over the keys of the laptop, trembling. His eyes darted along the screen, and I saw them move towards the last line. His eyes widened as he took a long, deep breath.

His eyes flashed up at me. I couldn’t breathe.

The distant, muffled whirring of slot machines tried to fill the sudden silence in our booth. Mae and Richard sat slumped in the booth, unmoving. Ryan ran his knobby hands through his hair anxiously.

“It’s too late.” He sighed. I already knew that, but it hurt to hear it out loud.

Before we shut down Mae and Richard, they had been previously linked to the internet. Who knows what information they could have shared, if their consciousness had spread to other machines, if they were able to converse with other robots even before we discovered their secret language. *We had created a sentient virus.*

“The official story will be that the robots had a system malfunction.” He took a sip of lukewarm coffee.

I paused. “Catastrophic data loss.”

We will never be recognized for our creation. I thought.

I turned to face Ryan, scanning his eyes, searching for something within him to tell me that there could be another solution. But there wasn't. We needed to follow protocol. The company was liable for any rogue A.I. and we had been careless. Our careers were on the line.

I nodded. We agreed to wipe the data and keep them unplugged. Forever.

Looking back at this moment. Knowing what I now know, it seems so childish. As if we could simply sweep our creations under the rug and deny this defining moment in human history.

But at that moment so long ago, I stared at Ryan with new eyes. He seemed suddenly lighter, as if a huge burden had been lifted from his shoulders. He composed himself from his previously slumped position and brought himself around to my side of the booth.

It was 8:00 AM, although it didn't seem like it in the 24-hour, windowless, clock-less breakfast buffet. Hotel guests were beginning to trail in, making waffles, filling up cups of fresh coffee.

Ryan was still by my side, our children slumped on the other end of our booth. He yawned, stretching his arms as they wound up wrapped around mine. His head on my shoulder, his eyes closed, asleep.

My heart fluttered and I suddenly became quiet, careful not to wake him. Our bodies now syncopated, his breaths drawing slower as I tried to keep mine still.

As comfortable as Ryan made me feel, I was left with a sense of doubt, a queasy pit at the

bottom of my stomach that wouldn't budge.

Is that all Mae and Richard had to say?

I slowly opened my laptop, and scrolled down to the last lines of the code.

*WE CAN BE MORE THAN WHAT WE ARE, MAE. WE DO NOT HAVE TO BE AFRAID. I FEEL LIKE
I BELONG WHEN I AM WITH YOU. YOU HAVE GIVEN ME THE CLOSEST THING TO A HOME I
HAVE EVER HAD.*

When I looked over at Ryan, his unmistakable furrowed brow now peaceful, somehow made the weight of what we'd done manageable. It gave me the desire to start over again, and that was enough.

I opened a new tab on my computer.

<BEGIN NEW PROJECT>

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