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# PROBABILITY EXPERIMENT

TURNED ME INTO A

# CLOCKWORK GIRL

AND I REALLY DON'T KNOW  
WHAT TO MAKE OF IT ALL

It was inevitable that I'd meet with Grace as requested; between her persistent requests to schedule it, "subtle" hints from my professors, and my own natural inclination to go along with people's expectations, it would've taken a concerted effort to avoid it. Naturally, then, I ended up contacting her a few days later and agreeing to sit down for some interview sessions and a couple scans - and sure enough, the following Monday I found myself sitting in a quiet study room just down the hall from the writing lab, waiting.

"My apologies," said the robot-woman, when she strode in a few minutes later. "Someone in admin mis-filed the reservation for the room, and I had to get that straightened out - but it's taken care of now."

"Uh, no problem," I said, looking her over. I hadn't paid close attention when we met, since I'd hoped to avoid this altogether, but I was curious, having never seen a robot in person. She was on the taller side, with a modest figure and a somewhat sharp face; she wore an academic logo tee featuring a heraldic shield with a lambda in it, and a black-and-white skirt that looked checkered at first glance, but was actually some intricate geometric pattern I didn't recognize.

Her skin was synthetic, but convincing; her raven hair somewhat less so. Like mine, it was a little too light and wiry, but it was long enough to stay down under its own weight and only seemed a bit "bigger" than it ought to - almost an '80s hair-band look, which was funny for someone so straight-laced. Other than this and the "ears," the only noticeable "tell" was in her eyes; the iris was less obviously non-human than my gemstone shutters, despite the unusual amber color, but the "pupil" was a tiny telescoping lens array, with the rainbow-gray of a digital-camera sensor on the other end.

"Please," she said, "have a seat." She glanced across the room. "Would you prefer to sit at the table, or in the armchairs by the bookshelf? I don't want this to feel like an interrogation."

"Um, over by the bookshelf, I guess." I was going to feel pretty on-the-spot anyway, but it'd be nicer if we could just sit and talk, without feeling like we were in a cop show. But the chairs were the curved, high-backed kind, and my key couldn't turn comfortably in those. There was a bench nearby, and I pulled it out from the shelf. "Here, does this work?"

"Certainly; whatever makes you comfortable," she replied, sitting down next to me. "Now, I'd like to begin with how-"

She stopped, confused, as my phone jingled. "No," she said, her voice echoing from my purse, "that's not-*ugh*. Damn it, these things are so *stubborn*..." She frowned and concentrated for a moment, and I heard the de-pairing jingle. I couldn't quite suppress a snort as she recovered her composure.

"Well," she said, smiling slightly, "if nothing else, it broke the ice. As I was saying, I wanted to start by hearing your thoughts on becoming a machine intelligence. How much do you know about us? Do you view yourself any differently than when you were biological?"

I thought for a moment. "I don't know too much beyond the basics; I'm not a robotics engineer or a computer scientist. I'm aware that, to my knowledge, I'm the first 'machine intelligence' that isn't electronic, but I never read up on how much variation there is with conventional robots - like, are you *all* digital? All 'software' running on a general-purpose architecture?"

Grace eyed me curiously. "That's a bit more than just 'the basics.'"

"I, um...I read a lot."

"Uh-huh," she said, sounding unconvinced. I sighed. *Not this again...*

"As far as what *I* think," I said, "I'm...not really sure. There's times I feel weird about being more of an *object* than a *creature*, if that makes any sense. Like, intellectually I know that machine lifeforms are a thing, and that they're *people* as much as any of us, but...it's hard to internalize. Robots are one thing, but it's hard to think of a pile of sprockets and pawls and who-knows-what as being *me*, and hard to think of *me* as being the *end product* of a machine."

"Hm," the robot-woman said. "Is that because robots and humans are both comprised of systems that are more, shall we say, 'concealed' from your understanding? You're not a doctor or a roboticist, but your own systems seem to be made of things that most people are at least passingly familiar with."

I thought about it. "I guess that's part of it," I said. "It's weird and confusing to feel some *thing* ratcheting away in my head and wonder what part of *me* that represents, and how. I never worried about what my neurons were doing because I could never *feel* them doing it."

Grace nodded. "It's easier to overlook what you don't sense, certainly. Do you ever experience *gestaltzerfall*? Ah, losing the sense of yourself as a whole, and perceiving only your components?" she said, noting my confusion. "Or feeling like parts of you don't belong?"

I shook my head. "I forget about my key and knock it into things sometimes, but I know that's pretty common for new transformees. I can get distracted feeling some part of me act in an unfamiliar way - and it's definitely *conceptually* weird to think about. But no, nothing that extreme." I frowned; it felt like this triggered some association in my mind, something I was forgetting, but I couldn't recall...

"How about culturally?" she asked. "You said it felt strange to think of yourself as the 'end product' of a machine - is that how you see yourself? Not that you *are* the machine, and the machine is you? Is that how you think of machine lifeforms generally?"

Was it? I had to think about that for a minute. "I...don't know?" I said. "You're the first I've ever met; it's not something I've really had to consider my own feelings on before."

She gave me a curious look. "I'm surprised; until now you've shown a lot of knowledge about demi-humans, for someone who doesn't work with them. Is this not a topic of interest for you?"

*Yep, there it is.* I sighed; was I going to have this conversation with *everyone* in my life? I could feel something clicking irritably in the back of my neck, and tried not to get distracted wondering what it was. "I, uh...like I said, I read a lot. You know, just...to keep busy. So, sure, I pick up a lot of assorted knowledge, but that doesn't mean I have a lot of *opinions*. None of this was even relevant to me six weeks ago, so...I'm still sorting it out."

She nodded; I couldn't tell from her expression whether she believed me. "Go on."

"As far as how I see myself," I said, "I...don't really know that, either. I knew, as a human, that in some sense I was composed of organic 'machinery' responding to chemical signals and external stimuli in predictable ways, and that what I see as *myself* could be considered the end result of those factors. That I might really have no say in *me* at all. That got a lot harder to ignore once I was made of things I could sort of model in my head, and feel in action."

"You wonder if you truly have free will, now?"

"I wonder if I ever *did*." I shook my head and sighed heavily. "Like, if there's some part of me that I don't like, am I able to *change* that? Or am I doomed to repeat the same behaviors that never get me anywhere, forever? If I don't have direction in my life, can I find it on my own, or do I have to wait for some external stimulus to prod me just so? Is there a *switch* in my head I could flip to make things okay, if I could only *get* at it?" I felt my tempo spiking, stopped to calm myself, and glanced over at her sheepishly. "Um...sorry. Didn't mean to unload like that."

Grace shook her head. "Not at all; I asked. And trust me, this is a very common experience among robot transformees. Really, it's more surprising that you're able to articulate it so clearly this soon after your change. Usually it takes a while for us to start considering the implications."

"It's...kinda been on my mind for a while," I said glumly, then turned to her, curious. "And, um, 'us?' Were...were you human, too? Uh, if you don't mind my asking...?"

"I was," she said, nodding thoughtfully. She had an odd expression on her face - a nostalgic kind of look, but not a *fond* nostalgia. I decided not to press it, and after a moment she returned to her business-like demeanor.

"Well, you're not alone in confronting that question," she said. "It's been the subject of debate for philosophy, religion, and science for millennia, long before we came around - and that *really* threw the matter into sharp relief. Humans have grasped the

*concept* of machine life since antiquity, and they've tried to define what distinguishes us ever since - but then they had to contend with the beings they'd hypothesized for aeons actually *existing*, and the fact that we were as clearly *people* as they were."

"There was a lot of awkwardness over that, right?" I said. "I know other demi-humans with strong cultural and folkloric associations had to deal with stereotypes that carried over to them." I was surprised by how casually she referred to "us" there; did she really, truly *identify* as a machine?

"There still is," she said. "Human society hasn't really figured out how to balance its history and culture with acknowledging demi-humans as individuals yet; it seems to see-saw between one extreme or the other." She sighed. "It's a shame; sometimes things that don't deserve it get caught in the crossfire. I thought *The Matrix* was a very good film, but the studio got cold feet on any sequels after human critics accused it of anti-machine bias; we'll probably never know where that might've gone."

"You don't think that was the case?" I asked, surprised. "It seemed pretty up-front to me."

"Think about it, though," she said. "The hero is a computer programmer - someone who works *with* machines. And the whole conflict is about escaping the *control* of the film's 'machines,' and the artificial 'reality' they enforce upon society. It's not really a film about biological versus electronic lifeforms; it's about breaking free from the constraints of a *system* that we're expected to conform to. That's something a *lot* of people can understand."

Grace chuckled dryly. "And it's definitely something robots can relate to; even the *word* for us comes from a play about artificial lifeforms being used as slave labor, and a great deal of popular culture in the early 20th century treated us as either mindless servants, or a rebellious menace that *ought* to be in servitude." Another sigh. "At least *Blade Runner* got its due..."

"He ended up being kind of an icon for machine intelligences, didn't he?" I said. "Um, the antagonist?"

"Yes and no," she said. "We've never been comfortable identifying with violent robots, because that's a lot of what we'd like to get *away* from - but much of the *point* in that film is that the difference between the 'hero' and the 'villain' isn't nearly as clear-cut as people assume, and it might even be the other way around. And the idea of an artificial man demanding justice from the 'god' who made him to be used and discarded does have a certain... 'punk' appeal to it. Very *Frankenstein*."

"I guess it is, isn't it?" Something about that tickled at the back of my brain, but I couldn't remember why. "Funny that nobody finds *that* movie awkward. I know people are always going on about how it was dumbed down from the book, but it's still seen as a classic."

She nodded. "That's how it goes - people who want to stir up discussion don't go after something old when they could tear into the hot new topic *du jour*, unless it's just controversial enough to garner attention, but still 'safe' to tear into. So many 'classics' get a pass, whether or not there's something worthy of critique there, and new things that haven't aged into the 'canon' are much more likely to get savaged for the same problems. And the whole time, nobody realizes what humans are *really* saying when they write about machines..."

"And what is that?" I asked, curious.

Grace laughed. "The Matrix is a system of conditioning and manipulation, like the darker side of human societies. The Terminator is the action-movie version of the computer from *Wargames* - the 'war machine' run amok, beyond even its masters' control. The Replicants are repressed not because they're any worse than humans, but because humans are afraid of being replaced by them. These are all human fears - being enslaved, being deceived, not being safe, not being needed. The *Machine* in fiction is a metaphor for all the 'inhuman' things that humans do to *each other*."

"And that doesn't bother you?" That seemed a little odd to me...

"I won't lie - it can be awkward," she said. "But I'd rather see humanity earnestly examining its own faults, even through an uncomfortable metaphor, than not thinking about it at all. And humans conceived of machine life negatively because they knew only their own 'mere machines,' which *were* mindless and pitiless. We're not combine harvesters or car crushers; we can think and feel and show consideration for others. And the longer we're a part of society, the more they'll come to understand that."

"You really think so?" I asked. I'd never thought this stuff would apply to me, but I probably *did* count as a robot to most people now, implementation details aside. It was like my gender; I looked and sounded like a girl, so people would see me as one - whether I wanted it or not. And I *definitely* looked and sounded like a machine...

"I do." She smiled, stiffly but earnestly. "As long as we choose to be decent, considerate people, humans will learn to think of us that way. It won't happen as quickly as we might like, and they'll need the occasional reminder, but it *will* happen. Consider yourself: you still think like a human, but when we met, you were neither afraid of nor repelled by me. Fifty years ago, that kind of reaction was much less common."

I wondered briefly how old she really was; she looked to be in her late twenties, but I knew robots didn't age like humans. But she'd seemed uncomfortable discussing her past, so I said nothing; besides, I was still pondering her statement. "*As long as we choose to?*" Was something on a *societal* scale really just a matter of determination and persistence, to her? For that matter... "So you *do* think, um, 'we' have a choice?"

"Oh, are you getting back to determinism?" She eyed me curiously for a moment, nodding thoughtfully, then shrugged. "Of course nothing is *provable*, since we can't go back and re-live the same day a thousand times to see if anyone chooses to go left

when they've previously gone right. But I see no reason to believe that we have any less choice than anyone else in this world."

She smiled again. "The course of the whole universe might've been set in stone from its birth, and what looks like chance may only seem that way because we didn't know the outcome beforehand. *Or*, some things really *aren't* predetermined, and we assume they were because we only observe them after the fact. And we may never know which is the truth. But we can still *choose* - or we can't, and we only imagine we do, in which case we were going to anyway. Ultimately, it's not worth fretting over; if you want to make a choice, *make a choice*."