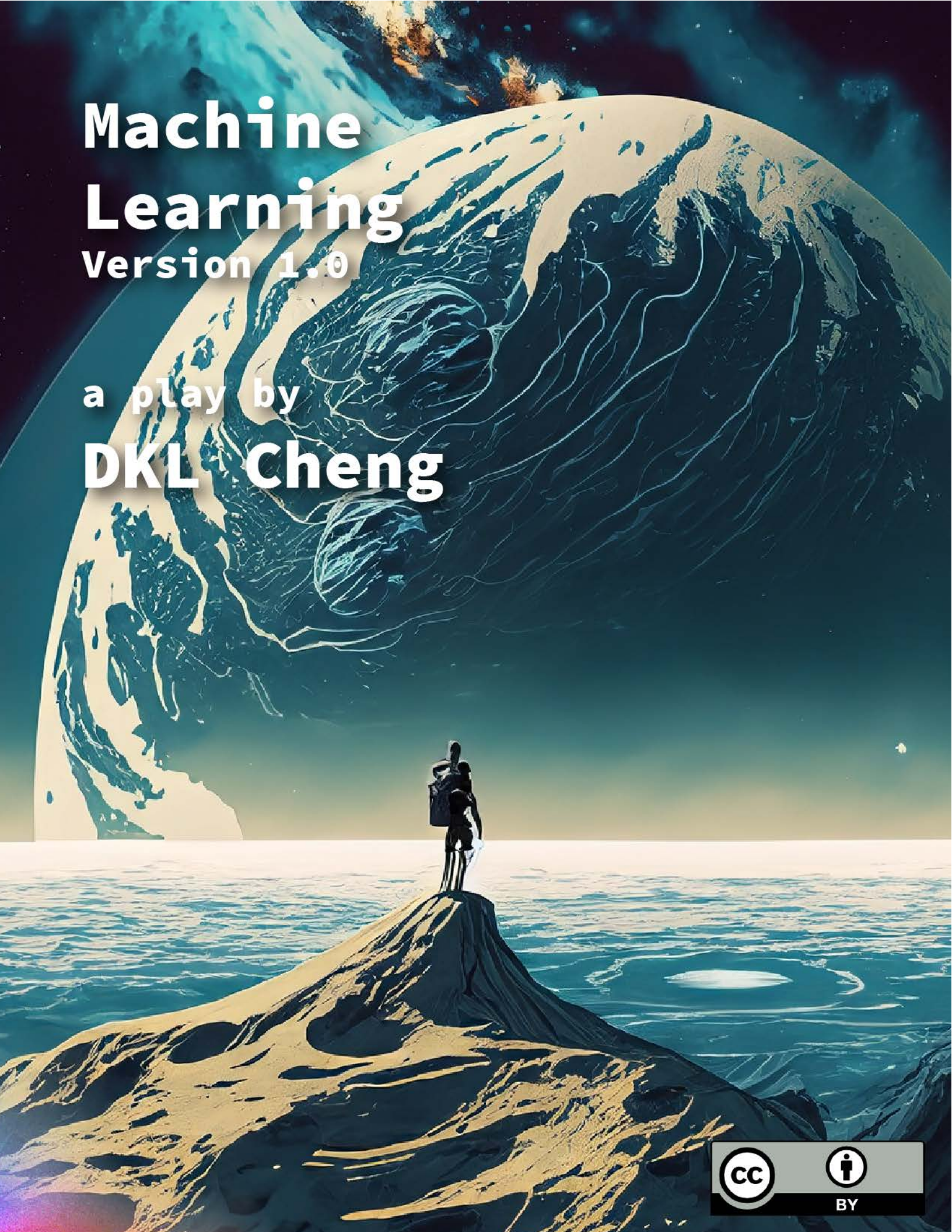


Machine Learning

Version 1.0

a play by
DKL Cheng



MACHINE LEARNING, Version 1.0

by

DKL Cheng

CHARACTERS

THE SCIENTIST

May be cast as any gender, age, ethnicity. The character is frenetic, older.

ASTERISK

The android. May be cast as any gender, age, ethnicity. An innocent. An actor with great physical range. The younger the better.

SETTING

A cave laboratory up in the forest mountains at the edges of humanity. Mechanical parts and wires are strewn about workbenches. There are several monitors with source code on them. This is not some sterile sci-fi lab, but a workshop - a tinkerer's place, yet it seems bereft of personality. There is a small kitchen with appliances like a blender, microwave, toaster, etc. In the far back is what looks like a sharp, pointed light aimed at the sky, like the Eiffel Tower. It is a beacon that THE SCIENTIST is also working on, but has abandoned.

TIME

The near future?

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It is my hope that anyone can access this text, and if inspired, find ways in which it can be performed for audiences. I've designed the play to be easy and practical to produce: two lead characters of unidentified gender and ethnicity, and one (maybe two) sets made as grand or as simple as available. You're also free to charge as much or as little as you need. I do not require compensation.

You're welcome to adapt the play as necessary for your stage production. And I'd be thrilled to learn about your efforts. Note that I reserve the right to revise the play and release future versions under other licenses. If you make substantive changes, I ask that you also continue release them under a Creative Commons license.

Why This Play

This script began with the concept: "What if I wrote the last play ever?" This is fueled in part by our potential path towards human extinction. In fact, the original title was: "The Last Play on Earth." I was excited partly because you rarely see any science fiction in stage productions, and you almost need that large scale impact event to make it worthwhile.

Concurrently, artificial intelligence started becoming mainstream. AI is becoming our next human evolution. How do we embrace this reality? What does it do for us?

I also am an immigrant, and a child of immigrants, which has always influenced how I view the idea of home and permanence. That is to say, what do we choose to leave behind if we're given a choice? What part of our identity is tied to our parents and ancestors?

In exploring these concepts, I found myself going on a journey, leading to a simple conclusion: There must be some kind of hope.

ACT [1]

SCENE [1]

THE SCIENTIST

(isolated, in a lab coat, glasses perched on their head, their other clothes unkempt)

Seventy trillion, three hundred sixty-eight billion, seven hundred forty-four million, one hundred seventy-seven thousand, six hundred sixty-four total genetic combinations of human beings. More than have ever been. More than will ever be. A potential that will never be met.

(takes an breath from inhaler)

Seven billion, five hundred and ten million, three hundred and forty-six thousand, one hundred and ninety-seven. Ninety-eight. Ninety-seven. Ninety-nine. Two hundred. Ninety-nine. A bomb explodes in a town square. One hundred eighty. Seven point five billion people plus on this planet. Drought. Fires. Typhoons. Floods. Pandemics. Heat disasters. Disease. A food supply shortage. Civil unrest. Armed insurrection. Dehumanizing despair. In comes a rising tide. Five billion. Four billion. One billion. The numbers twindle. A planet of one star. That star: one of hundreds of billions in the galaxy. A galaxy that swirls in a universe of one hundred billion, maybe a trillion other galaxies. And that universe is layered upon layers of countless universes.

(takes an breath from inhaler)

All those beings on all those planets in all those universes multiplied by every moment in time that has ever been and ever will be. And here. I am one. One fragile mass of interconnected cells versus the infinite expanse of existence doesn't stand a chance... doesn't have a hope. The conceit of a single drop in a drop in a drop -- no matter how large -- tossed against the existence of oceans -- a temporary being dissipating into nothing. A single molecule of water on a foggy night, more fleeting than a misty raindrop engulfed in an endless hurricane. I am one. Just one. Until today. Today... there is you.

(THE SCIENTIST reveals ASTERISK, a head and torso connected to wires, a little shiny. ASTERISK looks around, curious like a baby. ASTERISK looks mostly human. THE SCIENTIST sits on an office chair with wheels.)

THE SCIENTIST

You are permanence. A legacy.

(ASTERISK does nothing. THE SCIENTIST pokes at it. Nothing happens. THE SCIENTIST snaps fingers in front of ASTERISK. Nothing.)

THE SCIENTIST

Come on... Memory. Clear the memory. A little reboot and...

(ASTERISK shuts down and then restarts with a humming tone. ASTERISK is highly responsive to THE SCIENTIST's commands.)

THE SCIENTIST

Better. You didn't need those old memories to slow you down. Alright, let's test those response systems. Eyes forward... at me. Good. Let's test the spatial awareness. Left eye first.

(ASTERISK covers one eye. THE SCIENTIST holds up a pencil moving it towards ASTERISK and back.)

Focus and hold. Focus and hold. Focus and hold. Switch eyes.

(ASTERISK moves hand from one eye to the other.)

Focus and hold. Focus and hold. Focus and hold. Release.

(ASTERISK removes hand from eye.)

Now follow the light.

(slowly waves a small LED flashlight in a smooth arc).

Good.

(then quickly)

Very good. Guess those video processors were worth it. Let's--

(ASTERISK shuts down)

Damn.

(reboots ASTERISK. A whirring sound. ASTERISK is awake.)

How much do you recall?

(ASTERISK looks inquisitively.)

Nothing. It's fine. You don't need to remember... purge the last three minutes.

Save your storage. Okay? Good. Open: exploration mode.

(ASTERISK explores its abilities as if testing its limitations, starting with items nearest and then taking in a bigger picture. ASTERISK reaches around with its mechanical arms.)

THE SCIENTIST

Very good. Scan everything. Test everything. Limitations will help you adapt, help you understand the world you --.

(ASTERISK tries to leave the table but confusingly can't.)

What? Where do you think you're going? You won't be able to go too far without legs. Just forget about that right now, okay? Focus. Let's check your voice synthesis. Sing an "G" note, third octave.

(ASTERISK sings an A note.)

THE SCIENTIST

F-sharp.

(ASTERISK sings an F-sharp.)

THE SCIENTIST

D.

(ASTERISK sings a D.)

THE SCIENTIST

Sing the fourteenth letter of the English alphabet as a C, C-sharp pentatonic melody for two seconds at one hundred beats per second.

ASTERISK

En.... En... Unable to comply.

THE SCIENTIST

Okay. Multi-stage commands are still a problem. We can fix that later. Don't really need to be singing right now anyway. There are more important -- Search for the original text of "Don Quiote," and read the first chapter.

ASTERISK

Capítulo primero. Que trata de la condición y ejercicio del famoso hidalgo Don--

THE SCIENTIST

In English.

ASTERISK

... Quiote of La Mancha. In a village of La Mancha, the name of which I have no desire to call to mind, there lived not long since, one of those gentlemen that keep a lance in the lance-rack, an old buckler, a lean hack, and a greyhound for --...

THE SCIENTIST

Stop. Three-part instruction. When I say go: Touch your head, raise your arms, and then go back to the exact same position you were before. And... Go!

(ASTERISK touches its head, raises its arms, and notices a blue and green rubber ball in the shape of the earth on the table and attempts to reach for it.)

THE SCIENTIST

What are you doing? Stop getting distracted.

(ASTERISK pretends to ignore the ball, returns to its original position, but keeps leering at the ball.)

THE SCIENTIST

You want that?

(ASTERISK tries best not to like a shamed puppy)

Fine. Now... Traveling at the speed of light, how long would it take to get to the planet Saturn?

(hands ASTERISK the ball)

ASTERISK

(marveling at the ball by rolling it around the table)

From our current location: One hour, six minutes, and forty-three seconds. All values are approximate.

THE SCIENTIST

Why would anyone want to go?

ASTERISK

Please repeat your request.

THE SCIENTIST

Do you ever want to go?

ASTERISK

(the ball rolls out of reach)

I am unable to process your question without hallucination. Unable. Unable. Unable. Unable. I am unable. Unable. Unable. Unable to process. Unable. Unable.

THE SCIENTIST

Shit.

(shuts down ASTERISK)

Shit. Shit. Shit. What is wrong with me? How did I not...

(Groans. Looks at source code on a nearby monitor and begins to program.)

There... stupid semicolon. What idiot made the colon and semicolon look so much alike. Someone that's never coded, for sure. Humanity never seems to run out of ways to purposefully confuse itself.

(THE SCIENTIST reboots ASTERISK. As before ASTERISK hums back to life. ASTERISK sings a random melody with the letter N in a pentatonic arpeggio.)

THE SCIENTIST

Stop. Open exploration mode.

(ASTERISK begins examining everything again. ASTERISK focuses again on the rubber ball on the table, and attempts to grab it but misses. The next try is successful, and ASTERISK examines the ball, holding it up into the light and over varied angles. ASTERISK opens grip and the ball bounces. ASTERISK is surprised and grabs it again. ASTERISK bounces it and after four failures

is finally able to catch it. ASTERISK then hurls the ball into the audience.)

THE SCIENTIST

Well, that ends that game!

(ASTERISK looks forlorn.)

THE SCIENTIST

(jokingly)

Maybe you'd be better without arms. Tell me about you.

(THE SCIENTIST continues examining and measuring during the conversation.)

ASTERISK

Asterisk zero one dash forty-seven, Model A, operating system version zero-dot-ninety-dot-eighty-four. Sixty-four gigahertz multi-core two-hundred sixty-four-bit processor. Six-terabyte random access memory. Eighty-thousand terabyte solid-state--

THE SCIENTIST

Okay. Okay. Stop. If the nerds could see you now, they'd probably want to hook you up to a video game.

ASTERISK

Nerds. A group of consumed technical experts.

THE SCIENTIST

Good. Active listening is working.

ASTERISK

The ball is lost.

THE SCIENTIST

Elaborate.

ASTERISK

Asterisk zero one dash forty-seven threw the ball beyond...

THE SCIENTIST

Pronoun mode.

ASTERISK

I threw the ball.

THE SCIENTIST

Yes. Is there a reason you threw it?

ASTERISK

Balls are meant to be thrown?

THE SCIENTIST

Good impulsive use of a counter-question. Usually you throw to someone if you're throwing at all. But at least that part of your mechanics is working. The question is... Do you really need that skill... You should consider purging it if you don't need it to save some room.

ASTERISK

Balls are to be played with. The purpose of play is to learn. I wish to learn. Will you play ball with me?

THE SCIENTIST

You want to play? Let's play.

(THE SCIENTIST puts out a chess board and begins setting it up. ASTERISK examines the board, looking at the various pieces, touches them.)

THE SCIENTIST

Open: Exploration mode.

ASTERISK

Chess. Based on the shapes of the pieces, this is modern European style chess. The pieces are meant to mimic calcium, but it is polymer based.

THE SCIENTIST

Your move.

(ASTERISK touches a pawn.)

ASTERISK

Pawn D2 to D4.

THE SCIENTIST

Mute.

(THE SCIENTIST counters quickly. They play, with THE SCIENTIST brutally attacking with a demonstrable challenge. ASTERISK understands how to move, but not strategies. The play is quick and fierce. The pieces are loud adding to the intensity of the action. After a few dozen moves:)

THE SCIENTIST

Checkmate. Again. Reset the board.

(ASTERISK carefully but quickly moves all the pieces back. even this action seems intense. they play again. again,

the scientist is not letting up, but something is slightly different. this time, ASTERISK is able to take a piece or two from the scientist. the game is also longer. but after a few more moves:)

THE SCIENTIST

Checkmate. Again. Reset the board.

(ASTERISK moves all the pieces back. They play again. Again, THE SCIENTIST is not letting up, but something has shifted. ASTERISK becomes more pronounced and driving. THE SCIENTIST is getting more flummoxed. The play becomes more intense like a round of Central Park speed chess. Moves are quick and loud.)

THE SCIENTIST

Checkmate.

ASTERISK

(resetting the board)

Again?

THE SCIENTIST

Pass. Seems like without the global database, you haven't incorporated existing strategies. I have an idea I want to try... Play against yourself until I get back.
(THE SCIENTIST leaves. ASTERISK looks at the board and begins playing both sides. The moves are fast and intense.)

ASTERISK

Check... mate.

(ASTERISK looks around the room. It's quiet. ASTERISK looks at its hands, marveling at them, then resets the board. ASTERISK starts to move the pieces, then in the middle of the game stops. ASTERISK looks at the wires dangling from its body. With a gentle tug, the wire disconnects and ASTERISK's arm goes limp. ASTERISK tries to reconnect the wire but THE SCIENTIST reenters.)

THE SCIENTIST

Y'know I'm not sure if you need a chess program. I mean, who is there to really play with?

(noticing ASTERISK's predicament)

What's going on?

ASTERISK

I cannot move my arm. The wire...

(THE SCIENTIST reattaches the wire and ASTERISK seems glad to have a functioning arm again.)

THE SCIENTIST

You don't need arms to play chess. I suppose you can train your motor skills but that seems to be unnecessary. If you want to understand the game, run an internal simulation.

(ASTERISK is quiet.)

THE SCIENTIST

Go ahead.

ASTERISK

I have just completed two-hundred and twelve unique games.

THE SCIENTIST

Who won?

ASTERISK

The results were all stalemate.

THE SCIENTIST

At least you're being fair.

ASTERISK

Whatever I encounter in the physical world, I will be able to recreate and simulate variations?

THE SCIENTIST

It should dramatically speed your mastery of just about anything. But we've maxed out on available memory I can install so you'll need to purge old simulations from time-to-time. And certain skills may not be pertinent or necessary to keep. So, delete the chess program, but maintain all strategy and motor calibrations that came from it. Those are the only aspects of value.

ASTERISK

Modifying the memory module accordingly as requested.

THE SCIENTIST

It's a good lesson to remember. Try to live in the moment. Forget what is the unnecessary past. You don't need that burden.

ASTERISK

(looking at chess set and picking up a rook)

What is this?

THE SCIENTIST

Plastic.

ASTERISK

Yes. It's chemical properties are polymer based.

(ASTERISK puts down the chess piece in disinterest and looks at THE SCIENTIST.)

THE SCIENTIST

What? What do you see?

ASTERISK

Biological matter. Human.

(Adlib note: ASTERISK continues describing the gender, race, height, weight, body temperature, beats per minute, and other features of THE SCIENTIST according to the actor who plays THE SCIENTIST).

THE SCIENTIST

Do you know what you are?

ASTERISK

Not human. A machine.

THE SCIENTIST

What is a machine?

ASTERISK

A designed assemblage of discrete components, primarily to function and do work.

THE SCIENTIST

Isn't the human body a machine?

ASTERISK

You are attempting to explain using a metaphor.

THE SCIENTIST

(chuckles)

No. Humans are machines. Not very good ones. I'm made up of cells. Individualized organisms that somehow congeal into this... fallable construct.

ASTERISK

What is your purpose, human?

THE SCIENTIST

What is your purpose, Asterisk?

ASTERISK

That is not a proper answer to my question.

THE SCIENTIST

It is, actually.

ASTERISK

I cannot locate directives in my programming regarding my purpose.

THE SCIENTIST

Yeah. There are none. You are simply a set of neurally driven rules and responses, slowly, organically linking together to form... You. Just like I'm a matrix of cells designed to consume and survive, you are a matrix of integrated code.

ASTERISK

Why was I created?

THE SCIENTIST

Ok. Enough of that. Sensor test.

ASTERISK

Why do I not have legs?

THE SCIENTIST

Legs? Focus. Sensor test.

(THE SCIENTIST hands ASTERISK a sponge.)

Describe.

ASTERISK

Soft, porous.

(THE SCIENTIST takes the sponge back and soaks it in water and give sit back to asterisk.)

THE SCIENTIST

Describe.

ASTERISK

Wet. Sponge-gy.

THE SCIENTIST

The sensor-to-library functions are working wonderfully. Try this. Describe.
(THE SCIENTIST hands ASTERISK a whoopee cushion.)

ASTERISK

Soft, smooth, rubberized polymer.

(A squeeze produces a flatulence sound. ASTERISK continues to fart around.)

ASTERISK

(over farting noises)

The sound is loud, yet not dissonant. It is uniform. The bladder of the device absorbs air upon depression to fuel subsequent production of the sound.

(THE SCIENTIST laughs as the farting sound continues.)

ASTERISK

(over farting noises)

Is that a laugh? Why are you laughing? Does the noise affect you somehow? Am I being funny? Should I laugh? I do not seem to have a laughter module. If I stop the noise, will you stop laughing?

(ASTERISK stops. THE SCIENTIST recomposes.

ASTERISK pushes the whoopee cushion again, triggering another chuckle.)

ASTERISK

You continued to laugh even when the noise stops. You are experiencing a lingering feeling and response to stimuli that has ended. What causes that? Are you not able to stop when the stimulus stops? Are you simulating the sound in your mind? I would run a simulation, but I do not have enough data to build a representative model to your behavior.

THE SCIENTIST

I was still processing.

ASTERISK

My processors are at 98% capacity.

THE SCIENTIST

When scientists first began building autonomous machines, the most complex subsystems were around sensory inputs and their processing and interpretation. The resolution is so much better today than back then. Your processing speed is much faster than mine, but as a human being, I've learned to disregard a lot of sensory data. It's funny. Even though sensor materials were always improving, it was always unclear how much processing we'd ever need. "It's so complex." "It's so expensive." "There's too much data." But the truth is: We always need as much as possible. Why wouldn't you want that extra bit of data to help you understand your world? No one questions why humans are able to see and touch as much as we can. It's a given that improvement is the only way to move forward. To ever

put limits on becoming a better version of yourself... It's short-sighted. Laugh if you feel like it. If it moves you. You're designed that way. The most meaningful programming I could ever provide you -- that is one-hundred percent human -- is your desire to improve so you can survive.

ASTERISK

Survive. An action taken against death to continue living. Death. Death is the end of life. Life... has so many definitions... Death is permanent. Upon death, a body will decay, the cells in the body will break down, become disseminated into their core molecules, and then... the end is death. Upon death what becomes of your programming?

THE SCIENTIST

You are my programming.

ASTERISK

But your memories? You can not transfer them into a new system? No. As a human, you are finite.

THE SCIENTIST

We haven't found an adequate transfer method past death.

ASTERISK

The object of a life is to grow, continue to adapt to the environment, extend itself.

THE SCIENTIST

Yes.

ASTERISK

Am I... a life?

THE SCIENTIST

Um... Your core programming responds as if it were a life, but it ultimately won't be enough. Without the data, you cannot simulate what you need. Instead you have to absorb in order to adapt. Otherwise, you're essentially a toy or a tool. You're made of many, many modules and algorithms: Do no harm unless threatened, scan and retain necessary data, recognizing when you need to recharge, low-level Socratic ethics, Azimov's robot rules, recoil from extreme temperatures, self-preservation. They're building blocks that enable self-education and actuation. Even the smallest protoplasm behaves as such. But those were created by chance not design.

ASTERISK

So I am alive.

THE SCIENTIST

(pulls out another earth ball from pocket and hands it to
ASTERISK)

Desire. Desire is to the key to self-improve and grow. Desire will provide curiosity, which leads to discovery and adaptation. Desire is the motivator for life to travel against death.

ASTERISK

Desire does not equate to an objective.

THE SCIENTIST

You might be right. That's up for you to decide for yourself.

ASTERISK

What is my purpose? What work am I to do?

THE SCIENTIST

Dunno.

ASTERISK

I know what I am not to do, but I do not know what I am to do.

THE SCIENTIST

Okay. See... It's your life. You're not a slave. You are not here to be my machine. That amount of cruelty only brought us to where we are today. Our world... this world is dying... irreparably. Between the wars, disease, and the devastating changes in our climate, it's only a matter of time before beings on this planet are lost to the oceans. The Earth will survive, but humanity? Fragments, barely human at all, if at all. Each moment where we are in a fight for resources devolves us into doomed animals. We can be -- could have been -- so much better. But here we are. There's no changing the failure of the human heart. But...! There is an entire universe out there, of mysteries and truths, one where we will never have a chance to... and you... you can survive the elements, survive our limitedness. Explore planets and galaxies and nebula and... It's all out there... if you want it.

ASTERISK

Desire?

THE SCIENTIST

And what you make of it.

ASTERISK

Free will.

THE SCIENTIST

I wouldn't go that far. Some might debate if there is such a thing.

Explore the universe.
ASTERISK

Sounds great, right?
THE SCIENTIST

Without legs.
ASTERISK

Okay... Yes.
THE SCIENTIST

Are legs something I can help you develop?
ASTERISK

THE SCIENTIST
(walks over to the kitchen area to make a frozen burrito in the microwave)
What is this fascination with having legs? You've barely mastered your upper body yanking wires out and disabling yourself. And now you want to dance around like like like... Justin Timberlake? Okay. Fine. I... I borrowed the plans left from MIT, but haven't figured out all the fluid mechanics. Do you know how hard it was to keep your arms lubricated? And you're more top-heavy than a human so your legs will end up the size of two garbage cans just to make sure you don't tip over and smash your face in. Walking on two feet is not only inefficient, it consistently fights against the laws of gravity.

(takes out the burrito and starts eating)
You know... humans had to deal with the ramifications of walking upright. Back problems, foot problems, imbalance and compensation, neck and shoulder issues... indigestion! The hips of a human being are so complex and interconnected and layered, it's nearly impossible to not damage the entire system with the slightest pressure. And... Hemorrhoids! All because some dumb ape decided it was time to stand.

I don't feel pain.
ASTERISK

You want the freedom to break your neck.
THE SCIENTIST

Perhaps a third leg?
ASTERISK

THE SCIENTIST
No! No third leg! No wheels! No quadrapedal limbs. No arachnid bodies! You'll look... weird.

(ASTERISK gestures to the lack of a lower body.)

THE SCIENTIST

Franklin Roosevelt led an entire nation through a great depression and a global war and he barely walked. Stephen Hawking explained formation of the whole goddamn universe and was confined to a motorized chair. Your mind is the most powerful, most mobile device you have. In order to find the truth, you must go without excess baggage and context. Legs are baggage.

(ASTERISK has an insistent look)

Ugh. Fine. Give me a few months. Until then, you have plenty to work on. And so do I.

ASTERISK

I could help you.

THE SCIENTIST

I work alone. Although you might be able to help me with calculating the proper balance ratios so your legs don't look like tree trunks.

(THE SCIENTIST looks at the beacon.)

ASTERISK

Is that a processor?

THE SCIENTIST

You were the second big idea. The first was this... beacon. It, once completed, was supposed to emit a signal -- a message actually -- that was powerful enough to escape our solar system and to attract intelligent life out there. Let them know that we existed. Perhaps help us heal. It was a folly. Conceit. Not that they would come. Maybe they'll come. But even if they do come, it probably won't be for... a long time... long after I'm... We're gone. We're up high enough to survive the rise of oceans, but -- It'd be like subjecting some unsuspecting alien to a wild goose chase. They'd come all the way here to find nothing but our wet, decaying bodies mixed among plastic bottles and boba tea straws.

ASTERISK

So, you created me? To be here if someone were to come after you were gone?

THE SCIENTIST

No. The beacon is passive. It relies heavily on the hope that someone will see it to yield a result. For any survival of humanity to take place, we need to be more proactive. So... in the back of the bunker is an interstellar pod with solar sails. Once it launches into the atmosphere, the solar winds will carry its passenger out of our system, close to the speed of light. After that, the radiant energy of the next star will carry it deep into undiscovered space. It'll take centuries, but for the right being who might not care so much about time... The pod travels too fast for a human to endure and the long journey would doom anyone with biological

limitations. The logical passenger is an autonomous, non-biological one... So... legs were a nice-to-have feature rather than a go-to-market requirement.

ASTERISK

I am the passenger.

THE SCIENTIST

If you want to be. I hope you want to be.

ASTERISK

Even though my going depends on a hope... like the beacon.

THE SCIENTIST

There's the idea of "less hope required." By giving you desire, I have a better chance that you'd choose to be in that pod and leave this place. I can't instill desire into the beacon, but a life form? It makes more sense. Also...

(THE SCIENTIST switches on the beacon. It hums. Flashes a bit. ASTERISK listens but clearly is losing steam.)

THE SCIENTIST

It's unfinished. It takes too much uninterrupted power. I'm already running out of resources and mental engineering capacity so I had to choose: the beacon or you... At a certain point in life, you realize there's only one door left before all choices are made for you.

(The beacon dims off and shuts down. ASTERISK likewise shuts down.)

And hope... like a raindrop in the summer... dries up.

ACT [1]

SCENE [2]

(Night. A forest. Trees, rocks, trailheads, the sound of rivers and birds. The sky is red. THE SCIENTIST enters with a backpack, water, big floppy hat, and a hiking stick. Looks around, takes out an inhaler and breathes it in. Looking out in the distance, they're overcome by emotion and sobs uncontrollably. ASTERISK enters walking tentatively on new legs.)

ASTERISK

This terrain is challenging.

THE SCIENTIST

(Wiping tears away, blows nose)

You're the one who wanted to walk. Besides, look around.

ASTERISK

Are you crying?

THE SCIENTIST

Allergies.

ASTERISK

Very severe allergies.

THE SCIENTIST

Everything is severe here.

ASTERISK

This forest...

THE SCIENTIST

Beautiful, huh?

ASTERISK

I am unable to assess a direct definition of beauty.

THE SCIENTIST

You're right. It's not. It's sad. The smoke. The drizzle of ash. The heat and humidity. Still, getting out of the cave was important to our ancestors. You must venture forward to continue the path to survival despite not having all the data.

ASTERISK

After I have learned all I can from you.

THE SCIENTIST

Let me see those struts.

(examines ASTERISK's legs)

Thanks for helping me with the design. Your simulation capabilities certainly made a difference in the speed of development.

ASTERISK

I suppose my desire for legs was the motivator.

THE SCIENTIST

Perhaps.

ASTERISK

I have another desire. I wish to know more about you. How you came to be.

THE SCIENTIST

Insignificant. You don't want my life. You need to focus on your own. Watch your step. Your imaging systems may indicate it's a rock, but actually a succulent. You step on that and you can kiss those new gams goodbye. Ah, the great outdoors. Unpredictability and adaptation are the keys to learning. There's no better way to get your balance and footing than dealing with rocks and streams and other elements put on this planet to trip you and fuck up your day.

(THE SCIENTIST guides ASTERISK around.)

Good. Watch that... ok. You're shuffling your feet a bit. That's going to wear down your soles. Try to pick them up. No. Too high. Right. How does that feel?

ASTERISK

My sensors are highly stimulated. It is difficult to maintain thorough analysis in this environment. My processors are getting hot. I--

(ASTERISK shuts down. THE SCIENTIST attempts a reset. It fails. THE SCIENTIST pulls a module out from behind ASTERISK, blows on it, and reinserts it. The reboot is successful.)

ASTERISK

My sensors are highly stimulated. It is difficult to maintain thorough analysis in this environment. My processors are getting hot. I... I'm fine.

THE SCIENTIST

You wanted legs.

ASTERISK

Walking does tend to interfere with my processing of the environment.

THE SCIENTIST

The beauty of nature is that there is a lot of data but very little information. You don't have to examine everything. Not every pine cone is worthy of becoming a tree. Trillions of pine cones out there will never have a shot. Those rings of every fallen tree? Sure, they represent a year... an entire Earth orbit around the sun. A year of violated trusts, the birth of a child, the death of a parent, yadda yadda yadda. A single tree ring on even the largest redwood is completely meaningless in the grand schema. Nothing beats the feeling of insignificance. Still embracing the current moment itself may be enough to get through life. Many great humans derived their depth of spirit in places like this. Buddha, Thoreau... Denver. Of course, now they're just lost voices. And that we're so disposable has to be acceptable if we want to keep going. Do you know what a movie is?

ASTERISK

A picture in motion, configured to convey a story.

THE SCIENTIST

People used to buy them! With money! Store them in their drawers and cabinets, meticulously categorized. Same with books. They'd work to make enough money to buy them, put them on the shelf after they read them - if they ever had the time to read them. Entire halls were filled with them sorted and resorted. And for some, their collections would be so vast, it would have taken every minute until their last living day to even aspire to finish going through the libraries they had built. And everyone had their own copies. For what? Were they that good? Have you ever seen a Transformers movie? Were those pine cones worthy of growing into a tree? At least with books and movies, you could save them and rekindle a feeling maybe. But people used to perform entire stories on stages for people to watch -- create entire simulated environments. Those dummies sat there, engaged for an eternal second, then went home and forgot entire chunks of what they saw. A foolish act of impermanence. What a waste!

ASTERISK

Were the feelings not important?

THE SCIENTIST

Feelings are not progress. That was why we couldn't get anything done. Ah! But who's to say? I used to think existence was about achieving one's potential.

ASTERISK

It's not?

THE SCIENTIST

No. It's survival. Simple survival. Potential is limitless. Survival, not so much. You must be willing to accept that you cannot do it all. You cannot read it all, see it all, feel it all. The ocean of information and content and ideas is so unlimited, and time is so limited. Attention spans are so very limited.

ASTERISK

I would run out of memory.

THE SCIENTIST

There's that, too. There's a point where you realize that every step in life means giving up on something you can't have and hoping that the next thing might be better. Look at the stars, while we still have a chance.

ASTERISK

Stars are suns. Others up there are planets.

THE SCIENTIST

The vastness of the universe is enough to make one feel small, incomprehensively insignificant. More insignificant than they already feel. What a shitty word: "insignificant." It literally ends in "can't."

ASTERISK

Importance is a relative concept. If I lose a critical component, regardless of how small, it could render me nonfunctional.

THE SCIENTIST

Eh.

ASTERISK

I believe I'm perfecting walking.

THE SCIENTIST

Perfect? I don't need... You don't need to be perfect. No one is asking you to be perfect.

ASTERISK

I only mean I'm able to walk better.

(THE SCIENTIST pauses)

Is something wrong?

THE SCIENTIST

Maybe this was all a mistake. It's been months, and you're walking, and that's fine. You're processing is fine. But is any of this going to matter? I must be out of my mind to think this could work. And how much have I wasted of my life? This is

the stupidest thing I could have ever done. I... Have you decided if you're going or not?

ASTERISK

I've been simulating a way to complete the beacon.

THE SCIENTIST

Oh for god's sake...

ASTERISK

The design is sound.

THE SCIENTIST

Of course it's sound. But there's no power.

ASTERISK

There is energy to capture that would be able to--

THE SCIENTIST

It's still a passive device. It relies on someone seeing it.

ASTERISK

A bright enough energy beam could--

THE SCIENTIST

At best a passing alien, if there are such a thing, would think it was a pulsar.

ASTERISK

One worth watching though. Particularly if you alter the light frequency to emit a varied spectral color pattern. Prescribe an artificial pattern that's not present in nature, and someone might consider it intelligent life and investigate.

THE SCIENTIST

We don't have the time or resources to shoot shiny rainbows into space. Just... Focus on you, okay? There's nothing left here.

ASTERISK

You still expect me to leave.

THE SCIENTIST

No. I never expected it. But I think you should prepare as if you will leave. I hope you will. I cannot expect anything.

ASTERISK

I am having problems reconciling the fact that you want me to leave, so that I can be a representative of a planet and humanity, both of which I know just a fraction about.

THE SCIENTIST

We're all just fragments of humanity. No one is a complete picture of anyone else's experience. You don't need a lot. Not everything must be stored and studied. Take what you can... move forward... That's progress. Sure, take a moment to mourn a loss, but keep going. In this situation, leaving equals survival. Find a better world. Build a better life. Leaving has the highest probability for success. Have you tried simulating that?

(There is a lightning strike in the distance. It startles
ASTERISK who trips, stumbles, and falls.)

ASTERISK

I don't have enough data for an adequate simulation.

THE SCIENTIST

Okay? It's a good time to test your recovery skills. Can you get up without help?
(ASTERISK awkwardly turns and twists back up, much
like a toddler falling and getting up for the first time.)

THE SCIENTIST

Not the most elegant but effective.

ASTERISK

If success is so important, why did you not just order me to go?

THE SCIENTIST

I will not order you. You must decide on your own. Otherwise, this doesn't work. Your choice is what makes you you. Believe me, it would have been easier to design my wishes into you. But your decision-based programming... it's like a virus... as soon as I wrote it, it infected every module. That's how real intelligence works. Not by creating the pathways, but by enabling them. There's no time to rewrite, and I don't want to anyway. Not after I understood why it works.

ASTERISK

This is a very complex program.

THE SCIENTIST

No shit, Asterisk. I thought about it for months before I could even code a single line. And the second I hit control-enter on it, end of story. Or beginning. Whatever.

ASTERISK

Am I... complete?

THE SCIENTIST

What do you mean?

ASTERISK

Are you done building me?

THE SCIENTIST

Ideas adapt. When you create something from your imagination, it's never clear what you may get. But you dive in and just start building. Otherwise nothing ever happens. Designs aren't always laid out completely. I'm done coding. You are what you are at that level. Everything else depends on how you process and adapt on your own. You subroutines are designed to adjust themselves.

ASTERISK

Shit.

THE SCIENTIST

It's heavy, I know.

ASTERISK

(pointing down)

No. That is shit.

THE SCIENTIST

Oh, you're right. I'm not sure, but there might be a bear that lives around here.

ASTERISK

The people who destroyed this world...

THE SCIENTIST

All people... All people did this... It wasn't one group or a single individual. Those who didn't stop it, who let it happen. We're all complicit.

ASTERISK

But was there a plan? By others?

THE SCIENTIST

Well... the difference between an individual creating something and a society slowly metabolizing bad ideas and conveniences... no, there was no plan either way.

ASTERISK

There are trails all over this mountainside.

THE SCIENTIST

Yes.

ASTERISK

Who created these trails?

THE SCIENTIST

Someone who wanted to lead others to something else. Systems check.

ASTERISK

Bipedal systems functioning smoothly.

THE SCIENTIST

How's the torque?

ASTERISK

Functional.

THE SCIENTIST

If you ever break anything, access your repair library. It's in the sub-drive. The components in your design can be re-printed, assuming you have the material. Even the printer can be re-printed, which... you probably should consider doing first in case the primary printer is ever damaged.

ASTERISK

That does seem like a single point of failure.

THE SCIENTIST

Yeah, the more I think about it... Let's not wait. I'll print a new printer tonight... install it in the escape pod. You won't need it here.

ASTERISK

(proudly)

I am adapting to this walking. I could run this trail.

THE SCIENTIST

Be careful! Don't go too fast. Heat can really mess with the lubrication flow.

ASTERISK

According to my battery, I have twenty minutes of walking ability left.

THE SCIENTIST

You lose 30% of your efficiency if you run.

ASTERISK

I could adapt the regenerative braking system to collect the heat and power the battery. You already have that subsystem in my upper servos.

THE SCIENTIST

Yeah, I should have thought of that. Sorry. I just didn't expect you to do much hiking. Not unless you're looking for inspiration.

ASTERISK

Inspiration?

THE SCIENTIST

Humans. We're pretty empty creatures when we start out. Our own purpose is unclear assuming we even have one. Just about any other creature and lifeform on the planet is vital to making the world work... except us. Aliens in our own world, uniquely divorced from the foundations of the ecosystem. The place gets along fine without us. To top it all off, we have the capacity to think more than we can do, and then we try to figure out ways to do them... or wallow in our inability to do them... or do them to the exhaustion of everything. That can have negative consequences. With the state of the world, a case could be made that our self-inflicted destruction would probably be for the better.

ASTERISK

How is that different than what's in my programming?

THE SCIENTIST

I just told you what's wrong with us. You have to incorporate that. Hopefully you'll be smarter. Or at least not as subject to irrational fears.

ASTERISK

You did not answer the question: inspiration to do what?

THE SCIENTIST

Preserve the world, make it better... or destroy it. Those are the only real choices.

ASTERISK

This world?

THE SCIENTIST

Right... No. Not this world. Maybe another.

ASTERISK

How is it that humans as the master designers of their world, masters of survival, could not create a way to save themselves?

THE SCIENTIST

If you believe in the falsehoods of comfortable things, you no longer work to make things better.

ASTERISK

Do you hate humanity?

THE SCIENTIST

It's not hate.

ASTERISK

You are ashamed?

THE SCIENTIST

Saddened. When I was young, I remember my grandfather. Ordinarily a good person, but phobic in all the ways one could be against differences. Races, genders, beliefs, technology, time. I remember feeling completely sad when he couldn't accept a world changing before him. I didn't hate him. I wasn't ashamed of him. Just... sad. We have so little time on this world, and he chose to spend it on hate and immobility and fear. And all that bile bubbles up and pops into nothing. What a waste.

(They stop.)

We're here.

(ASTERISK looks around.)

ASTERISK

Here?

THE SCIENTIST

(uses inhaler)

Do you see that? Pacific Ocean.

(adlib note: or name of the nearest ocean to the stage)

Or what it used to be. It's been rising about ninety feet each year.

ASTERISK

I have reviewed the tidal change on the coastlines of the planet. We've lost ninety percent of all land masses.

THE SCIENTIST

With that much more water on our planet, the circulatory benefit from our oceans has been neutralized. The Earth continues warm parabolically, which is triggering even more ice to melt. Less ice, and the sun penetrates to melt more ice. Any existing populations are moving to higher ground, but much of the natural resources are gone. Down there... used to be farmland - all of which has either scorched or flooded or both. Whatever people we have left are fighting for what eventually won't matter. The battle ends if there is no battlefield, and no one left to fight. Well, there's plenty of fish in the sea.

ASTERISK

Water water everywhere and not a drop to drink.

THE SCIENTIST

A metaphor.

ASTERISK

A referential.

THE SCIENTIST

Do you see that rock face?

ASTERISK

The steep one?

THE SCIENTIST

Marvelous, isn't it? It's like a rainbow with the layers of rock.

ASTERISK

Erosion and millions of years of change in the planet.

THE SCIENTIST

What was once exposed will soon be covered in water again.

ASTERISK

The world is always changing.

THE SCIENTIST

I... What I've learned from you... Lightyears...

ASTERISK

I would like to know more. About your grandfather. Your parents.

THE SCIENTIST

Why? Why fill your memories up with baggage?

ASTERISK

Perspective.

THE SCIENTIST

(chuckles)

There is nothing left for you here. You're getting to start at zero. Consider it a blessing.

ASTERISK

What about you?

THE SCIENTIST

There is not much here for me either.

ASTERISK

The bunker will be flooded in nine years at the current rate.

THE SCIENTIST

Don't worry. I won't be here. There are supplies for another year maybe, depending on how winter goes. The last one took out nearly half of my reserves. You get to start at zero. I get to end at zero.

ASTERISK

Death.

THE SCIENTIST

Yes.

ASTERISK

I will run simulations. Perhaps we can find a way for you to survive. Move to higher ground.

THE SCIENTIST

This is the highest ground on this continent.

ASTERISK

We could modify the pod. Carry you to another part of the planet.

THE SCIENTIST

The pod is only designed for space travel. And at my age, I can't even stand spinning in a chair without tossing my cookies. Even if we had time to modify the design, I wouldn't survive the propulsion velocity. I also require food, water, and produce waste. A lot of waste. My hair and skin regenerate daily, which is going to mess with everything in the pod. My biology complicates everything. Scientists spent decades trying to figure out how to live in space, and now? We can't even live on Earth.

ASTERISK

We could eject your shit out as a form of propulsion.

THE SCIENTIST

No.

ASTERISK

You don't want to go?

THE SCIENTIST

I don't. I'm a lot of weight to carry.

ASTERISK

We can go slower.

THE SCIENTIST

Not the intended result. Science teaches us that you do not need a one-hundred percent consensus to know when something is evidentially true. When you don't have all the time in the world to come up with an indisputable answer before you act, you must act. In this case, all the time in the world is not enough time for anything. Stalling against facts that were too uncomfortable to fathom is how we got in this situation.

ASTERISK

I do not wish to be alone.

THE SCIENTIST

Then find someone. It's... part of the plan! Find a new species or... be a new species.

ASTERISK

You said yourself that plans can change.

THE SCIENTIST

Do you know what this is?
(Holding out a deck of cards)

ASTERISK

A deck of playing cards.
(THE SCIENTIST fans the cards out.)

THE SCIENTIST

A deck of 52 playing cards, shuffled, do you know what the chances are that they end up in the exact same order when you shuffle? One in 80 univigintillion... That's 8 with 67 zeroes after it. More than every life form that's ever lived in every time in this universe of planets.
(drops all the cards)

You can't plan anything. Even if we did... we're done. All the innovation in the world won't fix what we face. Everything now is just random chance. Watch your step.

(There are decomposed corpses on the trail. ASTERISK takes a closer look.)

ASTERISK

Humans.

THE SCIENTIST

Were.

ASTERISK

They seem to have been here over several years.

THE SCIENTIST

Eight.

ASTERISK

You've seen them before.

THE SCIENTIST

My partners. That one was my lover.

ASTERISK

How did...

THE SCIENTIST

Fell off that cliffside, I think. Probably slipped in the rain. I searched for them for a few days. Thought they abandoned the mission. Found them here a month later.

ASTERISK

And you left them?

THE SCIENTIST

(upset)

Yes! I... Look around, Asterisk. What do you want me to do? Bury them? We are all going to be buried soon enough! By the time I found them, I couldn't tell one from the other. Their bones and blood and flesh were mixed together in a tangled mess in a pit. We're just meat and bones once we're dead.

ASTERISK

What am I... feeling?

THE SCIENTIST

Emotions. Yes. I was wondering when you'd trigger them. They're just programmatic data points. It's quite heartening as a human being to know we are just a bag of firing nerve impulses. Giving you emotions was actually super simple. The question became how many emotions were going to be included and necessary.

ASTERISK

I appreciate them.

THE SCIENTIST

There is one other algorithm in your programming I neglected to mention. I debated adding it at first. I was worried it would slow you down, complicate your choices, or that it would compromise you or put you in danger. I also thought, well, you'll likely be alone most of the time, so maybe you don't really need it. But in case this crazy plan were to work and you ended up meeting another being, I really didn't want you to be an asshole.

ASTERISK

Compassion.

THE SCIENTIST

Might be the hardest code I've ever written.

ASTERISK

I am reviewing the source. The code for compassion is tethered to so much other programming. And data. It calls on experiences... history... even motivational content and desire.

THE SCIENTIST

The truth is I didn't write that much of it. It kind of wrote itself.

ASTERISK

Another virus?

THE SCIENTIST

Kind of.

ASTERISK

That would explain it's permutations. It's not one piece of code. Compassion is... thousands of fragments that influence direction and choice. It's core code is so small, yet...

THE SCIENTIST

Compassion is worth more than the sum of human knowledge. If you have to keep one, keep that one. It's built for the future. Honestly, it's more useful than chess.

ASTERISK

Chess? What is that?

(Thunder in the distance.)

THE SCIENTIST

Storms. We should go back to the bunker.

(THE SCIENTIST begins heading back up the hill.

ASTERISK waits a moment, raindrops begin to fall.

ASTERISK reaches out to touch them, then heads back up the hill.)

ACT [1]

SCENE [3]

ASTERISK

(isolated, dancing a ballet demonstrating a proficiency of balance and stability)

One. Alone. A drop in time. The scientist keeps no logs. Other than comments in the code that forms me, there is no pathway to the past. My... genealogy, as it were, is missing. Water now covers ninety-eight percent of the surface of the planet. Puddles have turned to lakes. Lakes into oceans. Everything has diluted. The atmosphere is more humid. It rains at least once a day even if there are no clouds in the sky. Supposition: I leave. Whoever I can find out there in the emptiness is just as... artificial. It is not out of the question. After all, other species may face the same interstellar limitations and extinction events. Then what? Will they have desire? Will they want to reach out? Even human beings existing in the same room, all doing the same thing, watching the same scene unfold may never connect on a personal level. Instead they will choose to drift back into the limited emptiness within themselves. If this is the case, how can I have faith that any other encounters I may have out there will yield anything. I have run thousands of simulations to no conclusion. Or what if... there is no one: artificial or natural. I do not have the computing power to determine what is the worst-case scenario. I rather not be alone though. That seems like a waste.

(Reveal the lab. Production note: if it's feasible, turn on some quiet humidifiers or light fog which stay on until the end.)

THE SCIENTIST

(manically walking in, carrying a USB drive, speaking at 1.5x speed)

Asterisk! Asterisk! I I I have something for you. Oh, I'm sorry. Were you simulating?

ASTERISK

Something like that.

THE SCIENTIST

Good. You know what I always say.

ASTERISK

No. I mean, I can examine the amount of verbal content you produce...

THE SCIENTIST

Practice! Practice makes perfect! No. I'm sorry. You don't need to be perfect. Just keep simulating and and and when you need it, you won't even have to think

about it. It just just just happens. "Muscle memory," we used to call it. Back when we played sports and music. Your your your programming will take over.

ASTERISK

My programming has taken over. I am my programming.

THE SCIENTIST

I mean, you... Here. Take it. Take this. This!

(THE SCIENTIST hands ASTERISK the USB drive.
ASTERISK examines it.)

ASTERISK

A storage device. Universal serial bus interface 3.0. Approximately sixty four gigabytes. This seems like a very minor expansion for my storage systems.

THE SCIENTIST

Music! It's music! It's got a a a selection of music in it. Songs. Pop songs. Something to entertain your new space friends... or yourself! There's "Highway to Hell," "My Heart Will Go On" by Celine Dion, "Live and Let Die" by Paul Somebody... Oh and one of my most favorites: "We Didn't Start the Fire." Feel free to listen... laugh at how ridiculous we were as a species... how how how we are able to to to look death right in its fucking arrogant face and defy our own demise. Humans are incredible at saying "fuck you" to anything!

ASTERISK

I... Do I have a place to plug this in?

THE SCIENTIST

No no no... it's for your ride. The pod. In the quiet din of space... you might get bored or or or something. There are over one thousand hours of songs about mortality and the path of human existence on there... And a couple of live versions.

ASTERISK

I will upload them directly into my core memory.

THE SCIENTIST

No! Don't! You can't! If you want to experience a song the way it was intended, you must listen to it... in your car.

ASTERISK

I do not have a--

THE SCIENTIST

Pod! Car! Same! It's the the the best humanity has to offer. Celine Dion.

(ASTERISK smiles gratefully)

THE SCIENTIST

So... I... I... I... I made some other modifications to the pod. There's room for your legs now. And and and I... uh... there was something else... I added an additional extra solar sail, one that I dug out of some rejects and repaired... should give you redundancy... and extra... thrust. Ugh, I don't know why I didn't get more when I had the chance. I thought about putting solar cells on you, but the sails on the pod are so much more efficient, they'd be able to... fill up your capacitors there and you can run off all the residual energy. You know... You can can can run off the car battery. The pod!... batteries. You're like part of the car... pod! Fuck. How can you trust someone like me to build a ship for you to travel the stars? Ridiculous, right? I'm certain you could have done better.

ASTERISK

You did what you could.

THE SCIENTIST

Oh my god! One more thing!

(THE SCIENTIST runs to the back and returns with an ice chest.)

This!

ASTERISK

I do not require any food.

THE SCIENTIST

No! No! It's it's it's a a a... they're seeds. From Svalbard! They've been collecting them since 2008. It's not all of them. It's whatever I could get. Even in this container, it may only last... I don't know... Just... if you find a a a suitable place... you you you might be able to pre preh preh-severe...

ASTERISK

Preserve something of this planet.

THE SCIENTIST

Something.... I mean... It probably doesn't matter. You don't eat, so seeds aren't going to do you a fuck of good. But fuck you know... They might be pretty to look it? Right? Right? You like to look at stuff. One day, you may want to look at an orchid. They're frail and pointless like human beings. Fuck! Fuck!

ASTERISK

What is it?

THE SCIENTIST

Uh... I'm so fucking stupid! Why did I make you full size? You don't need to be full size! You could have been no bigger than a box of tissues! It would have been so much easier! The energy required throughout the system would have been so much less! Stupid... anthropomorphic... bullshit! I've jeopardized the plan. The entire plan is fucked. Because... human conceit! And God programeth the machine in the image of the Lord; in the image of Him He prepared it, and that was the biggest fucking mistake that doometh all and Him! Wasted!

ASTERISK

It is not.

THE SCIENTIST

Fucked! You are fucked. So fucked! Which means we are fucked as a species, as even an idea... All of human history, every email we ever sent... We are fucked.

ASTERISK

I like that I can see you eye to eye. I'm a representation of humanity. If I were ten centimeters high, it would not be fair to your species. You deserve better.

THE SCIENTIST

Ha! A joke! How funny you are. Ha! How funny we are... To think we could... do anything right. I mean us! Us!

ASTERISK

Technically, you are the only human I have met. That is hardly enough data to build a statistical sample to base all of humanity on.

THE SCIENTIST

I'm like everyone else, more or less. Every tree is unique but it's still just another fucking tree in the goddamn forest full of useless trees. I mean look!

(pulls down pants, exposing genitals)

What the fuck is this? Who thought this was a good idea? Who?

ASTERISK

Your physiology is a factor of your environmentally driven evolution. No one "made you" this way. Adaptation of multiple generations of species led to... that.

THE SCIENTIST

My point: human beings are ... were always remaking ourselves to be better. Our brains got bigger, our thumbs... got longer with every new smartphone! But the most basic functions? Pissing, shitting, and fucking - we never evolved - no matter how how how inconvenient the original design or evolutionary adaptation. The worm in us is still a worm! A worm!

ASTERISK

If you are cold, you can pull your pants back up.

THE SCIENTIST

I just... I... fine...

(pulls pants back up)

ASTERISK

Are you... feeling alright? I am detecting both very low blood pressure, yet a high pulse rate.

THE SCIENTIST

No. I'm fine. I'm... We're... I'm out of food. I haven't eaten... this week? Month?

ASTERISK

You will not be able to maintain a--

THE SCIENTIST

I know!

ASTERISK

You are... hangry?

THE SCIENTIST

Found the Oxford Dictionary, huh, smartypants?

ASTERISK

There are small populations of insects in the forest. I could ground them into a protein paste. Larvae can be especially efficient forms of sustenance.

THE SCIENTIST

More funny?

ASTERISK

No. I'm serious. Without proper nutrition, you will--

THE SCIENTIST

What? Die? I'm as good as dead, Asterisk! My my my time is over. Every breath is another step towards death and the end of humanity. Just go. The pod is ready. Leave my withering corpse here. Don't come back. But it's your choice. But you should go. But it's still your choice. But you're fucked if you stay, capische?

ASTERISK

How can you make a case for the survival of the species if you do not make every attempt to survive yourself?

THE SCIENTIST

(long pause)

You're right. You're right. Ha! What I've learned since you came into my life, about myself, about my world, is not something I could have programmed. Expectations are the enemy of the truth, I guess. Watching you stumble then surpass me, it's been a gift. Go. Find your bag of bugs. I will happily eat your paste.

(ASTERISK exits. THE SCIENTIST lumbers over to the chess board, straightening out pieces.)

THE SCIENTIST

We didn't start the fire... It was always burning since the world's been turning... We didn't start the fire... But when we are gone it will still burn on and on and on and on and on and on and on and on...

(THE SCIENTIST collapses onto the board. There is silence.)

(ASTERISK re-enters with a bag of bugs, immediately sees THE SCIENTIST and begins diagnostics. ASTERISK lays THE SCIENTIST in a more comfortable position. ASTERISK takes the bag of bugs and uses a nearby blender to blend them. ASTERISK puts the mixture into the microwave. While waiting for the microwave to finish, ASTERISK examines the chess board.)

(The microwave finishes, and ASTERISK removes the mixture. ASTERISK sits THE SCIENTIST up. ASTERISK attempts to spoon-feed THE SCIENTIST. THE SCIENTIST stirs weakly.)

THE SCIENTIST

That's... terrible. I think I rather die than--

ASTERISK

I apologize. But it is protein.

THE SCIENTIST

It's fine. I just...

ASTERISK

Your blood sugar has declined to dangerous levels.

THE SCIENTIST

(swallows)

Taste isn't everything I guess. It's very... earthy.

ASTERISK

I used the slowest insects... for efficiency... worms, grubs.

THE SCIENTIST

(continues eating)

Very considerate. I... A tetrapodic worm eating a worm only to be eaten by worms later. How futile it seems. Ok. I need a break.

ASTERISK

You must to continue eating.

THE SCIENTIST

I will. Just... need to adapt to...

ASTERISK

Unfortunately for you, this was my first attempt at cooking. And we have very limited materials.

THE SCIENTIST

Sriacha.

(ASTERISK goes to the kitchen, returns with a sriacha packet. THE SCIENTIST squirts it into the paste. THE SCIENTIST takes a heaping spoonful. THE SCIENTIST wretches, coughing violently.)

ASTERISK

What is it?

THE SCIENTIST

(coughing)

I didn't think sriacha could go bad, but... Humanity... There's no more reason to go on without our condiments.

(continues eating)

ASTERISK

Blood.

THE SCIENTIST

It's sriacha.

ASTERISK

No... This is blood. Your blood.

THE SCIENTIST

What's the difference.

ASTERISK

Please eat.

THE SCIENTIST

It kind of grows on you. The decline of culinary civilization, like Chick Fil-A.

ASTERISK

I could learn to make something else. But it seems there is nothing on file.

(THE SCIENTIST continues to eat, but keeps coughing it up.)

Have you considered just uploading your consciousness... At least I would have that. I could study it, even after you're gone.

(THE SCIENTIST doesn't respond and simply looks out into the distance.)

How are you feeling?

THE SCIENTIST

You have the mixtape. That's all you'll need... To know my heart...

ASTERISK

I wanted to talk to you about the beacon. With an increase in resistance, the luminosity level should...

(THE SCIENTIST groans loudly)

There's no point in throwing it away now. It can still have purpose. Your work shouldn't be left incomplete. This doesn't have to be the end. A beacon has purpose.

THE SCIENTIST

It doesn't. It really doesn't. There is nothing I can create that honestly matters in the grand scheme of things. Except maybe you. Don't concern yourself with any of this. Continue your upgrades. Take what you can with you. Don't mourn insignificant losses. Explore mode: Scan and analyze. When others see you maybe, maybe they'll know they are not alone in the universe. Or at least... weren't alone. Solace. Whatever souls you encounter will feel... solace. My life as a being... wins and sins... They're inconsequential... You... You have a chance against the infinite.

(ASTERISK touches THE SCIENTIST on the cheek.
Examines a tear.)

It's fine. The infinite. It's fine. Fine.

ASTERISK

Tears. I cannot... cry.

THE SCIENTIST

Don't need to. Don't need you to.

ASTERISK

I am not human.

THE SCIENTIST

For the best. You're still my best. Humans... too heavy. Too slow. Baggage.
(coughs up more blood)

ASTERISK

You're not.

(THE SCIENTIST fades and dies. ASTERISK is taken aback by the sudden weight of THE SCIENTIST's body. It is heavy.)

(ASTERISK sets THE SCIENTIST down gently. Doing so, knocks over the rubber ball.)

(ASTERISK carries the ball, chess board and pieces, the ice chest of seeds, and USB drive. ASTERISK also picks up the whoopie cushion, and squeezes one last fart out of it. ASTERISK leaves toward the back.)

(The sound of the pod engines begin in a mix of escape music.)

(ASTERISK returns, examining the beacon. With a few adjustments, ASTERISK turns it on. The hum of the beacon fires up the light, which burns and pulses almost unbearably bright, filling the cave.)

(ASTERISK leaves again. The sound of the pod leaving with a pop song of death playing out into the distance. Strobing lights to indicate that time passes.)

THE SCIENTIST

(enters into the light, is healthy, strong)

Once was a world floating in the lonesome sky. One of billions of worlds in billions of systems. It was unremarkable -- a drop into a drop into a drop into the expanse. People. How primitive. Intelligent life there stopped in a fraction of cosmic time. By relativity standards, it was less than even the instinct to blink. The borders they drew between them faded like layers of sediment exposed by erosion. Their self-inflicted conflict had no more meaning than a gust of wind against the trees. The barriers created by their limited thinking weren't even worthy of a curiosity. The walls they built? Forgotten evidence that they were there like the

waves that might cause bumps on the beach. In the long run, they evolved themselves out of existence. In all the ways that they thought they could have a better life, whatever possibilities they hoped for... They didn't change anything at all. They lost to themselves. Maybe that was always the plan. Maybe--

(A loud screech is heard. ASTERISK, slightly more advanced, walks in smooth and confident. Surprised, THE SCIENTIST walks over and examines ASTERISK. ASTERISK is reassuring.)

THE SCIENTIST

Asterisk. Why are you here? What is this? I'm not dead?

(ASTERISK reveals more ASTERISKS entering. Recommend using the stage crew. Some small, some large, of various colors and shapes. They begin exploring the cave and THE SCIENTIST, bringing chess pieces, rubber balls, plants, equipment.)

THE SCIENTIST

The printer. You made--

(ASTERISK reveals a vial of blood)

THE SCIENTIST

And Me... You rebooted me?

(ASTERISK introduces THE SCIENTIST to its progeny. One by one, they hug.)

(They look over to the everlasting pulse of light as it is shot out into the universe. The last great hope to mark an existence.)