



AIVATAR
STEPHE BREWER

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“You can sit down, Tommy.” Ms Brookes said, smiling. Down at knee level, Mlle Charlotte's projection flickered a little as she waved her hand, and a cushion appeared on the floor before her. Most little kid's AIvatars took the form of a miniature animal of some sort. But even if it was anthropomorphic, they were generally more at home on the floor.

But as Tommy pulled up a custard yellow plastic seat, the form which materialised over the digital cushion was simply a bright, hovering speck of light. At the moment it was glowing a solid, dim grey.

Things might be worse than she imagined.

Tommy was a slight boy, and possibly a little pudgy, but with a clear light of intelligence in his eyes, and thickly curled dark brown hair. Although teachers weren't supposed to have favourites, they all developed some. While it was still early in the school year, Tommy was already in danger of becoming one of hers.

That wouldn't help him with the others, either.

“So Tommy ...” she hesitated for just a second. At this point her habit was to say something complimentary about a

child's Alvatar — but that wasn't really possible in this case. “You like stories, don't you?”

She thought it a poor attempt, but his eyes lit up, and he bit his lower lip as he nodded vigorously. His Alvatar bloomed gently into a little yellow willo'-the-wisp, and Ms Brookes fell ever-so-slightly more in love.

Mlle Charlotte flickered once more, as a deep blue, six inch high, winged armchair materialised behind her, and a thick storybook appeared in her hands. The little clockwork marionette figure — no more than a hand-span tall — sat, cheering “Oh! I could read to you both!”

Tommy shot a glance at Ms Brookes, who waved her assent. “That's fine, Tommy. I've got a few things I need to do. You can eat your lunch in the classroom today, if you like.” With that, she turned and brushed the surface of her wood-veneer desk, facing away from the five year old and the two digital projections.

A screen projection came up in front of her, hovering off the far side of the desk. It would appear as just an indistinct lit plane to the boy, if he bothered to look at it. But inside the lightweight, clear frames of her own glasses it displayed her preferred counselling interface. A video feed of Tommy sitting slightly behind her was surrounded by her previous notes on his interactions in class, a summary display of his grades, and

some statistical notes about developmental expectations for a five year old boy. There were a row of standard routines to run, and she commenced one of them.

“What kind of stories do you like?” Mlle Charlotte asked Tommy’s little ball of light, leaning closer over the huge tome on her lap. Tommy peeled a little plastic box open, and settled its neat rows of rice and fish rolls on his knees. “Oh, any kind.”

“Come now, you must have a favourite?”

“Well ...” he sighed, “Make it castles an’ stuff.”

Mlle Charlotte nodded an “Ahh ...” and made a little grunt as she heaved the holographic book open. Ms Brookes gave a little twitch of her mouth at that nice piece of play-acting, and knew that Mlle Charlotte would remember she had liked the touch. On Ms Brookes’ screen blocks with pictograms and short lines of text appeared, representing components of the narrative that Mlle Charlotte was beginning to tell.

“Once upon a time, in a far away kingdom ...”

“And,” Tommy interjected “there should be a princess.”

She brushed a finger lightly over the desk’s surface, prompting Mlle Charlotte.

The mannequin tilted its head, and asked a question, as prompted. “And what is this princess like, Tommy?”

The little figure of the boy straightened, and he looked off into the distance. “She’s very beautiful. Of course.” The glowing ball of his AIvatar grew ever so slightly, and flushed with a little pink.

“Of course ...” Mlle Charlotte agreed, returning to the book. But before she could read on, Tommy added:

“But she’s kind, too. She’s not nasty to people.”

Brush.

“Are princesses often nasty, Tommy?” asked the teacher’s AIvatar.

“Some of them are.”

The little boy popped a sushi roll into his mouth, and waited contentedly. So after a moment, Ms Brookes allowed her digital helper to go on.

The story proceeded, Mlle Charlotte’s programming compiling a serviceable, and even slightly wistful story out of the well worn components of fairy tales: The princess, a frog, a pumpkin, a troll, and a spider. Ms Brookes observed, and occasionally intervened. She could drag dramatic elements into the storyline — a moral challenge, or a puzzle, a frightening moment of peril, or a temptation. Mlle Charlotte would seamlessly weave the requested twist into the narrative over the next few sentences, and as Tommy ate his lunch and listened, his teacher observed the little boy on her projected

screen, making occasional notes on the recording that was being taken.

“... and with that, the troll stomped off over the hills, and the princess and the spider set to mending the frog’s cottage. And they all lived happily ever after.” Mlle Charlotte finished, sitting back and closing the book with a thump.

Tommy had finished his lunch, and with the story over started to pack up his box. Ms Brookes tapped at the desk a moment longer, then gave a little check. “Oh, are you two finished?” The little boy quirked an eyebrow at her. “Do you feel like going outside now, Tommy?”

He sighed, and shook his head, placing his lunch box into a neat cloth bag. “She’s your AI, Miz Brookes. You told her to tell that story.” Tommy turned to survey the schoolyard out of the nearby window. “Not long to go now. Yeah, I suppose I’ll take a turn around.”

And with that he brushed the crumbs from the corners of his neat little mouth, and took himself out into the corridor.

Ms Brookes stared after him, a frown making a single line above her nose. “Charlotte?”

Book and armchair misting away the little clockwork doll dissolved from the floor, and took shape sitting on the edge of the desk. She crossed her legs in a ladylike fashion, brushing an imaginary speck of dust off her knee.

“Physiological responses in line with expected parameters,” the AIvatar reported, “and from observations all developmentally appropriate emotional and psychological reactions to empathic prompts. I would suggest a slightly advanced understanding of narrative, and social constructs, Audrey.”

“Yes, I agree.” she said.

“His test scores indicate intellectual capacity well above the norm.”

Audrey smirked at the holographic doll. “A little early in kindergarden to be labelling him gifted, don’t you think?”

As expected, Mlle Charlotte bristled, sitting straighter, tucking her chin in, and frowning over her glasses at Audrey. “I did not use that term, Audrey.”

Audrey laughed. Mlle Charlotte had been with her for most of her life. The Artificially Intelligent personal aide was

given to her on starting kindergarten, although now children were issued them at birth, or at least in the first month or so afterward. When she started school Charlotte had not been an eccentrically mannered doll, but a rather unoriginal kitten. Tabby, with huge eyes and and infantile pwobwem wif hew “Rs”.

Having learned to read and write together, compute and calculate, to investigate and analyse, estimate, judge, and discern, they were as comfortable in their dialogue as a pair of siblings. Audrey was always the older and wiser, of course, but when she asked Mlle Charlotte to pull a quick survey of journal abstracts containing correlating uses of the terms “affect”, “avatar” and “infantile”, she couldn’t help but think that the AI was the more knowlegable.

But that was how well rounded people worked. Their AIvatars were extensions of their minds — collating, coordinating, filing and reminding — while the human held the executive role, exercising judgement that the computers could only assist with.

Audrey watched Tommy through her glass office door, as he neatly packed away his lunch box into the schoolbag in his nook, his bright speck of an AIvatar now glowing a muted teal. He took his time, before straightening his glasses,

murmuring a word or two at his AI, and then turning to the outside door.

“When did I first become aware of people’s AIvatars as ... tools. As a machine, separate from their owners?”

The projection tilted its head, in the manner which indicated a search of her databases. A few seconds later her hand gestured, and a series of charts, and links to papers appeared floating before her. “At about six and a half years old you had a conversation with your mother, specifically investigating the concept. But there are several conversational cues for a month or two before indicating a growing awareness of the principles. You have a higher than average intelligence by most measures, and were intellectually inquisitive, of course. A quick survey of the developmental literature suggests that an age of seven is approximately when to expect ...”

“Thank you, Charlotte.” Audrey pinched two of the articles out of the air and flipped them over to her desk to read later. They sank into the surface, while she sat back tapping her lower lip with a pen.

Mlle Charlotte remained looking out the window, to where Tommy was walking around the perimeter of the playground with his hands clasped neatly behind his back. The little glowing ball hovered near his right shoulder,

perambulating along with him. All the other kids tore around the expanse of the play area, clambering over the climbing equipment which was the feature that had been installed today. They bounced through rings, and boxlike grids of forgiving plastic, or caromed off the soft-fall like so many hyperactive missiles — each with their AI avatar projections cartwheeling along beside them: mostly monkeys, climbing lizards, or dragons today.

Then there was that lone little boy, promenading serenely around the maelstrom of noise and violent delight like a pint-sized prince, with his incongruously babyish will-o'-the-wisp trailing at his shoulder.

“Thank you for taking the time to see me.”

The man smiled, and muttered what almost sounded like an apology. Audrey was used to some level of reverence when people learned she was a kindergarten teacher, but it seemed more than that. His AIvatar was very unusually some sort of a creeping vine. It wound around his body and arms, where she realised it integrated almost seamlessly with a set of extensive tattoos visible up the sides of his neck, and down to his wrists. The digital projections wafted gently in an imaginary breeze, letting tiny exotic blooms peek out from the foliage, and bright zephyrs of pollen or light dance and drip around them. He'd put on a jacket for the meeting, and this was clearly unusual, because the AIvatar was having difficulty with the sleeves. It was experimenting with projecting tendrils tearing out from imaginary rents in the fabric, but when the man noticed this the vines withered and fell, the rents in the cloth healing themselves. The AI made do with sending creepers back up along the arms from the cuffs, but somehow managed to look dissatisfied with the compromise.

The woman's AIvatar had the form of a full sized white Bengal tiger. That in itself was striking — most people's AI personifications were closer to the size of a small pet, or toy

— but this creature was a nine feet from nose to tail, anatomically accurate white feline, with slim black stripes. And rather than shrinking politely down to fit the confines of the room, this monster retained its majestic size, brushing through the door frame and small furniture sets with an air of irrelevance for the fiction of its own reality — or perhaps the chairs’. The woman herself was as striking as her digital aide, with platinum hair falling in a smooth cascade over her pin-neat charcoal suit, and eyebrows and mascara painted onto her snowy skin as starkly as her tiger’s stripes.

The couple took a pair of toddler sized seats, and Audrey offered them the cool jasmine tea which was popular this season. “So, Ms Gudrún, I understand you’re in law?”

“Corporate, not practice.”

That appeared to be all she had to say on the matter.

“I see. And Mr Rendón —”

“Gutxi is a Creative Director.” Tommy’s mother answered for the dad.

And a good one, I’d judge, Ms Brookes mused. So unusual to have a non-animal, or personified digital presence. But she could see that it was passing him information, interrogating data and interpreting it to him just like any AIVatar, all coded through some unique semaphore of rustling vines, leaves waxing gently through spring and fall colours,

and those floral phosphoresces. Audrey found that simply watching such an unusual communication between person and machine was opening her mind to interesting concepts.

“So, do you both work —”

“We work remotely, as much as we can. I make a point of being home one day a week, and Gutxi has flexible hours. I thought we were here to talk about Tommy?”

Audrey slid a smile across her face — one of her best, soothing ones, and quietly made a marionette gesture, to get Mlle Charlotte to advance the interview script. “I was only thinking that where Tommy is concerned, the apple doesn’t fall far from the tree.”

Charlotte had skipped forward, passing a small sheaf of papers from under her arm to each of the parent’s AI avatars. The tiger simply extended its nose to the proffered file, which vanished at a touch, the data being ingested and analysed. But the vines puffed gently in a sudden imaginary breeze, lifting the papers from Mlle Charlotte’s hand, tumbling and scattering them in the air, to vanish amongst the leaves and blossoms wreathing their owner — dissolving as they were absorbed. “Tommy is a bright, intelligent little boy: intellectually advanced for his age.” Mrs Brookes continued. Tommy’s mother Sólveig reached out a hand in a curt gesture

of rubbing at the tiger's head, clearly her simple, open set of command signals to request a display of the report data.

“This is good. But I thought there was a problem with Tomás?”

“Not a problem, so much ...” Audrey blinked, glancing at Mlle Charlotte's text-based suggestions for cutting more directly to the chase, while staying polite and circumspect, “I do however have one concern.”

The father sat forward a little, and began dancing with his hands. A chocolate Latin-accented voice sprang into the small speakers in Audrey's glasses. “I'm sorry, but could you speak facing me a little more? Igo Mahats is translating, but it helps me to read your lips as well.” Mlle Charlotte translated the sign-language Gutxi was speaking — the voice tone supplied by the father's AIvatar.

“Oh! Of course,” Audrey agreed. Somehow she hadn't been aware that Tommy's father was deaf. Surely that should have been in the file ...? “Oh, but I wonder ...” she swivelled slightly and began swiping across her desk surface. This interview was not going the way she had expected, but she rallied, sending several broad requests silently to Charlotte about multi-lingual households and intellectual advancement, paralleled with emotional-developmental delay.

“Do you use your Alvatar ... Igon, was it? Igo - apologies. Does it speak for you in the house, or do you sign with Tommy?”

Gutxi’s hand came up knuckles toward her, with two fingers arcing left and right. His digital voice said in her ears “A bit of both.” He went on in sign, grinning, “If Tommy’s upstairs, for example, I use the Alvatar translator to shout up to him, like any parent.”

“But we have a strict rule of no headsets from an hour before dinner to bed-time” the mother said. “So we all talk, and connect with each other. Gutxi reads a chapter a night to Tommy and I, as well.”

“When you say talk ...” Audrey flushed as she asked the question.

“In sign.” The scorn rippled through her answer.

Audrey nodded, “So Tommy is fluent in sign, then?”

“Of course!” Ms Gudrún almost barked it.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t have any note in —”

Gutxi swayed in again — there was a lot of shoulder movement in his hand signs, “Children typically pick up sign much earlier than speech. It’s natural to them. Tommy was speaking sign from about six months, maybe proper sentences at a year or so.”

“Yes, I’ve heard that’s typical in a signing household,” Audrey deliberately looked away from her desk, with its data displays above, and into the parents’ eyes. “Also that this can sometimes lead to a lag in picking up vocalised communication. Tommy doesn’t show any sign of that —” she rattled out, seeing Ms Gudrún’s spine stiffen, “his English speech is well above that of most of his classmates. But I wonder about his experience, and whether this has in fact helped him advance faster.

“There is no mention,” here she deliberately turned back to her desk, even though she didn’t need to check, “in Tommy’s admission papers about being able to sign.”

“The forms asked if we spoke any other language at home.” Tommy’s mother said. “Spoke.”

Audrey decided to let that one slide. She wasn’t trying to win an argument with these people. “It would have been helpful information, that’s all. No harm done, I wouldn’t have treated him any differently.” She wafted a hand, brushing all the data displays she had summoned away, then clasped her hands and leaned toward them. “As I said, Tommy is showing no difficulty with the classwork.”

“So why are we here?”

“You mentioned,” the father put in, mildly, “a concern?”

“Yes,” Audrey sighed, finally at the point. “It’s about his AIvatar.”

Here she paused, to see how they would react. They both simply continued staring at her. Eventually Mr Rendón brought his hands up, and made an unmistakable gesture.

“Crocky?”

“I beg your pardon?”

“Do ... do you mean Crocky?” Ms Gudrún asked. “His AI? The little crocodile?”

Audrey blinked.

“Tommy ... Tommy’s AIvatar is not a crocodile, here at school.”

The parents looked at each other, then Gutxi wagged a finger and pointed, shrugging. “What is it?”

“I — well, that’s what has been concerning me.” She hadn’t expected that. Almost no children of Tommy’s age were socially competent enough to have different AIvatar presentations in different social contexts. “Here it’s ... well it’s just a little ball of light.” Both parents simply looked at her, a little confused. “Like ... like a baby’s.”

Ms Gudrún surged to her feet, and her tiger bunched forward with her, a basso rumble emanating from its chest. “Oh — that is too much!”

Gutxi's hands moved, and his voice murmured

“Sólveig ...”

“No! This woman is sitting here and telling us that we're emotionally retarding our son!”

“Ms Gudrún! I certainly am not —”

“Sórveig, I don't think —”

“Yes, you are! You're sitting there and telling us that he's intellectually advanced, but because we speak in sign as a family that we're stunting his social development!”

Audrey forced herself to stay seated, speaking low and calm, but the boy's mother had the bit between her teeth now. The father was standing, a mist of calm green with gentle orbits of azure lights blooming out from his Alvatar, as his hands massaged the air expressively. Only about half of his sentences were translated aloud to Audrey, the rest she assumed intended for Ms Gudrún, but Sólveig wasn't watching him. She stood there talking over them both, with her giant feline making blatantly threatening postures. Mlle Charlotte assumed a position of poised calm, her hands clasped neatly before her little apron - chatelaine swinging gently by her side, as she stood in front of the snarling beast.

Audrey waited till they had their say, then calmly corrected them. “Ms Gudrún, I wasn't aware of Mr Rendón's language, as I stated before. I certainly didn't call you in here

to level accusations of maltreatment at you. I am concerned about Tommy's development, because of the presentation of his Alvatar ...”

She talked for another minute or two, gently wrestling the heat and venom out of the conversation, but what remained was a chill quiet. They managed a civil conversation for the next fifteen minutes but in the end Tommy's parents left, with Ms Brookes frowning and adrift in her empty classroom.

The burble of voices, gently atonic notes from a wooden xylophone, small electronic pings and chuckles that was the usual background noise of her classroom had ... changed. It was something subtle, and intuited — felt more than known — because she picked it up rather than Mlle Charlotte. With a gesture, Ms Brookes left her marionette guiding three children through a Spanish-to-Mandarin noun matching game, and began a gentle wander around the outside of the room.

There was another cluster of children engineering a suspension bridge, which a virtual mouse was going to try scurrying across. They hadn't figured out the balancing principle involved, but she could see they were making one of the more useful mistakes on the way to figuring it out, so she didn't interfere. Their conversation was gabbling, anyway: each competing creatively to try to crack the problem first, and that wasn't the tone she'd heard.

There was a play going on, with the foam slot-wall pieces being used to create a three dimensional set, and the tiny homunculus robots acting out a script the five year olds were improvising together. They were placing hovering cameras to capture the action, and replay it in a VR interactive, with set decoration and lighting laid over. But that

group was quietly intense, deep in visualising what the finished artwork would feel like.

Which left only the cluster in the corner. The furthest from where she had been working. And yes, the ... tone ... of conversation was coming from there. They had their backs arranged in an instinctive barrier, concealing whatever it was they were up to, as well. Audrey glided over quietly, to insert herself into their play.

They almost visibly jumped.

Mateo's AIvatar was usually a rather delicate little ballerina. She almost never put two feet down at the same time, one of them usually being held out parallel to the ground, and had a really quite beautiful red and autumn colouring. For just a second however, Ms Brookes discovered the AI projection hopping; no, lurching, in a most undignified way, her elegant spindles of legs tangled in masses of Rapunzellian golden tresses. As Audrey sat, the AIvatar flickered blindingly back into her usual form, and was twirling with her slowest, most innocent, elegance.

The other kids were no different. Chin-Lee's fairly mundane but lovable teddy bear normally toddled around heavily with no need for anything more realistic to interact with than her rounded, sewn stumps for feet and hands; today she was sporting grotesquely fleshy hands, fully formed with

five fingers each and pink polish on each nail. Micha's puppy dog looked almost normal, until you found yourself looking twice at the intensely human blue eyes that stared out of its furry muzzle. All three of the kids' avatars twitched back into their normal configuration the instant Ms Brookes sat on the rug they were sharing.

Including Tommy's.

Audrey didn't even get a moment to see what it had been — his back had shielded him from the rest of the classroom — but there was a definite flicker, and now it was back to being its regular little calm orb. She could have cursed.

Of course, she didn't mention anything. "And what are you four working on this morning?"

There was a hurried little improvisation. An almost endearing scramble to invent the shared investigation they were undertaking. She smiled at them all, and gave some suggestions, putting them on track to count and sort the colourful wooden tiles nearby. In ten minutes she had them improvising some basic division and multiplication, as part of a strategy to form a mathematically even mosaic. But then, they were four of the brightest kids in the class.

She pondered this, as she left them to their re-aligned purpose. Why was it always the smartest kids who ended up teasing, or leveraging their intellect or maturity against one

another? What was it they had been teasing Tommy about?
What shape had his AIvatar been?

And all at once, she realised that Tommy was hiding his AIvatar's regular shape. Hiding it, from her. The other kids had seen it, but she hadn't.

An hour later, as the morning break approached, Ms Brookes ensured that Tommy was one of the children she asked to help pack things away; and that none of the other three were. She was ready to give him another task or two, but it wasn't necessary. Tommy lingered over his blocks until the other two helpers had finished their packing and bolted out to the play equipment. Then he calmly finished his job, carried the box to the shelf, and approached her, himself.

"Is anything the matter, Ms Brookes?"

Mlle Charlotte was unable to conceal her surprise, but Audrey kept a better straight-face. "I don't know, Tommy. Do you think everything's O.K.?"

"Oh," the little boy sagged, just a little. "No, no everything's fine with me, Ms Brookes. I ... I just thought maybe you wanted to talk to me?"

She smiled at him. "I love talking to you, Tommy. But it's Recess. Do you want to go and play with the other children?"

“I ... that’s fine. I mean, yes.” He turned, then checked back. “So long as ... there wasn’t anything you wanted to say to me?”

She softened, and leaned in. “I just want you to be happy, Tommy. And to feel safe. You can always tell me if you don’t, alright?”

He let his breath out, and nodded down. “Yes, Ms Brookes. I’m alright.”

And with that unconvincing assurance, he wandered out to his peer group. Audrey sighed, and turned to her desk to make another note of vague and unspecific unease, in her growing file on the little boy.

The teasing was only escalating, as the weeks went by, and she still could not even figure out the genesis of it.

He was sitting on his own, feet swinging from the metal bench of the tram shelter. Audrey was a little stunned, at first, and took several seconds to check, and check again the surrounding street. But there was absolutely no one else there with him.

This shouldn't even be possible, she shook her head as if dazed. The school's care centre should never have released a child his age, not without an immediately present carer, but here Tommy sat, calm as a monk, on a public street without a soul around.

She hesitated only for a second, before striding quickly over. When she was several metres away his head came up, and all at once his eyes filled with the most genuine warmth. A smile sprang from one side of him to the other, and his little hands patted his lap in unconscious delight. But at the same time, his AIvatar flickered from some bright, golden shape — almost definitely humanoid — to its usual formless presentation.

“Hello, Tommy. Are you ...” she dived, still trying to figure out how this could have happened. Can't ask him if he was about to catch the tram: such a young child simply wouldn't be allowed by the transit system. Better not sit too

close — Oh! But he’s a little boy on his own! He can’t be just left to fend —

At that moment a figure appeared, striding across the transit way. Audrey looked up, relief flooding her as she recognised Tommy’s father, casually dressed in a sleeveless, slit throat t-shirt and sarong, which displayed his beautiful creeping vine tattoos to much better effect than the last time she had seen him.

Tommy looked across, and if Audrey had thought he lit up for her, then she was suddenly put back in her place. The little boy leaped to his feet, his fingers a circle, with one extended, tapping delightedly at the side of his head. “Daddy!” came Tommy’s own voice, but projected this time through Audrey’s earpieces. He shot across to his Gutxi, to be swept up in the man’s arms. At the same time, Audrey saw a bright green little alligator — or no: a crocodile, of course — with pudgy little legs and large, friendly eyes, clamber across the road, and up one of the father’s legs. The little creature looked much more like a stuffed toy than a real animal, as it scampered through the leaves and flowers, snapping at the little butterflies and wisps of light that burst out, disturbed by its passage.

Tommy and Gutxi fell back into a seated clutch, and both began signing at the same time. But this was clearly a

game that they enjoyed every day, because as his dad asked “How was your —” Tommy’s hands interrupted, literally flapping in with his own sentence and slapping Gutxi’s hands away so he couldn’t finish the sentence.

“I want an ice-cre —”

But daddy was talking over his son now.

“Did you do anything exci —”

“What’s for dinn —”

“What did they teach —”

“When we get home can I —”

“Do you want me to help with your —”

Each time, the other leaped in swiping with their hands, so that the tumultuous greeting was half flapping interruption, half shouting over, half tickling, half a game of handsies, and half outrageous giggles. Audrey had never seen such an excited, joyful, playful, loving greeting — at least not quite like this one. Their personal joke made the use of sign-language an intimate, family act: like cuddling, only more fun. She snorted a laugh, then found herself bleating in surprised joy. The man and his son turned beaming at her, and then both collapsed into gales of laughter themselves.

At that moment a tram pulled up opposite them, and in a second or so Sólveig Guðrún was dashing around the rear of it, sprinting over toward them. Her giant white tiger Alvatar

made this a most unnerving sight, and her hands waved curtly as she scrambled over to them.

“You didn’t need to! I was almost here!” Audrey heard her voice translated again.

“It’s alright,” Gutxi’s chocolate tones assured.

“They kept me late, but I was on the way.”

“It’s fine. I wanted the walk, anyway,” he assured her with his hands. “Anyway, Ms Brookes was here with him.”

Ms Gudrún stiffened even further, which Audrey found surprising given how tense she already was. She decided to leap in, and offer an olive branch she had been preparing.

Quickly moving from one to another, she pointed to her own chest, then held her left hand up and moved the right finger from behind to in front of it. The next sign was a sweep in from the right, at waist level, palm up. Then left hand upright side on, right hand beside it, tipping fingers back to her face.

She was halfway through the complicated sign for “check” when Gutxi waved dismissively, “God, you’re accent’s terrible!”

She paused, then signed to herself again, and hesitantly tried to mimic his sign for “accent”.

“Well,” he explained, with his hands and in her ear, “Not your accent, so much, but your grammar. Please, it’s alright to just speak English.”

Audrey let her hands drop. “I ... well, after our conversation I did a bit of research. I thought it would be good to learn a bit more, so I started studying ...”

“No, no: your signs are fine. But the way you’re speaking ...”

She frowned, all at sea. Sólveig cut in.

“You’re doing ‘English Sign’. One. Sign. For. Every. Word.” She spoke both languages in the sentence, but her own signs were suddenly staccato, and Audrey realised that there were a lot more of them than she was used to seeing when Tommy’s mother and father talked. “It’s. Such. A. Slow. Way. To. Talk. Understand?”

“Oh!” Audrey sighed, “Oh, I had no idea ...”

“Of course not,” Gutxi brushed her half-apology away before she made it, “You’re learning from a computer. It’s a cultural thing. Just like any language.”

Sólveig was glaring at her, but Audrey ploughed on focusing on Tommy, thinking very hard and going back to signing.

I. Thought. We. Show. Class. Some. Signs.

Tommy’s eyebrows shot up, and he looked to his mum.

“Not bad.” Gutxi countered. “You can cut out the ‘I’, even the ‘some’ too.”

Audrey fell back to English. “And if you wouldn’t mind, Mr Rendón, I’d be very glad to welcome you one day, to talk to our little people. I think it would be great for them to see a whole range of different ways to communicate. I understand that you’re busy, but ...”

“No, sure. I can make time for that.” A strand of his digital vines stretched out, and a blossom floated away from it, wafting toward Mlle Charlotte, who caught the message, and integrated Mr Rendón’s calendar data. The AIs would coordinate the dates between them as Audrey drew up her lesson plan later in the week.

Audrey twitched a finger, and Mlle Charlotte stepped forward. “And is this Crocky? What a handsome little chap he is!”

The little crocodile toy wriggled forward on its belly, and paused for a moment. There was a look in its eye for just a second, and almost on instinct Audrey gave another non verbal command to her AIvatar. This one essentially meant: Roll with it.

Crocky wagged its tail — that was the only way to describe it — and then shot forward, jaws gaping and snapped its teeth closed on Mlle Charlotte’s outstretched hand.

With a comical spring-twanging noise, the clockwork doll's arm came off at the shoulder, emitting a little shower of cogs that quickly rolled away. Crocky was delighted, and started shaking and worrying at the dismembered limb, while Mlle Charlotte wailed in overdone hystionics, and bawled "Oh, my arm! My beautiful arm! Whatever will I do ..."

Tommy's eye's bulged, but then an enormous grin split his face. Audrey judged that not many other adult's AIvatars had been so willing to play along when Crocky introduced himself this way, and he was clearly delighted.

Somehow as she staggered melodramatically around, Mlle Charlotte managed to put her other hand down to steady herself ... conveniently near Crocky's waiting jaws. Not for the first time Audrey thought she could have kissed her clever little digital companion, because after half a second the crocodile saw the opportunity, and leaped forward to snatch at the second limb.

That one came off with even more comic mess, this time spurting holographic oil all around. Mlle Charlotte knew better than to just play along, though, and contrived to stagger in Crocky's direction and liberally coat the vicious little reptile with black goo.

Tommy was almost rolling on the floor laughing, as Mlle Charlotte apologised profusely for making such a mess, and

promptly losing a leg to the game. Gutxi chuckled appreciatively, and even Sólveig raised a slow blink at the scene. Audrey dusted her skirt, then said she had to be on her way.

They exchanged another word or two, then each turned for home. While she didn't look back, Audrey was sure she could feel Ms Gudrún's gaze searching her as she started down the road.

6

Crocky started to turn up to class, from that day on, and while he soon learned that he couldn't play that particular game with Mlle Charlotte during class time, he seemed to decide he could accept that, and to hang around.

Tommy's dad's visit was a huge success, and he agreed to come in a month later and find out how they were all going on their signing. When he did, he was very enthusiastic, and told each student individually the things they were doing really well, despite the varying levels of ability each had attained.

By the end of that term Crocky and Mlle Charlotte had developed a finely tuned rhythm of before, during, and after class tousle-play. Ms Brookes never managed to entirely breach the little boy's armour though. Whatever he had been hiding from her just seemed to drift away. In the end, she just had to let it go, and be satisfied that her intuition had been right, and that she had managed to find a way to coax Tommy into a happy relationship with the rest of the class. Sometimes teaching kindergarten felt more like alchemy than science.

Ms Brookes chivvied her five and six year olds down one side of the darkened corridor, while the Year Fours barreled back the other way. She urgently shushed an eruption of giggles and yelps, quickly adjusted a top-heavy chicken hat with too many bright yellow feathers, then whispered loudly “Break a leg! Out you go!”

The twelve children of her class shuffled in an adorable line out onto the wash of light on stage, with Mateo launching into his opening line too early. Many of the class hadn’t made it out yet, and the audience was still cooing and clapping at the littlest performers of the school.

Audrey cupped her cheek and shook her head. The Year Three teacher patted her on the shoulder — but then something remarkable happened.

Tommy, who had the next line, stepped forward. No — he bounced. He was wrapped from head to toe in a green duvet, sewn together to make a neat parcel. It wrapped over his head, leaving only his cherubic face peering out. But as he did so, a delicate haze of dusty luminescence surrounded him. His AIvatar was adding a visual effect which all the audience saw through their visors, to enhance the illusion of his caterpillar costume. And then he coughed.

In a brilliantly timed piece of comic delivery, he spluttered, and hacked as though clearing the cloud from his lungs — and wonder of wonders, his Alvatar improvised with him, adding an eddy in the air!

The audience burbled and giggled, and Tommy kept the moment alive. Knowing him as she did, Audrey could tell that he wasn't just doing it for the attention. He was watching, as subtly as a five year old could, and waiting until all his classmates had taken their positions, before delivering his line.

In fact, as the play went on, Tommy pretty clearly stood out as one of the better performers. She wasn't surprised: over the last two terms all the troubles with kids teasing him had vanished, and he had come on in leaps and bounds. Audrey had almost forgotten that she had harboured any concerns about the boy. The will-o'-the-wisp still made occasional appearances, but in a way Tommy's mutable Alvatar seemed to engender a growing maturity among his classmates. They all started manifesting slightly different Alvatar presentations to suit the social context, which was early for a group of young learners like themselves.

Backstage her colleague murmured "Is that shy little Tommy?"

Audrey bloomed quietly, and brushed her hands down the front of her dress. "Not any more."

The play stood out in the evening. Co-authored amongst all the children, every character communicated in melded speech, sign, and dance, all flowing out organically as part of their actions. Beside Audrey, another teacher or two paused in the middle of their hurried preparations and made little appreciative noises.

Later on Ms Brookes was standing at the door of her classroom, with Mlle Charlotte perched on her shoulder marking off each child as they were picked up by their carers. She finished congratulating Chin-Lee on her performance, and turned to find Ms Gudrún standing beside her. Audrey couldn't help but glance quickly to either side, before realising that Sórveig's AIvatar had taken the much more elegant form of a stylish brooch. It's tiger's face still peered out alarmingly from its setting of glittering jet and diamond, and would have been a very heavy piece if it weren't a projection. For all that, it seemed to maintain an air of haughty disdain for being constrained to this shape during a social evening with many young children around.

"I ..." the coolly beautiful woman started, but then seemed to change her mind. "The play was wonderful. Really, very ... surprisingly good."

Audrey gave her the warmest smile she knew how, "They're a very special group, Ms Gudrún." She glanced

around, then confided, “Tommy was fantastic, though, wasn’t he?”

There was a roar from down at their waists, and Tommy appeared, along with Crocky clambering up Ms Brookes’ back after Charlotte. But then a sudden fringe of ferns erupted like a giant arboreal collar across Audrey’s shoulders, blocking the little monster’s attack, and Tommy found himself swept up as his dad pounced through the crowd. Gutxi’s voice was booming and enthusiastic, as he congratulated his son.

“Yes, well,” Sólveig observed, smiling “we can all see where that comes from.”

Gutxi turned, and signed. “What are you saying?”

Sólveig began speaking with her hands as well, “Oh, I’m sorry! Didn’t I sign that?” she teased.

Gutxi laughed, booming again. “No, my darling. You must have forgotten!”

They smirked at each other, and then deliberately folding her hands together, Tommy’s mother murmured toward Ms Brookes, moving her lips very little, “It’s sometimes very convenient to have a different channel.”

Gutxi pulled a face at her, then barrelled into the classroom with Tommy to pick up his things.

Audrey and Sólveig stood there for a moment, before the mother put in, “On nights like this he of course has his speech-text displays on.”

“Oh. That would make busy events easier.”

“Yes.”

They stood again. Audrey had to wonder where all the other parents had suddenly vanished to. At last, Sólveig turned to her slightly and quietly said, “We ... we just felt it was ... Gutxi should be able to be completely accepted. With no explanations needed.”

Audrey gave a simple nod. “Absolutely right.”

Ms Gudrún nodded too, and turned back. Finally the boys emerged, Gutxi weighed down by bags, and Tommy on his shoulders still wearing his bright pink wings on his back, where they had sprouted during the play. “Goodbye, Miz Brookes!” shouted Tommy, his eyes feverish with sleepless excitement.

Gutxi waved a farewell, and Audrey replied. Sólveig nodded to her again, and was about to follow them out of the school, when she turned back. “Thank you, Ms Brookes.”

She smiled at her. “Call me Audrey.”

During the last week of the school year, the little ball of light returned. She hadn't seen it since the play, and Ms Brookes was immediately wary, but the other children seemed oblivious, so she decided to make no comment. Things were winding down for the year, and while it seemed a shame to see this little backward step, there was not much Audrey could do about it in the short time that was left. It didn't seem like it would be a serious issue for him anyway, so she simply made a note to the teacher who would be taking Tommy into his class the following year.

When the final day came around, Audrey brimmed with the usual sense of fulfillment, joy, and grief. She was showered by each family as usual with a series of small gifts, and she dutifully accepted them with great humility and thanks. She helped each child pack up their portfolio of works, and closed down the stations around the classroom.

And then she found that Tommy had waited to be the last to leave the classroom again. He hadn't done that in months.

He stood there, a look of forlorn yearning on his face, and a pasted together collage card in his hand. And there, hovering beside him, was his little golden ball.

Audrey stepped over, and crouched down with him. “Oh, did you have something there, Tommy?”

He thrust the paper token of affection toward her, bending it badly in his grief. “Oh, Ms Brookes. I ...” he looked down, and then very deliberately steeled himself with a big breath in through his nose. It was almost more than Audrey could bear. He looked back at her, with serious eyes. “I think you’re the best kindergarten teacher in the whole wide world.”

She felt something flop and flow in her chest again, and gave him a huge, tight smile. “Oh, thank you, Tommy. You’ve been the most wonderful little boy.” Then she looked at the little glowing AIvatar. Not knowing why — it wasn’t usual for people to directly address the AIs of others — she suddenly felt that she needed to acknowledge it too. Tommy was a very intelligent, and quite mature boy. She suddenly felt sure that he had known, all year, that the form of his AIvatar was a source of concern for her. “And you have been a very good helper for Tommy too.”

The ball of light shrank for just a moment, and then it turned a shade of delicate pink. As it blushed, it grew, and bloomed, and became a bright halo, then blaze of light. For a moment it almost became overwhelming, but its brilliance faded, and it resolved into a shape.

Exactly the same height as Mlle Charlotte, she had a neat cascade of bright blonde hair, held back from her face with a cerise band. Her curvy figure was clad in a neat, floral print dress, and her black slippers looked very comfortable and sensible for scampering around on the floor with a group of kids all day. Her hands came up and primly dusted off the front of her skirt, and she looked up at Ms Brookes with brilliant blue eyes.

“Oh ...” Audrey said. She couldn’t find any more of her voice. She had never seen such a perfect little digital sculpture, of herself.

Still voiceless, Audrey turned her eyes brightly back to the little boy, standing there with his hands clasped before him, his soul shining out through his precious face. “Oh, Tommy ...” But what could she say?

So she raised her hand, of course, and pointed to herself. Then she clasped her fingers together over her heart, and let them burst forward, toward him. Lastly, she brought both of her hands up, indexes pointing to him, and brought them, in a gentle bump, together.

I love you too.
