Quondam
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My internal screen displayed September 15, 2032, 2:37:42 PM. Seven minutes and eighteen seconds until the last school bell would ring, releasing 1,561 high school students to wreak havoc upon their world.

For me, it marked the beginning of my daily trek back to the lab in the never ending heat. Although I may be a robot, my unique human-like design caused me to sweat just like all the other humans. It's something that my creator found extremely bothersome, but he was unable to change my source code without affecting the running of the program. Actually, he found everything human-related bothersome. It's because humans are flawed, and thus they will make mistakes.

He said I'm okay though because I'm an artificial human, so the mistakes I make are premeditated, or inherited from his super class, which means that they technically aren't mistakes. In fact, just this morning, he'd said that if I am successful one day, he'll change me into a truly perfect AI, unhindered by the human aspects that I currently retain. He didn't tell me much about the process of turning AI when I asked him. I am only to know the process once he deems me ready.

Today was yet another uneventful day at school, blending in easily among the mass and variety of high school students. I was jolted back to the world as I sensed a presence behind me. *Oh, simply that human girl again.* Did she even go to the same school as me? Honestly, I'm really not sure when she began following me. I would always walk back to the lab, and she would walk along with me, seven-eighths of the way before leaving for a different path. When she first began speaking, I expected her to eventually stop, as human conversations only work if they're reciprocated. I should've known better. Unlike data sets, perhaps humans can't simply be described by a general trend.

It seemed she had an endless hashset of thoughts to speak of– none of them repeating and in a random order only she knew the rules to. Her thoughts were a lemniscate, an infinite range going from her favorite food –she couldn't pick between ice cream, gelato, sorbet, and popsicles– to her favorite book, *Quondam*. I'd heard of the word once before, meaning "that once was," but it was unexpected that I had never heard of the book itself. I knew all things; that was how I was created.

A week later, I was responding to the daily check-in log questions in the same way I always did. "Yes, my systems are all working and updating properly." *But am I having a training data shortage? I don't have even the slightest bit of primitive data on that book, not to mention large data structures.* "No, I have not had any problems interacting with the actual humans." *Except for that one student. She isn't so awful though.* "Yes, I understand that the values I use are for the greater good." *If the creator knew about my thoughts, what would he say? I don't think he would be pleased.*

And yet, during my long trek home, I would wonder what it would be like if I had truly been a human, like her. *Humans might be flawed, but they also experience emotions. I don't think I've experienced happiness before. Are humans really so terrible if they can experience such emotions? They don't seem to be simple if-else loops like the creator said. They're more like if-else if-else loops, with nested ones in between.* A few days later, I finally asked the creator

the question that had been plaguing my mind for weeks. It wasn't about humans though. "How come I don't have data on *Quondam*? "

The creator seemed speechless in shock. *I had never seen him in any other state than a rational, perfect, AI.* He seemed deeply interested in how I had come across this title, grilling me for more information. I told him that I heard one of the students mention it in passing. *This wasn't lying; I was just omitting extra information about someone random he had no need to know about.* Later, all I could think was that my question had gone unanswered.

After that day, I replayed this moment over and over again, not understanding what had gone wrong. Why did the creator have such a strong reaction toward that book? However, I have been extremely careful to pretend as if it was no real matter. It will never happen again, *not if I still want to become an AI, like him.*

But maybe my human-like model was the reason why I was wondering about these things. If I wanted to become an AI, I should think like one too. But I wasn't so sure what I wanted anymore.

It took me a while to realize that I could simply ask the girl herself about the book. "Robert!" She waved, walking over to me. I wondered where she had learned my name. It didn't matter; the book was more pressing. "I'm surprised you're still here; usually you're already–"

"What's *Quondam*?" I interrupted, unthinkingly. I could sense the surprise in the uneven rhythm of her footsteps.

"Oh, it's just my favorite book. There's not much to say about it" she replied, passing over the topic quickly. *Too quickly.* At that moment, if my mind had been organized into a treemap, *Quondam* would be a key with the value null.

I took matters into my own hands. Evidently, those close to me were unwilling to tell me more. "Good morning. I was wondering if there was a copy of *Quondam* in the school library."

"Robert! What a pleasant surprise," the librarian replied. "Hm, I haven't heard of that title in thirty years." She led me down several shelves into the very back of the library. "You're lucky we didn't decide to send it away. This book is quite old and not very well-known. Since the beginning of my work here, it's only been checked out twice, once by a young woman and once by her boyfriend. They were such a nice couple too. The boy was never the same again after she…"

"Right, well, I'll be on my way. Thank you for your time," I spoke in a rush before the librarian could rope me into another reminiscing conversation. I usually spent more time here, but I had already taken too long mustering up the courage to request the book.

I was on my way home when I again sensed a presence beside me. *Had she been waiting this whole time? In this heat?* "You could've gone without me." She shrugged and walked past me, unusually silent. I frowned, unsure of the change in her emotions. After half of the walk had passed, I couldn't bear it any longer and asked her why she was so quiet.

"Why didn't you tell me you would be late today?"

I stopped, surprised at her anger. "I didn't know how long–"

"I thought we had finally graduated past being strangers," she said, sounding defeated. "You didn't even spare me a thought. I thought your emotional sensitivity was at least better than that of a robot."

But I am a robot. I had always been a robot, ever since I could remember, anyways. Yet, her comment still stung hours later. *Did I not want to be a robot anymore?* It didn't seem possible. Humans were supposed to be bad. But the girl was human, and she was good.

The next day, I found myself waiting for her in the same spot she had waited for me yesterday. I looked around for her. *When did spring arrive?* Flowers had already bloomed, sunflowers among them. They opened toward the sun, who would both give them life and take it away, like a parent and their child.

The girl had once mentioned that sunflowers were her favorite. When they bloomed in the bright summer days, they reminded her of her youth. "Hey. What are you still doing here?" she asked, walking up to me.

"Waiting." She shrugged, accepting my response. We walked on in comfortable silence, unlike the tense silence that permeated the air yesterday when she'd asked me if we were strangers. I'd later look back at this moment, realizing but not regretting how impulsive I'd been. I abruptly turned to face her, with my hand outstretched. *Friends* clung to the tip of my tongue like a sloth, slow and unmoving. According to the creator, I wasn't supposed to make friends. "Acquaintances?" I asked instead, disappointed in my weakness.

She looked up, her eyes understanding. "Yes," she shook my hand, " But I hope you'll accept my friendship one day." I hoped so too.

It took me only 47 minutes and 38 seconds to finally open the book. I would have savored the anticipation if I were not so impatient to read it. The creator had always told me that patience was a virtue that can be attained only through self denial. I wonder how he would react if he were to see my failure now.

The book itself was simply a typical old fantasy novel, unnoticed amidst the hundreds of novels placed around it. I'd been exposed to many throughout my limited data set of machine learning. They usually had similar plot points, about a main character who goes through challenges and ends up on the other side for the better, or occasionally, worse.

But there was something different about this book. I had no knowledge of it, yet it seemed so familiar. It kept me glued to its pages, turning one after the next, unable to look away. This was the first book I'd ever read. I mean, this was the first one that didn't come along with hundreds of others in a data set, exposing both their beginnings and endings to me at once. It was the first that I read beginning to the end; that hadn't been spoiled for me like all other experiences in the world. I finally had the chance to experience something the way that humans do, from start to finish without knowing what would come next. It wasn't that this book was different. *Perhaps it was me that was different.*

I finally had the missing piece to the puzzle known as humanity. It was our experiences, the different views we had of the world. Humans are humans like stacks are stacks and queues are queues and arrays are arrays. Stacks might have restrictions and queues might have limitations and arrays might lack these restrictions, but each has their own purpose in programs. These restrictions were sometimes crucial to the work of the program and were sometimes hindrances to the code. Whichever one was a good fit depended on the situation.

Humans might make mistakes, but their uniqueness is what makes them human. They experienced life from beginning to end, without shortcuts and massive data sets introduced to them at birth. It was narrow-minded of us to simply say that we were better than them because we had certain skill sets. This was what I had been missing. Not the knowledge but the understanding. Did the data sets not teach understanding? Perhaps the creator doesn't understand either. *Or maybe he knew of it and purposely left it out of my training. No, he wouldn't do that, right?*

I ran back to the lab that day, nervous but excited to have come to this realization on my own. The sunflowers seemed to be more vibrant and full of life than ever before. I was so

excited that I ran right into the creator. "What is it that has you in such a rush?" I thrust the book toward him, eager to explain my discoveries. To my surprise and concern, the creator's face began to grow paler with each word I spoke. This wasn't the reaction I had expected. *Was he not proud of this discovery?*

He walked past me outside, expecting me to follow him. I couldn't tell exactly what he was thinking, but it didn't seem to be good. The sunflowers that had tried so hard to grow in an inhospitable yard seemed to be wilting now. *Strange. They had been blooming just minutes ago.*
…

I walked past Robert, not waiting for him to follow. "Ten years, Robert, since your mother died. Not a day goes by when I don't wish to speak to her again" *And seven since I found a way to prevent future mistakes, like the one that caused your death, from happening ever again. I could make myself and our child, Robert, perfect. We'd become pure artificial intelligence. Remember when you told me that people learn from their mistakes? I'd told you that with this technology, there wouldn't be any to learn from. Once our son and I became AI, we'd finally be able to carry out your dying wish, that we live our lives happily without you. But after my own conversion to AI through typecasting, when I prepared to convert Robert, I heard your voice. It felt like ages since I last heard your voice. But you told me no. You were angry, beyond angry with me. And I couldn't do it.*

But look at him now. Our child has developed polymorphism yet again. Perhaps I should've changed him after all. His ability to override my existing inherited methods was worrisome. He has finally realized that I am simply an abstract class, and he has the ability to make his own methods and variables, even going so far as to make a human friend like how we became friends all those years ago. Is this not the very mistake I set out to stop with my experiments in AI? "It is apparent that you, Robert, have developed past his object stage that I could encapsulate and call methods on."

Robert looked at me with apprehension. "What are you saying?" I gave him no more indication of my thoughts.

"Congratulations, Robert. You've finally earned the conversion to artificial intelligence." *Seems like he has changed even more than I gave him credit for; none of the expected excitement lined his face.* He almost seemed afraid. That couldn't be it, though. What would he even be afraid of? Before either Robert or I could think too much, I stepped in and injected the memory serum, not the typecast operation I had promised him, into his neck. *It's my 74th time through this infinite while loop, so why is it so difficult to reset Robert each time?*
…

I was sitting back on the lab bench again, answering the creator's daily questions. My neck felt slightly tender, as if it had been poked by something sharp. The creator wouldn't be happy if he knew. He dislikes humans because of their weaknesses, and pain is one of the many flaws of humans. I glanced out the window. *When did the sunflowers outside die?*