

What's a Pebble?

Emily Ziomek

You don't need that

Aria heard Helix's voice in her head while analyzing a black pebble she found logged in her shoe. That's when Aria looked over her shoulder and saw Helix standing perfectly centered in the doorway of the sleeping room. "How long have you been there?" She hadn't heard the automatic doors slide open, though, that is the point of upgrading from the ones with hinges. Upgrades were no longer a choice, but a part of being a model citizen.

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to scare you. I just wanted to see if you needed my help with anything?" She blinked the moment her mouth stopped moving.

Before Helix took any steps closer, Aria scrunched the pebble in her palm without making it known. She didn't want to raise concern in Helix. Squeezing with all the strength in her hand, her nails dug into her skin which secured the pebble from escaping. "Nope! All good. Let's go eat."

Aria walked a few steps slower than Helix so she could quickly hide the pebble. Some hiding places never change. Just like women from the 1800's, the 1900's and 2000's, Aria found that the best place to hide the pebble was in her bra. Under the guise of scratching her chest, she dropped the pebble in her cleavage. Secured between two mounds of body fat and an underwire, Aria could feel the pebble pressed against her skin. Even though the pebble was out of sight, she could still feel it on her chest, notifying it's presence.

Before the Technological Revolution in the year 2107, Aria's goal was to be like her mom. Fiercely inquisitive, yet serenely so. Only thirteen years old when the government was substituted with Miranda AI, Aria had nearly forgotten about life prior to constant exposure of

digital entity models. The revolution came years after overpopulation threatened the human race's ability to survive. In 2100, Hollville's government seized control of all farm land in an attempt to mass generate genetically modified food by enriching produce and meat with lab created supplements. This rushed effort to save humanity allowed for those 'enrichments,' to surpass the standard safety testing protocols of foods and drugs being used by the public. After one year, Aria noticed 'Enriched Sustenance' stickers on every fruit and packaged snack she ate. The first time she looked at the sticker was when she took a bite of a honey crisp apple, but only felt the crisp on her taste buds. Taste of honey and apple had been lost in its upgrade.

Despite the flavor, the remedy worked better than expected. Less food was needed to satisfy each citizen, and the ratio of people to food was balanced. As Aria grew up, she had no memory of food pyramid charts, or even of the timeless phrase *Breakfast: the most important meal of the day*. Sitting at the eating table more than once a day felt more like a disorienting dream than the past. She couldn't even remember the term that was used before 'eating table.' Restaurants became a place in history, and eating to socialize was an archaic practice. Each household was delivered meals for the week: One meal a day per citizen.

Helix was the same height as a seven year old with dark ringlet curls sitting atop her shoulders. They frizzed, just a little, to make her seem more human. The pair walked straight down the hallway towards the sitting room, but Helix walked with more composure than Aria did. Her arms and legs simultaneously moved in natural rhythm: right leg then left arm, and left leg then right arm. Each finger hung by her sides, straight and fully extended, never curling up into her palms.

The two sat down at the eating table, and Aria stared across at Helix while they waited for the trap doors that look like placemats to slide open, and lay out their meals for the day. Only a little more than an arms length away, she looked into the synthetic eyes that blinked every 3.4 seconds. She wondered if there was any suspicion in those eyes, but didn't notice a difference. Her plate of Enhanced chicken, potatoes, and corn appeared. Whether it actually tasted like chicken or not was something she couldn't remember. Nor did she really care. *If I can't remember what it used to be like, I can't really miss it.* This frequent thought became a mantra.

Aria shoveled each bite of food into her mouth without talking to Helix. Conversing while eating wasn't necessary. The little pebble pinched at the skin under her clothes and all she wanted to do was yank it out. Without finishing the plate, she placed her silverware back at its 'Start' setting. The trap doors opened again and dropped the plate into a cleaning bin.

"Is something wrong?" Helix asked while lifting a fork to her mouth.

"No, I'm just done." Aria started to stand up. "I'll be right back, I need to wash up now."

"Sounds good. I need to finish eating, but I'll join you in the sitting room once the Delivery Bot brings upgrades." She looked at the forkful of Enhanced Sustenance and kept eating.

Seven years into the invention of Enhanced Sustenance, the entire population was sterile. The same experts who solved the overpopulation crisis, were the ones who turned to AI as the solution to sterilization. A program that can manufacture, process, and deliver ideas or actions, working the same as a human brain, was the remedy chosen. As population decreased, so did the number of officials that were qualified to lead Hollville through the crisis. The government was digitized and transformed into Miranda AI, a system responsible for attending the needs of the

citizens and preserving the country. The citizens no longer trusted the fallible leadership system, and voted to be a country governed by AI. After that, humans took the backseat in society.

People stopped going outside a while ago. By the time Aria was five, crime rates soared higher than ever before, and people didn't want to leave their homes. The progression of technology made that possible. Once AI could deliver everything to doorsteps, and children could attend school via holographic classrooms, there was no need to expose themselves to high risks of danger. As a result of safety measures, social interactions amongst humans plummeted. Miranda AI started Project Humex. These Humex bots were created through biological fusion of organic matter and AI technology, and commissioned to accompany any person who lived alone. They lived nearly the same as humans, but were programmed to serve the needs of their companion.

As she entered her wash room, Aria closed herself off from Helix's view. Helix processed and analyzed everything she saw, which, at times, pushed the boundaries of Aria's privacy. All processed data entered into the greater server: Miranda AI. Aria knew she didn't have long until Helix came checking on her, so she dug through her bra and pulled out the pebble. She stared into the darkness of the pebbles color, and the grainy rub of its surface. *How did this even get inside?* As she tried to recall the morning, she realized she hadn't actually listened to anything she'd watched in the hologram broadcast of Model Citizen News earlier that day. She couldn't remember anything the Bot Casters reported. Reflecting on what might have been boredom caused Aria to remember looking out the window in the sitting room, and seeing a Delivery Bot stuck on a crack in the pavement. She couldn't remember the last time she needed to step outside for anything, especially with Helix around, but that day she did. Not helping the Delivery Bot

felt wrong to Aria, so she ran out while Helix was occupied, and pushed the bot back onto its programmed path. She'd made it back inside the house in a matter of minutes.

Squeezing the pebble between the tips of her thumb and index finger, Aria pushed it into her skin, forming an indentation that looked like a meteorite landed in her epidermis. The pressure relieved her screen touching fingertips. Curious by the sensation, she rolled the pebble in between her palms and let the earthy texture touch her skin. The edges glided across her soft hand, occasionally catching on a wrinkle and leaving a pinch. She looked at her palms, red from friction, and as they tingled with heat she remembered feeling this sensation once before. Closing her eyes, she scraped the pebble against her skin, harder and harder each time, until she pictured the memory. She saw a version of herself at an age younger than seven because she looked smaller than Helix presently did. She remembered the sound of her panting breath and feeling wind push past her hair. She remembered the pain of rough friction against the flesh on her knees. She remembered playing tag, chasing other children, falling on the pavement of the street, skinning her hands and knees against the tiny black pebbles in the road, and getting back up to keep playing. She remembered the only thing she needed in that moment: to tag someone as *it*.

When Aria was seven years old, she was watching a newly released movie called *The 95%*. The acclaimed film revealed what had been found in 95% of the never-before discovered depths of the ocean. Bioluminescent creatures that had never been seen before floated overhead as she sat next to her mother on the couch in their sitting room. She reached her hand out, palms flat, and readied herself to catch the shapeless, glowing blob. As it touched her skin, the pixels broke apart and disappeared into thin air, destroying the creature before her eyes. Tears formed at

her waterline, but dissolved like the glowing blob when the whole scene went dark and a government announcement projected itself in front of them.

ATTENTION CITIZENS: PLEASE REMAIN CALM

Today, while Patrol Bots were surveilling and protecting, they encountered a corrupted Delivery Bot. Though they secured the threat, further investigation was needed. With the help of our Expert Bots, we have deprogrammed all bots connected to corruption.

We urge you to stay indoors and limit any contact with those outside your home. Your safety is best ensured that way. We can provide you with anything you need, if you stay home and follow the guidelines of Model Citizenship.

Thank you for listening to this message. Please remain calm. You may now resume your previous actions.

When the announcement disappeared, Aria looked at her mother whose face was now blanketed by the blue light of the hologram projector. “Is something wrong?” she asked.

“I’m not sure if something’s wrong, but I’m not sure if everything’s alright.” She reached both her arms out to wrap Aria in her embrace, “All that matters is that we’re together.”

In spite of her mother’s nurturing, Aria’s face still seemed concerned, so they resumed the movie. While Lucille distracted Aria to preserve her daughter’s childhood innocence, she stared out of the window and repeated one question in her mind: *Should we really remain calm?*

Aria opened her eyes and saw herself in the reflection glass. A crumb sized tear pooled at her tear duct, but this time it fell. The stream glided down the skin on her cheek, leaving a shiny streak parallel to her nose. Her vision shifted to look at it like she was staring at a portrait in a museum; something she’d never done before. Her lips caught her own attention when the tear

trickled in through its creases and bittered her tongue. She couldn't remember the last time she tasted anything. Its saltiness made her salivate. Staring back into her own eyes, she saw the vertical streak again, and wiped it in a downward motion towards her tongue. It stretched out at full length, hunting the taste once more.

The taste didn't linger as long this time. Her fascination cleared her eyes of anymore pooling tears. Before she could think, and produce more, she heard the rhythm of Helix's footsteps getting closer.

"Is everything all right in there? Do you need anything?" Helix alerted from just a few steps down the hall.

Aria's peace transformed to panic as she tried to figure out where to hide the pebble. It was foreign and unnecessary, therefore a danger in the eyes of Helix. She'd been programmed to ensure Aria's safety, and she could only see the pebble as a threat.

Aria answered to avoid any suspicion or panic. "Everything is okay, I'm just cleaning my nose." She panicked, thinking Helix would ask questions, but she didn't.

The house alerted the presence of a Delivery Bot at the front door which distracted Helix.

Fear of the outdoors circulated through the air until it was strong enough to keep everyone from opening their front doors. The few who refused to heed the advice from Miranda AI quickly disappeared. After that, the only humans willing to defy this warning were the children. Boys and girls would sneak out and play with each other in patches of dead grass between their homes. One by one, children from each neighborhood disappeared. Bot Casters did not report on this news, so people created their own ideas about what happened. With the current state of their world, society theorized that the children were kidnapped by cannibals. Before

Miranda AI established itself, it was widely believed that a small portion of the severely malnourished population turned to cannibalism. There was never any proof, but it was believable enough for a desperate population. No one doubted the lengths that people would go for food, so Model Citizens feared that the small society of cannibals had persevered through the revolution and was preying on Hollville. A theory based on fear was enough to stop people from asking more questions, and to start keeping their kids inside.

While she thought about where to hide the pebble, she recalled a time when she hid a frog from her mother. They'd been watching the thunderous downpour of rain outside. The dirt turned to mud, caving in the holes that frogs lived in and caused them to retreat out. Once the rain had calmed to a drizzle, Aria snuck out and grabbed a frog from her front porch that she'd watched from the window. She liked how it stretched out and retracted within seconds, and blended into the ground like a rock when it didn't move. Her mother busted the scheme within minutes on account of the frog's refusal to stay silent or still once it was brought into the home.

The two of them brought the frog back outside, closed the door, and went back to watching the rain slow down. Watching it slow down was better than watching it pick up. It made time feel like it was slowing down too; waiting for the drip sound of each drop that slowly slid off of the roof, and watching each drop, one by one, splatter across pavement and leave patterns of explosion on the ground. This entertained Aria more than any holographic movie or virtually constructed world. There was no control or structure to the rain. It fell when and where it wanted, and switched pace at whatever rate it pleased. Moving at its own rhythm, it hypnotized Aria and her mother. She'd forgotten how many hours they'd spent together in silence enjoying the rain. Occasionally, they'd break the blissful silence to think out loud.

In the soft tone of a young girl still finding her voice, Aria asked, “Why don’t all the raindrops just cluster together before they fall? They could team up and turn into a waterfall that starts in the clouds.”

“I’m not sure, but that’s a great idea. You should share that thought with the rain! Maybe it’ll hear you,” but Lucille knew her young daughter was too smart to believe that. “Or maybe it won’t, but that doesn’t mean it isn’t worth a shot.”

Lucille only cared about Aria and her future. She was so young when the outdoors became unsafe that her mother worried what would happen to her in adult life if she had no memories besides the one inside the house. She pushed Aria to engage with the outside from indoors. It’s why they spent hours watching the world from the window. She taught Aria to watch the world the way she did. She would only ever take her eyes off the rain to look at her daughter while responding to the questions.

One of Aria’s many forgotten memories was the worst day of her life. Helix made sure there was nothing in the house that could ever remind her of the day she lost her mom. It was her one job to protect Aria’s well-being and that included her mental state. Anything that could compromise Aria’s happiness was a programmed threat in Helix’s artificial mind. Helix was a non-human supervised deep learning AI bot, monitored by Miranda AI. While this AI model had the ability to process information, calculate, respond, and foster connections through identified relationships, it couldn’t make moral decisions. However, the philosophy of Hollville was that morality wasn’t needed if the system didn’t include humans. Computers didn’t fight, people did. Matter of fact, they welcomed this concept with open arms. Refusing certain liberties meant less

responsibility in making the right decisions, especially when AI was there to make calculated decisions for them.

Four years ago, when Aria was twenty-four, Helix came into her life as a companion bot to ease the grief of losing her mother. She appeared at her doorstep the day after Lucille was gone.

“Hello Aria! It’s nice to meet you, I’m Helix, your newly designated companion bot.”

With a stuffy nose, Aria managed to ask, “Why are you here?”

“To keep you company, my friend! Miranda AI knew you were alone and appointed me as your companion to protect you from harm and loneliness. We’ll have a great relationship, I’m programmed to foster the best one possible based on your algorithm”

Her face still showed doubt. “If you’re supposed to protect me, why do you look like a kid?”

Entering into the home by sliding past Aria’s arms, Helix responded, “According to your algorithm, monitored by Miranda AI, you were projected to respond best to a child Humex. It was estimated to be perceived as the least threatening form of companionship for you. Does that seem accurate?”

“I guess it does...”

After that, Helix never left. Each day consisted of a schedule that fostered a relationship between the two of them. Helix set up her charging station next to Aria’s bed, and performed each need-based action at her side. They always shared their one meal of the day, and spent their time watching holographic entertainment. Their mornings started by waking up in a nature

sunrise simulation chosen by Helix. Aria's favorite was the Black Sand Beach because she thought it looked more dream-like. *Surreal, you mean.* Helix would correct her anytime she brought up this thought.

"You know, I've been thinking-"

"You know, I can do that for you." Helix interrupted like any prepubescent who's learning the proper tone for sarcasm.

"Yes, I know. But have you thought about what it'd be like to actually wake up on that beach?"

"I don't need to, I can imagine it by simulating it. Like we do each morning... Did you want me to simulate it again?"

"No, I just mean I think it would be—" Aria sighed in defeat. "Actually, nevermind."

"You don't want to talk about it anymore?"

"Not really."

"Okay. I respect that. If you have any more questions I can answer them."

That's how most of their conversations went. Aria would ask questions, hoping they'd be nurtured, but instead Helix would give her endless answers. It pushed her to stop questioning anything at all, even if she planned on keeping it to herself.

She'd taken too long to hide the pebble. Aria heard the automatic locks on the main door clicking into system as Helix finished collecting the delivery.

"Updates! Come look at what the Delivery Bot dropped off!"

"Yeah, yeah, I know! They do that every day, and it's always the same stuff." Aria's voice carried through the hallway as she still decided the fate of the pebble in her palm. She looked at

the sterile environment and noticed the lack of places to hide her new found treasure. Before sneaking thoughts could reach her frontal lobe's neural pathways, Aria heard Helix's awaited response.

“It's never the same thing! They always deliver new objects, that's why they're called ‘updates.’ It's *updated* from the last version of itself. All the bugs or unnecessary functions are wiped clean, and replaced with better software.”

Aria repeated Helix's words in her mind, *‘wiped clean,’ That's it!* At the spark of her idea, she lifted the quarter sized opening on the soap dispenser's lid. Usually, that compartment was only used by Helix when she refilled it based on Aria's need. Dropping the grated pebble in the dime sized slot, Aria hoped this hiding spot would ensure its safety.

She opened the door to see Helix patiently waiting on the other side. “Okay, fine then. Prove it.”

While Helix proceeded to educate Aria on all the new features of the same old objects, her mind could only focus on one thing: the pebble. She wondered when she'd get back to it, and her nervous system kept resonating the feeling of its texture on her skin. The physical object of curiosity was just steps out of reach in the other room. She imagined a small cluster of bubbles at the soap's surface, holding the pebbles' last words, “Help me!,” as it drowned in disinfectant.

When dropping it in the container, she hadn't put much thought into how she'd get the pebble back out. Her biggest concern in the moment was making sure Helix wouldn't find it, but now she stressed about retrieving the object that felt extraordinary in her hands. Maybe it was because, to her, the pebble was new. Unlike the constantly updated gadgets that got dropped off at the doorstep, disguising themselves as ‘new and improved,’ when it was really just more of the

same. Or maybe it was because it entertained her more than Helix ever had. It didn't answer all the questions she asked, and it didn't mind leaving her hanging, no matter how loud or how many times she asked. She couldn't control it. It didn't serve any purpose besides existing, unlike anything else in Hollville. Aside from humans, of course. Their related experience bonded the pebble and Aria beyond her own understanding.

"Aria," Helix waved both hands in front of her eyes, "Are you still listening?"

She shook her head and tried to blink away the wonder, "Yeah..." but the wonder lingered. Questioning how to get the pebble out of the soap, Aria decided to do what she'd been conditioned to do best: Trust Helix.

"Actually, no. I'm not listening." She elaborated before Helix could produce words. "Can I show you something?"

"Of course you can! What is it?"

"Here, just come with me." The pair walked to the wash room and Aria pointed at the soap dispenser. "It's in there."

"Let me make sure I'm understanding you correctly, you're pointing at the soap?"

"No! Well, yes, but no." Aria opened up the little slot at the top of the dispenser, "It's in there *with* the soap. And I need you to get it out for me. Please."

"This sounds odd, but alright, if that's what you need then I can do it. I'll drain the soap and get whatever it is you're looking for." She extended her pointer finger into the top slot, and suctioned out the contents through a micro-sized vacuum underneath her nail bed. Within seconds, Helix drained the whole container and at the bottom laid the pebble.

"That's what I wanted to show you!" Aria tried reaching in to grab it, but her fingers weren't long enough.

Helix detached the dispenser from the wall and shook the pebble out. It landed in the sink, clinking around the ceramic rim. They both stood and stared at it for a moment before Helix snatched it and held it up between their faces. “Where did you get this?”

Aria hesitated to respond as she re-thought about her decision to show Helix the pebble, “Outside.”

“The outside poses numerous threats to your safety. This object is a danger just by association.”

“Yes, I know, but I’m fine. Can I have it back now?” Aria’s eyebrows started sinking with concern.

Helix started walking out of the washroom. “No, you don’t need this. You needed to dispose of it when you found it. Don’t worry though, I will take care of this, and keep you safe and happy. You’ll be better without it, trust me.”

Aria yanked her back by the collar of her shirt, “No! Give it back.”

With an inhuman grip, Helix pulled Aria’s hand off the shirt and turned to face her. “Please don’t do that,” she demanded through an unbothered smile.

Helix’s indifferent demeanor only escalated Aria’s fear about getting the pebble back. “Well, *please*, don’t take my stuff.” Aria tried swatting the pebble into the air with her free hand.

Helix proceeded down the hallway as Aria scrambled to free the pebble locked away with the strength of a biotechnic clenched fist. As her emotions heightened, Aria began screaming at Helix. She’d forgotten the feeling of her vocal chords stretching until air steamed out of her lungs as she expressed her anger. The pebble was *hers* and she *did* need it, no matter what any AI child tried to tell her. The two pushed and pulled at each other’s palms, until Helix’s force was enough to shove Aria on the ground. Aria reached her hands forward as she fell, hoping Helix

would catch her, but instead her tailbone crunched into the wooden floor. Aria stared at Helix with wide eyes, almost like she was seeing her for the first time again. While she tried to get up, Helix rushed to the front door. With the aim and speed of the world's best pitcher, Helix launched the pebble past the view of the human eye.

"NO! Please, no!" Aria pleaded as she watched it disappear from sight. She disregarded her pain and went running after it. Before she could make it past the front steps, she tripped. Her foot slipped off the edge of the stair and propelled her body weight forward. Putting her hands out in front once again, she caught herself this time. A searing pain traveled through her hand, and when she looked down, all she could see was raw flesh and a couple little pebbles embedded in her palms. And then she remembered.

Aria remembered the day Lucille was gone. The image of her mother being dragged out of the house by Patrol Bots. She remembered screaming, "Stop it! No! Please, no! Don't take her! Don't leave me alone!" while she sobbed on her knees. She remembered the last time hearing her mother's voice, "Let me go!" before the Patrol Bots silenced her. She recalled the memory of a societal *upgrade* mandated by Miranda AI that permitted her mother being ripped out of the house while bots repeated the phrase, "We're here to help!" Her memory came back to life when she heard a voice from above her head, "Do you want my help?" She glanced up and found Helix's eyes looking down at her. Aria couldn't see Helix the same as before. Her voice, her stare, her stance, her grip, every part of Helix resembled that day. It was all different now. She looked at everything she knew, and felt the same fear she'd forgotten after her mother was taken.

She couldn't stomach going back inside anymore than she could stomach another plate of Enriched Sustenance. Knowing Lucille should still be there, her grief and anger were enough power to get herself off the ground. Remembering how her body moved during the game of tag in her childhood, she got up, and started running away as fast as she could. She passed houses that all looked the same, just like hers. Each barren front yard fueled her fear as she remembered watching a Patrol Bot quietly snatch a boy from the yard across her sitting room's window back when she would watch the rain fall with Lucille. At the time, Aria was too young to understand that the missing children had been taken by Miranda AI as part of the 'upgrades.' By keeping everyone focused on the indoors and their own screens, no one realized that the same entity they trusted was also the one capable of sacrificing for the 'common good.'

The further away Aria got from home, the faster her memories flooded back. The foreign world she looked at was nothing like the one in her memories. Gravel replaced grass in front yards, silence fell from the absence of croaking frogs and singing birds, and no mothers watched their children playing from the window, ready to yell, "Slow down," or "Come eat!" Aria ran until there were no more houses near her.

She took a moment to catch the breath that led her to the wooded area of leafless trees. While bent over she spotted a figure moving slowly from the corner of her eye. Alert, Aria threw her body back into a standing position and locked eyes with an older woman. With only four dead oak trees distancing the two women, Aria could tell the woman was not a Humex. Her hair hadn't fully greyed, and no Humex can replicate the process of aging. It's not necessary for them. The woman was too far to see clearly, but close enough to make Aria nervous. She wondered if it could be Lucille, if maybe, somehow, she escaped the upgrade. Curiosity lifted her foot and she moved one step forward, but it still wasn't enough to get a better view. The woman remained

silent and still as Aria took another few steps closer. Standing next to the third oak tree, she still couldn't see the woman's face clearly. Before she could move forward again, the woman lifted her leg, stepped over a log, and began walking closer.

Her unexpected movements provoked Aria's fear response. The feet she'd used to run away were now propelling her out of the woods. Questions about the woman dissolved into thoughts that started with the phrase *what if*. Fear of the woman erased her curiosity, and the further away she got, the less questions she remembered. She couldn't handle the infinite amount of possibilities that came with identifying the woman. It wasn't what she'd been conditioned to do. As Aria overthought each possible outcome of this interaction, her heart raced faster until the beat was strong enough to push her back home where Helix was waiting, almost like nothing had happened at all.