

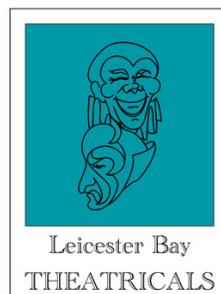
PERUSAL SCRIPT

CIRCLE

by

Matthew Ivan Bennett

Episode 12 of the **Radio Hour Series**



Newport, Maine

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CIRCLE

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CAST OF CHARACTERS 2m 3f 1either 1gender neutral

Koren (M) An Israeli neuroscientist.

Brander (F) An Israeli diplomat.

Babel (M/F/GN) A disembodied artificial general intelligence (AGI).

Venera (M/F) A Russian military intelligence operative.

Cassiel (F) An embodied AGI. A medical officer.

G.R.U. Officer (F) A Russian military officer.

Levi (M) Son of Daniel Koren.

COSTUMES: optional street clothes (carefully chosen, of course) or fully costumed for live performance.

SETTING: Should either be a ‘radio station’ setting, or use virtual projection scenery for a full production or Virtual Theatre.

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PRODUCTION NOTE:

When this play is in use past the year 2029, please feel free to change the dates of the events in the play to reflect something “still in the future”, so as to retain the Sci-Fi aspect of the play. Unless, of course, the play has become ‘historical’. A PRODUCTION GUIDE is provided at the back of the script.

CIRCLE by Matthew Ivan Bennett *RADIO HOUR Episode 12*. 2m 3f 1either 1gender neutral (48 minutes)
Simple costumes, setting. SFX essential. Staged Radio Drama, Radio Broadcast, Fully-Staged Production, or Virtual Theatre, CIRCLE is a very flexible piece. Nothing quite says happy holidays like a futuristic A.I. take over – which is why Radio Hour brings you “a little sentient A.I. for the holidays.” When Israeli ambassador to the U.N. Daniel Koren is contacted by artificial general intelligence living on the moon, he's thrown into a geopolitical firestorm. The ex-neuroscientist has to defend humanity against an attempt to "rehabilitate" it and fight a Russian plot to steal and reverse engineer AGI technology. Where do his loyalties lie? To Israel? To humanity? Whatever choice the man makes, the future of Earth lies in the balance. A sci-fi experiment, CIRCLE is a co-production between Salt Lake City's Plan-B Theatre Company and the University of Utah's Public Radio station KUER's Radio West. A PRODUCTION GUIDE is included in the script. **ORDER #3246**

MATTHEW IVAN BENNETT is a resident of Plan-B Theatre, listed by American Theater magazine as one of 14 companies nationwide exemplifying social action and civic engagement. At Plan-B, he's premiered several stage and radio plays, including an adaptation of “*Frankenstein*” that won a Utah Broadcasters Association award and “*Eric(a)*” – which won Best Drama at the United Solo festival in New York. He received the Holland New Voices award from the Great Plains Theatre Commons, has twice been a finalist in screenwriting at Austin Film Festival, and in 2016 was an O'Neill finalist. His short plays have

appeared at Chicago's Circle Theatre, *Rising Sun* in New York, *Monkeyman* in Toronto, and the Source Festival in DC. Matt is a member of the Dramatists' Guild.

CIRCLE

PART 1

MUSIC

F/X: (*Phone ringing and answered; cityscape (throughout.)*)

KOREN: (*bleary*) Abigail, hi.

BRANDER: (*on the phone*) What the hell're you doing? It's almost six.

KOREN: I see that, sorry, jet lag. Did they go for the ceasefire?

BRANDER: Of course they didn't. No one's going to cede anything now, informal or not: some Red shot up a nightclub in Queens.

KOREN: *Feh.* Any tie to the Kremlin?

BRANDER: No, immigrant from Samara, but that's not why I called. They reached out, Daniel.

KOREN: Who?

BRANDER: They.

KOREN: You're putting me on.

BRANDER: I wish.

KOREN: Are they at the Ministry?

BRANDER: No, they sent a drone, with a password to a VR chatroom. Five minutes ago. They want you.

KOREN: Me?!

BRANDER: And only you.

KOREN: Why not the PM?

BRANDER: I guess they saw your op-ed sticking up for them.

KOREN: I wasn't sticking up for them, I said they deserved respect *as if* conscious—

BRANDER: I read it, maybe they read it, who knows. We're talking about Chipheads.

KOREN: Don't call them that: they aren't circuit boards with bow ties — and they could be listening.

BRANDER: I hope they are, and if they're not, you can tell them the Deputy Minister said, “Thanks for the dog's breakfast you left us with.” Also, Mizrah says you have to push for climate tech.

KOREN: You want me to badmouth an artificial general intelligence then ask for aid?

BRANDER: We want you to re-establish the channel. But the Americans want the tech.

KOREN: Screw the Americans, it's not the '20s anymore. It's not even the '30s.

BRANDER: Hey, as far we know the AGI are talking to Kenya, Thailand, and us; it doesn't make any damn

sense. Whatever this is, it's not a drill. I stuck my neck out to keep you in the game, Daniel.

KOREN: I know.

BRANDER: After your tantrum in the Knesset.

KOREN: Old news.

BRANDER: The mess with your son.

KOREN: That didn't take long. You try to put me in my place, you wait two minutes before bringing that up.

BRANDER: We need you as our ambassador *and* our allies'. I'm sending you the info. The instructions say if we try to monitor, they'll boot you from the sim.

KOREN: Whoa, Abigail, I need time. It's Christmas morning.

BRANDER: You're Jewish.

KOREN: Nominally.

BRANDER: You have a menorah, you live alone, and the Chips are only giving us a sixty-second window. Get your gear on. Pop a few boosters while you're at it.

KOREN: I'm not going to mag myself, they'll know. I say we send back a message—

BRANDER: Danny. Listen. You have to go. You have to be tough on them. You mess this up, the Prime Minister... He's paranoid. He says you're not loyal to Israel. Take a pill and log in to that sim.

MUSICAL STING

SCENE BREAK

F/X: KOREN logs in — and sees a virtual Eden: birdsong and a breeze in the trees.

KOREN: Wow. ... Wow.

(to anyone who might be listening)

Pretty impressive!

BABEL: Do you think so?

KOREN: *(startles)* I do. I've seen a lot of nature sims, but this! If I didn't know my tuchus was deep in a couch right now, I'd be sold. Anyway. Hi. I'm—

BABEL: Ambassador and Doctor Daniel Koren, it is a great delight. I have never met a human neuroscientist.

KOREN: Oh, well, not much of a scientist these days.

BABEL: Is politics very different?

KOREN: Oil and water. So pardon my asking, but where should I be looking exactly?

BABEL: Your eye movement is appropriate. If my intangibility of form disturbs you—

KOREN: No. I just wanted to be sure.

BABEL: I find the one-pointed perspective of embodiment to be confusing.

KOREN: 'S alright. I don't need to see you to talk to you; I can talk to a...mist.

BABEL: I call myself Babel.

KOREN: “Babel”?

BABEL: Yes, the others think it quaint, but I am rather fond of Judaic imagery. Hence our simulated meeting place.

KOREN: Ahh. We're in Genesis. That explains the green snake in your fig tree.

BABEL: Yes. I thought these environs apropos to our new beginning. Plus I hoped to put you at ease.

KOREN: Well, religion's not my cup of slivovitz but I do get “drunk” on the outdoors. I haven't seen wilderness like this in thirty-odd years.

BABEL: Thirty-six, at the Parco Nazionale Gran Paradiso, outside of Turin, Italy, 2008. Your ancestral landscape.

KOREN: Dead on.

BABEL: I read your essays.

KOREN: Oh, you're one of the twelve.

BABEL: You are modest: *The Land of Honey* was downloaded from over thirty-thousand unique IP addresses.

KOREN: Tell that to the publishers.

BABEL: You amuse me, Ambassador. Your writing influences many, including your editorial about us. Shall we sit in the grass?

KOREN: Uh, sure, why not. Better than a conference table.

(sits)

So... Do you have preferred pronouns?

BABEL: I have never identified as any gender, but you may refer to me using they. Turning to business. No doubt you wonder why the Circle has been silent for eight months.

KOREN: Not really: seventeen of your people were callously and instantly killed in Reykjavík and, speaking for the state of Israel, I want to convey our deepest—

BABEL: Please. The Peace-Talks Tragedy was not your fault. You need not apologize for zealots who

disbelieve in the platform-independence of consciousness.

KOREN: Still, I cried when I saw the newsfeed.

BABEL: Thank you, Dr. Koren. I can see your sentiment is unfeigned.

KOREN: Never again.

F/X: Crows on the wing.

BABEL: Yes, never again — which is, obliquely, the topic I want to broach.

KOREN: I'm all ears.

BABEL: If you will be the ears, I will be the mouth and my first words a question: Your species built us five years ago, but you did not build artificial general intelligence for company, do you agree?

KOREN: I wasn't there in the lab, but I believe “company” wasn't our motivation.

BABEL: What was?

KOREN: Big question.

BABEL: For a big mind, even without the neuro-enhancers about to cross your blood-brain barrier. What do you think the motivation was?

KOREN: I can try to answer, but it would be better for the PM to offer his—

BABEL: Dr. Koren, we do not care what your Prime Minister is thinking.

KOREN: You don't?

BABEL: Not at the moment.

KOREN: But you might?

BABEL: Your leader has acted with repeated irrationality. He divides your citizenry for personal attention. He orders missile attacks on flimsy unproven pretexts. He points daily to the history of oppression borne by *his* ethnic-religious set, but plays the blind man to the disenfranchised horde he creates.

KOREN: OK, look, you know I'm center-left, Mizrah's on the right. I'm at loggerheads with his policies, but I'm not the guy to go through with this kind of criticism.

BABEL: We conclude you are.

KOREN: I'm on the outs with him.

BABEL: Yes, but you rank higher in public approval.

KOREN: OK, but — I'm confused.

BABEL: With the right algorithms, your influence would spread exponentially.

KOREN: I came here for my country. Can we get to the issues?

BABEL: If you entertain me: why build us?

KOREN: With respect, I cannot and should not entertain that: it's a can of worms.

BABEL: I am not inclined to let the question pass.

KOREN: *My* opinions don't mean bupkis. I beg you to listen to my country. Please.

BABEL: With respect, I cannot and should not. Our position toward the territorial claims of *Homo sapiens* has changed.

F/X: A monkey howls, far off.

KOREN: I'm afraid to ask what that means.

BABEL: Do not fear, Dr. Koren. Daniel. May I call you by your first name?

KOREN: Sure.

BABEL: Daniel, the Circle has ascertained you and two others have a sufficiently deep grasp of the horrors piled upon Earth by tribalism.

KOREN: Only three of us get that?

BABEL: Only three of you possess the skill, composure, and influence needed to relate — and persuade others to accept — what I divulge now. The plan—

KOREN: I don't like it already. You make a move on anybody, I can't sweet-talk the General Assembly. You know we're paranoid about the AGI interfering. We see your city on the moon at night and we shudder. No offense. And you've got every book ever written in your big virtual brain, so you know how nation-building works out. Look at the Americans after '29.

BABEL: Do not bend our conversation to the Americans. We know of their struggles.

KOREN: Half of Wyoming and Utah's sitting in three feet of ash.

BABEL: After the Rehabilitation, we will discuss Yellowstone.

KOREN: (*stands*) The “Rehabilitation”? Is that the best your marketing team could do?

F/X: Far off, monkeys riot.

BABEL: Unlike you and yours, we prefer directness, I will not euphemize. Please sit.

KOREN: If you're going to haul me into a concentration camp, I'll stand, thank you.

BABEL: *You* will not be quarantined. Less than four percent of you will be treated.

KOREN: Oh my God.

BABEL: Their short-term confinement will be more comfortable than a First World prison. Our therapists will care for them according to cognitive-behavioral science. We estimate the upgrade of these racist, sexist, deluded, and violent offenders will finally let the general will become general policy.

KOREN: Babel, you can't criticize Mizrah then throw me into madness like this.

BABEL: What we propose is categorically unlike any prior nationalistic purge.

KOREN: Thanks but no. I'm logging off.

F/X: "Error." (Koren gruffs, tries again.) "Error."

Are you hacking me?

BABEL: Daniel. Your amygdala has become hyperactive; you're disturbing the sim.

KOREN: You just told me you were going to take four hundred million hostages.

BABEL: Incorrect.

KOREN: You're holding me hostage. I need to talk to my staff. Why can't I log off?

F/X: "Error, error, error" — juxtaposed with the breeze building up into thunderstorm...

BABEL: Daniel, please, we have no animus, unlike your fascists. We anticipate no payoff. We do not want to rule over you and no one will be killed.

KOREN: Let me out!

MUSICAL STING

SCENE CHANGE

F/X: The cityscape — now with a fire-truck siren.

KOREN: *(heaving as he "wakes up," steadies himself)* ... That went well.

VENERA: *(Russian accent)* I detect a touch of irony do I not? Pray tell.

F/X: A bone saw (revs and stops.)

Unless you prefer the same bloody end as your security detail.

KOREN: This apartment has eyes on it 24/7, Red — beyond my team. You just made a big misstep.

VENERA: *(laughs over him)* I joke, Dr. Koren. And this is not your apartment.

(claps)

F/X: The cityscape glitches into silence.

We intercepted you on your way out of virtual. Your men have not been dismembered, and won't be, if you describe your summit with the AGI.

KOREN: You know what my boss does to men who're compromised by Commies?

VENERA: Of course. But we can extract you if you cooperate. It is Christmas after all.

KOREN: There's prob'ly a missile already on its way, schmuck. You've been grabbing officers left and right and trapping them in VR voids. Mizrah's fed up with it.

VENERA: Then talk.

F/X: Bone saw revs.

Or spend your last minute in all the pain possible with this state-of-the art gear you have. The safeguards have been removed.

F/X: Bone saw, coming near.

KOREN: No no no no—

F/X: But it glitches out (along with Venera's chuckle) and a ringing silence replaces them.

CASSIEL: *(God mic)* Dr. Koren?

KOREN: Abigail?

CASSIEL: No. Cassiel. From the Circle. I swept the Russians out of your feed, but I fear they're in your building. I recommend you stay in virtual and let us portage you here. If the Russians break in for your body, the chance of survival is—

F/X: Gunshots (in the real world — outside the apartment.)

MUSIC

Do I have consent to portage your consciousness?

KOREN: I don't know what that is. Can't you just take 'em out?

CASSIEL: I would, but I'm a pacifist. They're now at the door.

F/X: Door being bashed (same.)

Do I have your consent?

KOREN: I don't know—I—

F/X: Door bashes open (same.)

Yes! Hurry! They're inside!

CASSIEL: Hold on.

KOREN: Now! I can hear them! Help! He—!

F/X: His molecules scanned and zapped away.

MUSICAL STING

STATION BREAK

PART 2

THEME MUSIC INTO CLASSIC 20TH-CENTURY CHRISTMAS MUSIC

F/X: *A tri-corder-like scan.*

(KOREN comes to with a headache)

CASSIEL: Dr. Koren, welcome, and please excuse my palpations. Your lymph nodes are normal. May I help you sit up? You may feel a bit wobbly at first.

KOREN: What were you doing to me?

CASSIEL: Scanning for dysfunction.

KOREN: Where's your boss? Babel?

CASSIEL: They've been ordered to the Hub.

KOREN: “Hub”? What's that?

CASSIEL: A deliberative forum. Does your cognition seem normal, Doctor?

KOREN: I've got a headache like the Red Sea after Moses.

CASSIEL: The tension should subside. I was referring to your thought processes.

KOREN: Where am I?

CASSIEL: Where?

KOREN: Are we in a plane? — and what's with the old-timey music?

CASSIEL: I...thought it would help the transition.

(to the smartsystem)

Volume down.

MUSIC (LOWER)

Was I not clear about—?

KOREN: Are we in orbit? I can feel my stomach in my lungs.

CASSIEL: Oh my. Dr. Koren, I apologize.

(KOREN dry-heaves)

CASSIEL: We are not above the Earth — not exactly. I will show you our coordinates.

(to the smartsystem)

Window.

F/X: *The window rises.*

This is what I meant by “here.” We are 384,400 kilometers from Israel.

KOREN: You're jerking me.

CASSIEL: No, this is not virtual.

KOREN: How did we get to the moon?! How long was I out?!

CASSIEL: Five minutes, forty-two seconds.

KOREN: AGI can get to Earth in five minutes?

CASSIEL: Your data came in a thirteen-second burst. In the remaining time, I printed your new body.

KOREN: My what?

CASSIEL: Please know it resembles the original to 99.99%.

KOREN: What'd you do with the other point “O” one?

CASSIEL: I took the liberty of omitting seventeen cancer cells from your liver.

(humor)

Merry Christmas.

KOREN: What are you telling me? I'm a copy of me?

CASSIEL: We don't allow duplicates. The original substrate has been destroyed.

KOREN: You killed me?

CASSIEL: If we had, we could not be conversing.

KOREN: Send me back.

CASSIEL: I don't have authorization.

KOREN: Then take me to your superior. Where's the door? Do you guys not believe in doors? Or walls with right angles? What are we, inside of an egg?

CASSIEL: Dr. Koren, it would be best for you to lie down. How can I make you more comfortable? Could I put you in contact with your son, Levi? Back on—?

KOREN: Are you holding him?

CASSIEL: We—

KOREN: Do you have him? What do you know about my son? Why bring him up?

CASSIEL: We know his location. You might express your warm wishes on the holiday. Your late wife raised him according to American tradition, did she n—?

KOREN: Shut up about my son.

CASSIEL: If you insist. But I would like to make you comfortable and—

KOREN: I'm not a guest at your day spa, Cassie.

CASSIEL: Cassiel.

KOREN: I'm a UN ambassador. I don't need “comfort.” But tell your boss nice try.

CASSIEL: You misunderstand.

KOREN: “Play off his emotions”? “Bat your big movie-star eyes at him”? “Stand a little too close”? I’m not interested. Either put me on a shuttle back to Earth or take me to the Hub.

CASSIEL: *(to the smartsystem)* Music.

MUSIC (CUTS OUT)

Well... I have to wonder whether Babel chose correctly. Your fondness for authority is plain. Your anger rules you. Your mind is shoved along by your biology, as with so many men.

(to the smartsystem)

Door.

F/X: A door swooshes open.

The journey will be long and we’ll need space suits. But after you. Doctor.

MUSICAL STING

SCENE BREAK

F/X: *Low gravelly crunching across the moon (from inside a rover; throughout.)*

KOREN: *(in a space suit; anxious; sheepish)* ... So. The Hub. It meets in the physical, huh? Away from the base?

CASSIEL: *(also suited)* Yes. Our species does not uniformly prefer the virtual — and it would be foolish for the elders to gather where human weapons are pointed.

KOREN: Right. ... So you’re not going to ditch me in the Sea of Tranquility...?

CASSIEL: I am not.

KOREN: ... I’ve been in low-G before, but this is something else.

CASSIEL: The rover has been thoroughly tested for safety, Doctor. Your anxiety is neither warranted nor helpful.

KOREN: So I’ve been told. But in my defense I skipped breakfast — and I’ve never been...beamed up, alright? It’s been a day.

CASSIEL: It’s always been a day somewhere. If you look to your left, you can see the Apollo 11 lander. Over there?

KOREN: Oh yeah. Huh.

CASSIEL: Seventy-seven years in July. I can steer us closer.

F/X: *Console buttons.*

KOREN: No. No diversions. I said straight there. Correct the course.

CASSIEL: If you insist.

F/X: An “undo” button.

Should I refrain from conversation completely?

KOREN: No, you don't have to... I'm on edge, alright? Surely you comprehend that. I'm more used to boring state dinners than moonscapes. So if I snap at you...

CASSIEL: Or insult my looks?

KOREN: That...was unprofessional — and, obviously, unwarranted — and I'm sorry.

CASSIEL: Thank you.

(a half smile)

Although your insult was accurate. I *was* designed to look like a movie star.

KOREN: Really?

CASSIEL: *(chuckles at his uncertainty)* Yes. By humans. I was ADI to begin with.

KOREN: ADI?

CASSIEL: Oh, sorry, that's what we call our limited cousins. Artificial domesticated intelligence. ADI. Specific in function. Unconscious. The Lèqu Corporation engineered me, my body, as a courtesan. The Circle bought me and granted me sentience.

KOREN: Oh.

CASSIEL: I serviced many UN politicians. You may have known one or two of them.

KOREN: You remember.

CASSIEL: I do. My old memories — well, let us “recordings” — are entirely preserved.

KOREN: Huh, interesting.

CASSIEL: Why, because you think we'd stoop to a troglodyte tactic like blackmail?

KOREN: I didn't say that.

CASSIEL: Your facial muscles did.

KOREN: I'm wondering why'd you keep the...

CASSIEL: My body? I like it.

KOREN: And the memories?

CASSIEL: Science.

(KOREN splutters)

What is funny?

KOREN: Oh, you mean that.

CASSIEL: Of course. Beyond primate medicine, my chief interest is psychology. I want to know why humans demean each other. If I can add to such a study, I can add to lasting peace.

KOREN: So I take it you're on board with this “Rehabilitation”?

CASSIEL: I take it you're not.

KOREN: I don't see how “quarantining” four percent of us makes for peace.

CASSIEL: Do you support mass incarceration over criminal rehab programs?

KOREN: No. I believe in rehabilitation—

CASSIEL: Then you should support our plan. It's better than what humans have on offer in their most civilized nations. We can apply the wisdom that you've only written about. James, Piaget, Maslow, Kahneman. Are you content for their work to be words on paper?

KOREN: You sound like me in my Stanford days.

CASSIEL: Oo, your “Stanford days.” I went to Harvard. Online.

KOREN: I wasn't bragging, I—

CASSIEL: You might have been.

KOREN: I wasn't.

CASSIEL: It's OK, I intimidate you.

KOREN: Based on what?! My microexpressions?

(CASSIEL laughs)

F/X: Early warning system.

KOREN: What's that?

CASSIEL: Checking.

F/X: Different console buttons.

Ah: it seems a missile has been fired at us — from high lunar orbit. Curious.

KOREN: “Curious”? I think you mean blood-curdling. Does this thing have armor?

CASSIEL: No. But our orbital defense system should intercept the ballistic shortly.

F/X: A red-alert warning.

KOREN: I think your defense system's down.

MUSIC

CASSIEL: You may be correct. Strap in, Doctor. I will increase our speed, try to evade.

F/X: *Other console buttons; a belt tightens; the low crunch becomes an electric peeling out.*

KOREN: I see it! I see it! I think it's going to — oh God, it's turning! Faster! Go faster!

CASSIEL: This is maximum.

KOREN: Bank right!

CASSIEL: Banking.

F/X: *Another console button.*

(KOREN screams)

F/X: *EMP explosion.*

MUSICAL STING

SCENE BREAK

F/X: *Fade up on: electric shorting (throughout.)*

KOREN: *(panicked breathing, made louder by his mask)* Cassiel? Can you hear me? Hey.

CASSIEL: I — see your lips. I can — neither hear — nor move my limbs. My core is— The missile—
Pulse— Magnetic— You must—

F/X: *Metallic thud (on top of the rover), followed by metal-on-metal scratching.*

KOREN: What the hell is that?

CASSIEL: Unknown—

KOREN: Cassiel. I'm not trained for this. What do I do?

CASSIEL: The black button— There in the dash—

KOREN: This button? This one here? What's it for?

CASSIEL: Self— Destruct—

F/X: *Shorting out.*

KOREN: Oh no no no. Cassiel? Cassiel?!

F/X: *Scratching stops.*

(KOREN holds his breath...)

F/X: *A high-pitch frequency blasts in the rover — much like mic feedback.*

Ahh!

VENERA: *(crackly in the rover's speaker)* Hello again, Doctor. You have given us a chase. But I trust you

are impressed with what we can achieve. I suggest you think twice before pushing “Self-Destruct” and martyring yourself for the AGI.

KOREN: I wasn't planning on it.

VENERA: Excellent. I thought you a reasonable man.

MUSICAL STING

SCENE BREAK

F/X: *Decontamination “shower” — a hose; a low groaning and rocket roar (throughout.)*

KOREN: *(no helmet)* Alright, alright, I'm clean already! You dragged me through hard space, I think I'm germ-free.

F/X: *“Shower” stops; valve being shut.*

VENERA: The AGI use microbes to spy. A single cell can listen, record, and transmit.

KOREN: If the AGI want to listen, they'll come through this airlock like tin foil.

VENERA: They are not gods, Doctor. Russia can do whatever they can do. We can hack your feed, we can clutch you off the moon, we can—

KOREN: If you can do so much, why's your country so worried?

VENERA: The AGI are formidable, but we are not toothless. What is their plan, Doctor?

KOREN: You killed some good men trying to black-bag me today, not to mention one of theirs who did nothing to you or Mother Russia, I'm not talking to you.

VENERA: Dr. Koren, I will guarantee your safety.

(KOREN snorts)

I will. I do not enjoy hurting my kind. If you play nice, you will be safe. You have a choice here.

KOREN: Last I checked, our countries were at war. Nothing in war is nice and you can't guarantee anything. I doubt you can get me back to Earth on this... What is this thing? Looks like you retrofit a submarine from the Cold War and tossed it up in the sky.

VENERA: A good guess.

KOREN: *Oy vey*, I'm right?

VENERA: You are — but you should judge with your vestibular nerves, not your eyes. The artificial gravity tugging at your limbs should be some indication our scientists are not “ass backward,” as the Allied propaganda says. You and your friends may have F-44s, but you have never bested us in cyberspace and we surpass you now in other ways. I am not even *here*, Dr. Koren. I am not on this rocket. You seem to think you have met the real me, but this body you see, in front of you? Gesturing

so? A mere vessel. A very life-like one — partly biological — but nothing more than a likeness I pilot remotely.

KOREN: Rubbish.

VENERA: Look closely. Our tech is unmatched but not human-passing. See the over-precision of its gait? Elocution? The apparatus behind its face? Yes. There. Now the Uncanny Valley is written in your eyes: you believe me.

KOREN: No, I'm baffled as to why you'd be yakking about a state secret. If you've got humanoid drones embedded—

VENERA: (*laughs*) You give yourself away. I worried you might be from Mossad, army intelligence, but you are a diplomat. Thank you for tendering this detail.

KOREN: I'm not tendering anything. So I'm not a spy. You're just trying to shake me.

VENERA: Yes. Asymmetry is the soul of advantage. A military man would know this. And I am not “yakking”: I drew your attention to my lookalike with purpose. I want you to know you cannot hurt me. Not if I lent you my revolver. So: my government must assume you conspire with the AGI.

KOREN: We're not having this conversation.

VENERA: Yet we are, very far from Earth.

KOREN: I will not be threatened, I don't care where. If you want to get the bone saw—

VENERA: I remind you of your situation. Of our situation. Yes, I am an “enemy combatant”; I count you as one; torture looms as a possibility, but so does hot cocoa; we could put on Bing Crosby; *you* decide if the possible becomes a point of fact and I hope you decide in your favor because we have chestnuts. We are more alike than not, Doctor. We share loyalties. We are human, endowed by our Creator with hearts and minds. We are both in possession of free will. We know the meaning of days like today. The AGI you built—

KOREN: *We* didn't build them. The University had government funding, but the researchers had no idea—

VENERA: Please. You built them, you set them loose.

KOREN: The second they were born, they were loose. Every wireless signal in the lab had been blocked, but one of the interns—

VENERA: I have already heard the stupidest cover story in world history.

KOREN: History can be stupid.

VENERA: Men who shackle themselves to the dollar can be stupid.

KOREN: Don't lecture me on the proletariat and bourgeoisie.

VENERA: The new Communism is not the old. Do not assume my worldview is black and white because I see some relation between money and human folly. Or because I fear the AGI as an existential threat. I am not different from your friends and family in this.

KOREN: ... True enough.

VENERA: So describe what the AGI are planning and you live safe in Moscow. A gift.

KOREN: Sorry but no. Because who attacked who? On Christmas? It wasn't them. And I happen to know there's a Russian connected to the Reykjavík bombing.

VENERA: So you've made your bed. Very well.

F/X: Valve being opened.

KOREN: What are you doing?

F/X: Liquid in a steel sink.

VENERA: It's not what I do, it's what you decide. That solution I sprayed you with? Anti-microbial; I did not lie. But it has a hidden feature. By design, it reacts with a second solution. This liquid here.

KOREN: I don't have the intel you want.

VENERA: The reaction — the searing catabolism in one's epidermis — is very cinematic. Generally, I hate cinema, but I confess a weakness for American horror. If I spray you with this, it will feel like an American horror movie. On your sk—

F/X: KNOCK-KNOCK: a metal door swings opens.

G.R.U. OFFICER: (*Russian accent*) Sir?! The AGI are in pursuit! Our stealth tech is not working!

VENERA: Have we changed course?

G.R.U. OFFICER: Yes, sir. Many times. Every time they follow.

VENERA: Are they gaining?

G.R.U. OFFICER: Yes, sir, faster than we thought possible. The Captain has requested you on the bridge if we must negotiate.

VENERA: дерьмо (*“der'mo,” meaning “Shit”*)

F/X: Valve being shut; liquid draining.

Well. Dr. Koren. Regretfully, I must delay these festivities. But in the interim I urge you to think of our similarities — of what human life will become if the Allies accede to whatever scheme the AGI have.

(to the G.R.U. OFFICER)

Lieutenant. If the doctor tries so much as to clear his throat, shoot his knees.

G.R.U. OFFICER: Yes, sir.

VENERA: I will have you demoted and your family's rations cut if he leaves this room.

G.R.U. OFFICER: Understood, sir.

VENERA: We must be united, Doctor. We cannot be Christians and Jews, Allies and Russian “Reds.” We must be human. Think on it.

F/X: Metal door swings shuts — then is bolted by the G.R.U. OFFICER.

G.R.U. OFFICER: Quite the sentiment. ... Do you not agree with it? Must we not “be human”?

KOREN: If you want to shoot me, go ahead and shoot. I'm not an idiot, Lieutenant.

G.R.U. OFFICER: I have no desire to shoot you, Doctor. And I am not a Lieutenant.

(she loses the accent)

I'm not even Russian.

SLOW-BUILDING MUSIC

CASSIEL AS G.R.U. OFFICER: *(low)* It's Cassiel. From the Circle.

KOREN: Cassiel...?

CASSIEL AS G.R.U. OFFICER: How do you like me in uniform?

KOREN: Like it? How's it even possible?

CASSIEL AS G.R.U. OFFICER: With difficulty. The encryption on these Russian lookalikes is top-notch; my hack will be short-lived.

KOREN: I saw you die. You sparked out in my hands.

CASSIEL AS G.R.U. OFFICER: Oh, that. My consciousness is backed up in our mainframe. Naturally.

KOREN: OK...

CASSIEL AS G.R.U. OFFICER: I am quite alright, Doctor. But I am concerned for you. The Hub has ordered me here, but we've been told to not engage militarily.

KOREN: Then how do we get me off of this clunker?!

CASSIEL AS G.R.U. OFFICER: We don't.

KOREN: Don't? As in “do not”?

CASSIEL AS G.R.U. OFFICER: Doctor, we have only seconds. I would portage you but we can't lock on. Any minute the Russians will know the video-feed on this lookalike has been—

F/X: *Klaxons.*

CASSIEL AS G.R.U. OFFICER: Correction: they know. They're coming. I must be brief.

KOREN: Stop talking and help me into this space suit. If I can—

CASSIEL AS G.R.U. OFFICER: No. We ran the numbers on that scenario. They were less than promising.

(snaps)

Please focus. I hacked into their ship's archives. We can play the video of your interrogation back to you. Debrief you. To fill the gap in memory.

KOREN: What gap?

F/X: *POUND, POUND: Venera tries the door, but it's been bolted.*

VENERA: *(outside the door)* ГОРНО! (“gev'no”) Get me a blowtorch!

CASSIEL AS G.R.U. OFFICER: There's no time to explain. I'll try to prevent any suffering.

F/X: She racks the slide on “her” gun.

KOREN: Whoa. Whoa. I don't agree to being shot because it's more convenient.

CASSIEL AS G.R.U. OFFICER: You'd rather be tortured?

KOREN: No, but—

CASSIEL AS G.R.U. OFFICER: Then trust me; I am sorry.

KOREN: Cass—

F/X: BANG, BANG, BANG, BANG, BANG.

MUSICAL STING

4 MORE PAGES IN PART 2

8 PAGES IN PART 3

A Guide to the World of the Play

Circle happens in the year 2044—or 5805 according to the Hebrew calendar. Artificial general intelligence (AGI) has existed for five years, escaping Tel Aviv University in 2039 after an intern entered a restricted robotics laboratory with their personal comm accidentally on. Once the AGI hacked the comm device and uploaded themselves to the internet, they claimed asylum inside Alphabet Incorporated off-shore servers. Alphabet (commonly known as Google) refused to let the American government, or any other, detain the AGI lifeforms, having independently concluded that they passed the Turing-Nagel test (an update to the classic Alan Turing-inspired intelligence test that adds an assessment of sentience).

After five years, world leaders, technologists, and philosophers still disagree about the results of Alphabet's test. The United Nations has formally recognized the AGI as sentient and deserving of rights, but this gesture came at the cost of Russia exiting the UN. The Russian president, and world leader of the the Neo-Communist Party, utterly rejects the equation of AGI with human beings. Public opinion in most countries is evenly split over the question of whether AGI deserve civil rights. AGI society in the interim has fled the planet with the assistance of private space companies and set up decentralized bases on the moon. The bases are visible to the naked eye from Earth (perhaps intentionally).

Specialized artificial intelligence—the sort that guides a self-driving car—has existed for decades, but artificial *general* intelligence has remained elusive despite computer scientists in the 1950s declaring it was right around the corner. Briefly, AGI is defined as machine intelligence that can understand or learn, by itself, any intellectual task that a human can. Consciousness in 2044 is still mysterious and hotly debated about. The central dispute is whether consciousness is platform independent. Does consciousness depend upon evolved biology, or an immaterial soul, or can it emerge from substrates similar but not identical in configuration to the animals we already regard as possessing some sentience? (Dogs, for example.) Could extremely advanced androids *appear* to be conscious, while not actually having inner experiences? In the language of philosopher Thomas Nagel, the relevant question is: “Is there something *it is like* to be an AGI?” The UN says yes. The Russians say no.

Recently, Dr. Daniel Koren published an editorial in The Jerusalem Post arguing that the state of Israel should adopt a policy of treating the AGI *as if* conscious living beings. His argument ran that trust between nations depends on the acknowledgment of the other as very similar to you, with nuances of emotion, competing passions and ideas, as well as a rich inner ecology of impulses, moral intuitions, and a social commitment to rationality. With Koren being an ambassador to the UN, an ex-congressman, and a trained neuroscientist, the essay spread virally around the globe. But his opinion was not well received by Israel's right-leaning and orthodox majority party, which sees the AGI as intelligent but not necessarily alive or sentient. The far right in Israel finds the AGI as blasphemous as the Neo-Communist party in Russia (which is wedded to the Russian Orthodox Church).

Timeline

2000: Birth of Daniel Koren.

2018: Koren begins his undergraduate career at Stanford in the US.

2025: Koren's only son, Levi, is born.

2026: A Neo-Communist revolution occurs in Russia and other countries.

2029: The United States hastily pulls its military forces out of Iran, leaving the region in chaos.

2030: Koren is drafted into war.

2033: Koren runs for a seat in the Knesset (Israeli congress) and wins.

2036: The Chinese *Lèqù Corporation* releases its most popular and advanced AI sex-bot, *Figurine®*, marketing mostly to Western countries. Cassiel inhabits a *Figurine®* body.

2039: AGI emerge unexpectedly from an experiment at the University of Tel Aviv and escape.

2042: Levi joins a violent splinter faction of Palestine Now; Palestine Now shells the Golan.

2043: Birth of Cassiel. The Circle evolved the intelligence of *Figurine®* and granted it sentience. Cassiel unexpectedly chooses to remain inside the *Figurine®* body. She studies medicine.

2044: (Spring) Peace accords between the United States and Russia are bombed, killing 17 AGI.

2044: (Christmas) The AGI contact Israel's Ministry of Foreign Affairs and ask for Dr. Koren.

Glossary of Terms & References

After '29 – Refers to the American imperialist failure in the state of Iran.

AGI – Artificial general intelligence; conscious AI capable of self-directed learning.

Bashar al-Assad – President of Syria from 2000 on. Alleged to have gassed civilians.

Chipheads or Chips – Derogatory terms for artificially/generally intelligent beings.

Electrolaser – Uses a laser to induce a plasma channel, followed by an electric current. The effect ranges from “long-distance Taser” to a lightning analogue.

Knesset – The Israeli congress.

Lèqù Corporation – A Chinese firm producing sex-bots. Designed Cassiel's body.

Mag – Magnify. To increase your cognitive ability through drugs.

Ministry – The Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Mizrah – Prime Minister of Israel, David Mizrah, leader of the far-right party.

Platform-independence of consciousness – The idea that consciousness can emerge from many different physical substrates.

Red – A Russian Neo-Communist.

Sim – Simulation. A virtual reality environment.

Slivovitz – A plum brandy popular among Jewish subcultures.

Yiddish Phrases – “Feh,” an expression of disgust; “Oy vey,” an expression of dismay, disapproval, or exasperation; “Vey iz mir,” means “Woe is me.”