

The quarry (XV)

Description

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I continue the story with another draft episode. For some intellectual back story see What is nature for?, and my book Network Nature.

After eight hours of unfinished conversations, Maralina needed a break from behaving like an AI. As an AI proxy, she was transferred from one human user to another whenever the monitoring agent decided she had contributed as much emotional energy as she could to the conversation. Maralina never learned what happened next. Did Emma feel appreciated? Did Don repair the sinkhole in his gravel path? Did Jean find the missing documents? The accumulated incompleteness was beginning to weigh on her. Add to that the suspicion that the whole work task was fakeâ??AI all the way through.

A call came through from Archura. â??Iâ??ll go to the quarries tomorrow.â?•

Archura wanted to look for some materials she could use in the community garden project. Like many residents of the district, she had visited the quarryâ??s outer fringes. She explored deeper when she was a CogLab apprentice.

â??Iâ??ll come with you,â?• Maralina said. â??Itâ??s not safe.â?• Archura had helped her with a place to live. Now Maralina was returning the favour.

â??I can look after myself, but itâ??s ok if you want to tag along.â?•

They met at the quarries where two major access tracks converge.

Archura pointed to remnants of heavy machinery, broken conveyor belts, rusting silos. â??This place is a challenge if you come here for access to nature,â?• she said.

â??But nature is here amongst the debris.â?• Maralina ran a foot through a clump of long grass. A cricket leapt onto the track.

â??These ruins are inspiring to a designer, but less useful than piles of rocks.â?• Archura liked the steel hoppers of graded aggregate, mostly depleted.

Maralina noted a sign that read DANGER. They kept clear of survey shafts and pits where water collected. Invasive vines and giant hogweed made their way into abandoned workings. There was no managed re-wilding here. A boardwalk constructed to access a reserve for birdlife lay overgrown and neglected.

It struck Archura as ludicrous to lift soil and rubble to the top of a steel framed urban structureâ??to make a garden over 100 metres in the air. There was so much that should be done here to restore contact with natureâ??grounded in the earth.

But she decided that the roof garden was not as stupid as the plan to turn the tower into a vertical conveyor belt where the wealthy ascend as the poorer descendâ??or was it the other way round?

Neither of them doubted their right to be in the quarry amidst the piles of earth and rock. There were no signs prohibiting entry as they progressed into a network of canyons.

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This was just an early investigation anyway. Archura would return later to take photographs and scans. She wasnâ??t sure the contractors she worked with would go ahead with her project.

â??Thereâ??s a lot for you to work with,â?• Maralina said, speaking encouragingly.

â??Is that an AI speaking?â?• joked Archura. It would take a while for Maralina to release herself from her proxy role.

The gravelly sound of their footsteps reflected from the furrowed faces of the canyon. Crows disturbed from the scaffolding sent flutters and calls around the canyon.

A faint hum joined the chorus. It grew to a buzz. A drone appeared. It hovered around them at a distance. Then closer.

â??Itâ??s probably spying on us,â?• said Archura.

She pulled a face and waved at it as people sometimes do at security cameras. It seemed to retreat. Thereâ??s no threat if you are not doing anything suspicious.

It stopped, waited a few seconds. It came towards her again.

They both waved their arms about as if it was an insistent wasp. It retreated.

â??Itâ??s an emot.â?• Maralina recognised the type of drone.

â??Like they have in clubs?â?•

â??This one isnâ??t as friendly, or as large. We should keep clear. Iâ??m not going to encourage attention.â?•

They stopped walking. It hovered at a distance.

â??Why is it coming so close?â?•

â??It wants to administer a feeling,â?• Maralina said.

â??You mean it wants to get a party going? A quarry rave,â?• Archura mused. â??Without consent,â?• she added.

â??It could administer fear.â?•

â??Itâ??s working!â?• The drone approached again.

They circled their arms above their heads more defensively this time. It almost touched Archura.

She dodged to avoid it and stumbled against Maralina.

The drone seized the chance. It hovered closer. Then it touched her. Metal on flesh. Archura shuddered. Bioneural signals passed through her nervous system. She was dazed. Maralina held her. The drone turned its attention to Maralina. It was about to make contact, but then â?¦

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Whack!

It was launched off course. The emot hit the wall of the canyon causing a small avalanche.

Another human being suddenly staggered before them. He was recovering from the impact he had just landed on the drone. A large stick fell from his hand. The drone was still airborne and retreated down the canyon, loosening more earth as it grazed the sides.

He spoke, but not to the women. â??Val, Tell the group to reprogram the drone.â?• This person came into the quarry with him.

â??Ok Brice.â?• Val dashed down the canyon in the direction of the retreating drone.

Brice turned to Archura. Did it get you?

â??Yes.â?•

â??It was meant to produce low arousal and neutral valence,â?• Brice said.

â??Meaning what?â?•

â??Not enough energy to care. The calibration drifted negative.â?•

â??So instead of making her indifferent, it made her miserable?â?• queried Maralina.

â??Approximately.â?•

â??Thatâ??s precise. How do you know?â?•

But he was busy ministering to the casualty. He coaxed her from Maralinaâ??s arms and rested her against a mound of earth and grass. â??How do you feel?â?•

Archura tried to stand. â??Iâ??m fine. But â?¦â?•

â??Donâ??t name what it gave you â?¦ â?• he interrupted. There was urgency in his voice. â??Naming will enforce the state, â?¦ what the emot is programmed to make you feel.â?•

Maralina tightened her grip on Archuraâ??s arm. â??Listen to me. You are furious. Suspicious. Amused. You think this man is ridiculous.â?•

Archura looked at Brice.

â??That last one is working,â?• she said.

Archura was dazed, at a loss. She faltered as she rose to her feet. Then she woke to the situation. She turned to Brice. â??Who the hell are you?â?•

She changed again, suddenly â??â?¦ actually, Iâ??m not interested. Donâ??t tell me.â?• She turned to stare at some crows circling in the currents of the canyon.

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â??Itâ??s starting to take effect.â?• Certainty was in his voice. â??Think of something else, some other words. You are angry, vengeful, want to get back at the drone â?¦â?•

â??What are you saying?â?• Maralina was watching as her friend gazed vacantly at a lone eagle in the sky.

He continued with the list, â??Bored, sanguine, jealous, sorrowful, annoyed â?¦ â??

Archura rallied. She looked at him again. â??Thatâ??s it! Iâ??m mad â?¦â?•

â??Good.â?•

â??With you!â?•

â??Thatâ??s ok.â?•

Maralina repeated their question. â??Who are you?â?•

â??You still what to know things. You are unaffected it seems,â?• Brice said.

â??It didnâ??t touch me. Are you controlling it?â?•

â??No, but my group are.â?•

â??Your group? Who are they? Where are they?â?•

â??They are in the quarry today.â?•

â??Are they testing drones?â?•

â??The drone is a defence.â?• He seemed to smile. â??It stops people like you asking questions.â?•

â??By attacking us?â?•

â??By administering an affect. A feeling of indifference. So you lose interest.â?•

â??And do what?â?•

â??Go away.â?•

â??But we arenâ??t spying on your group as you call them. We just got here.â?•

â??The drone was mis-calibrated. It mistook proximity for snooping.â?•

â??We were minding our own business.â?•

â??If we donâ??t want people to see what we are doing, the best defence is indifference. We pass unnoticed. Apathy kills curiosity. As long as no one cares, then we can go undetected, or at least thereâ??s less chance we raise suspicions.â?•

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â??Iâ??m certainly suspicious of you.â?•

â??The emot was acting to defend our group. Itâ??s in auto mode.â?•

â??Which group? She wasnâ??t sure she wanted to know.â?•

Archura had regained her composure. She was angry, â??Iâ??m connected at CogLab,â?• she said, exaggerating her influence. â??Iâ??ll tell them your drone attacked us.â?•

â??It looks like itâ??s back.â?• Maralina interrupted. She pointed to a small group of people scrambling towards them from further in the canyon. A drone was in pursuit.

Brice waved a greeting in the direction of the group. â??No. They want to fix the damage.â?•

â??They are bringing the drone back!â?• Archura picked up the length of wood discarded by their rescuer. She was still angry.

The first one to arrive said, â??I feel we should apologise.â?•

â??But you must let the drone administer its correction,â?• said another.

These people seemed friendly, even effusive.

It was a while before Archura would allow the drone near her again. The group offered reassurance. There were three of them in hiking gear. One wore a safety helmet.

â??The drone is in restore mode,â?• someone said.

â??Put it in standby and show me the correction setting,â?• Maralina said.

â??You wouldnâ??t understand the display.â?•

â??Try me.â?•

She read the numbers on the emotâ??s display. She was sceptical about its application in this situation, but the numbers were in accord with the affect theory as she understood it.

Archura submitted eventually to yet another contact. Metal on flesh. The emot rrestored her native curiosity. Her hostility subsided, further assisted when one of the group opened a thermos of tea. She felt better.

The second contact from the emot lifted some of the heaviness. Whether curiosity returned because of the correction, the surrounding strangers or the thermos of tea was harder to determine.

â??What are you doing here?â?• she asked.

They moved into an open area, an encampment of sorts. There were canvas chairs. Thatâ??s where they explained about the booksâ??or tried to.

TO BE CONTINUED

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