

Chapter 1

A young research assistant poked his head through the laboratory door and said, "We're heading out to grab some beers. Want to join us?"

Dr. Jane Dixon brushed aside a strand of dark hair that had fallen from her ponytail. She waved the offer off without turning to face him and gave a curt, "Too much work." I need to get out of here at a decent time to see Robbie, or I'm going to need to find a new nanny.

"Come on, Dr. Dixon. One quick drink. It's Friday."

She sighed and faced him, removing her dark-rimmed glasses. "How about a rain check?" She gave the younger man her best smile, but Jane knew she sounded insincere.

"Sure, a rain check." The research assistant gave a perfunctory nod and let the door swing shut. Jane wouldn't receive another invitation anytime soon, which was fine with her.

She put her hands in the small of her back and stretched, yielding a satisfying pop. Not for the first time, she congratulated herself on the regularity of her yoga workouts. They were one of the few distractions she permitted herself. With forty in the not-too-distant future, it was one distraction she couldn't afford to forgo. She pulled her stool closer to her computer and checked her maze for the final time. She chuckled to herself. After all her years of education, she was reduced to playing video games with rodents. Using a virtual maze allowed her to create a level of complexity unrealistic with traditional animal intelligence testing.

Jane walked into an adjoining room with rows of cages where her subjects spent most of their day. She approached a cage adorned with a garish blue first-place ribbon. Her assistant had put it on the door as a joke. At first, it migrated back and forth as different rats outperformed others. For the past two months, it hadn't moved.

She opened the cage and made a coaxing motion. "Come here, Einstein." A fat, white rat dashed out the door onto her hand and scrambled up her right shoulder. His neon-blue eyes gave off an icy intelligence. The change in eye color was one of many side effects of her tests Jane still couldn't explain. The rat whipped its tail into her hair for balance, hopping from paw to paw.

"Settle down, boy," she said. She carried Einstein back into the lab with its virtual maze and extended her hand. He raced down her arm to the large trackball and made little jumps in anticipation of the race. As Jane clamped him gently into the metal rig that held him in place, he stopped jumping. Einstein differed from the

other rats—he never struggled when Jane locked him in place. The other rats fought against the harness, making it difficult to complete the test preparations.

A two-dimensional overview of a simple maze flashed on the screen. Without hesitating, Einstein rolled through the maze on his trackball, completing the challenge in seconds.

“Too easy,” Jane said. “You don’t even deserve a prize.” Despite this, she stroked the rat’s head and gave him a small piece of cheese. Einstein snapped it up in his front paws. As soon as he devoured it, he pulled against his harness and chattered at Jane.

“Relax, big fella.” She tapped on her keyboard to reconfigure the course before bending down to eye level with Einstein. “Now the real challenge begins.” He stared into her sea-green eyes. The small rodent had the intense focus of a fighter about to get in the ring.

A second maze flashed on the screen. There was a straightforward solution that was long and twisting. A second solution existed, but so far, none of the rats had figured it out. The second path had two tiny virtual teleportation pads. If the rats stepped onto one of the pads, they were transported to a corresponding location in a different part of the maze. For this test, the pads would save precious seconds.

“Go,” Jane shouted, starting the timer. Einstein didn’t budge. Instead, he looked back and forth between the obvious path and the first teleportation pad.

“Clock’s ticking,” Jane said to herself in frustration.

Einstein shrieked as he noticed the decreasing progress bar. A tentative paw step forward cleared the maze overview and put him in a six-inch-high virtual hallway. He waddled straight to the teleportation pad but stopped short. He turned his gaze to Jane as his whiskers moved back and forth, up and down. Jane stared back, willing him to make the right move.

The rat rolled forward on his trackball across the pad. The screen flashed, and he teleported to within a few steps of the exit. With a final glance at Jane, he spun through the gate with twenty seconds left on the clock.

Jane clapped her hands. “You did it.” She reached toward him. He clambered up her arm, slower now that he was out of the virtual world. She gave him a piece of cheese and returned him to the steel table.

“Impressive,” she said to the empty room. At times like this she wished someone could appreciate her triumphs. Her coworkers were at the bar. And Robbie? Robbie is Robbie. The warm smile of a mother flitted across her face as she thought about her son.

Einstein broke her reverie as he scratched and clawed at an iPad on the table. "It's like having a second child," Jane sighed to herself. She obliged Einstein's pestering by starting an old episode of Sesame Street. The classic show was his favorite. Most other children's programming bored him. His second-favorite genre was as far from the Children's Television Workshop gang as you could get. One of Jane's more unsavory assistants had decided to play Rated R comedies on the screen in the evening when the animals were alone in their cages. The crass movies entertained Einstein for hours despite the fact he couldn't understand any of them.

Jane's mobile phone vibrated. A message from her nanny read, "WHERE R U!!!" She glanced at the time in the lower right of her screen and gave a sharp intake of breath. I did it again, she chided herself.

"Leaving now. Sorry." She almost typed a sad face emoticon but caught herself. It wouldn't be well received. She pushed Send and dropped the phone on the lab table. She pounded the results of today's tests into her computer, not bothering to correct spelling errors as she raced to enter her observations while they were still fresh.

The phone buzzed again. Jane gritted her teeth at the unnecessary back-and-forth. These nastygrams would only delay her departure. She reached for the phone in frustration, but Einstein was perched over it, staring at the screen. She nudged the little rodent back and set her jaw as she read the text.

The screen read, "Who is Einstein?" As she struggled to make sense of the nanny's text, her eyes scanned back to the previous outbound message. She juggled her phone, almost dropping it on the floor.

The screen read, "I am Einstein."