



**The Emperor
in my Head**

a /pol/itically incorrect fiction

by Anonzo Glory

First Arc: Chapters 1-6

v.026

*Of all sad words of tongue or pen, the saddest are these: 'pol/
was right again.'*

-anonymous

PROLOGUE

The Germans were out there. Captain Harper could feel it.

After twenty-seven missions flying B-17s over the heart of the Nazi war machine, the grizzled Captain had started developing a sixth sense for these things. And they weren't always out there any more, not these days. Round-the-clock bombing raids had taken their toll, and with each successive mission, Harper noticed fewer and fewer German fighters taking to the skies, to the point that sometimes there were none at all.

But they were definitely out there today. And something else... something else was wrong. Really wrong. A sense of profound unease suddenly overcame Captain Harper, but he stoically remained still, his rapidly beating heart completely muffled by the omnipresent drone of his B-17 Flying Fortress, the *Queen Betty*. Harper glanced askew at his Co-Pilot, a kid everyone called Duffy, but the young man was absentmindedly staring out the window, hand on chin.

And of course, that's when it happened. The large aircraft shuddered as explosive shells tore through its midsection, shredding the fuselage and instantly annihilating both waist gunners. Grimacing, Harper grabbed on to the plane's controls, holding tight, doing his best to steady the bucking plane. *Almost...* he urged the plane to stabilize, lest the intense vibrations shake the bomber apart. *Almost got it...*

The next round of shells ripped through the left wing, instantly exploding the fuel tanks and taking both engines with it. The broken wing smoked as pieces fell away, resulting in the heavy bomber entering a slow, perpetual, and very much irreversible death spiral. He looked over at Duffy, but the kid was unconscious, the red smear on the window providing all the explanation needed.

This is it, Harper thought, closing his eyes. *I'll be with the Lord soon, and he better be damn ready with a fifth of Jack and a deck of cards*. The inertia of the death spiral soon became too great to bail out of, and all Harper could do was hold on until the plane either exploded in midair or disintegrated on impact with the grassy plains below.

As it turned out, it was the former. But just before meeting his end, Harper caught a glimpse of the enemy that had cut their lives short. *That plane... incredible... it was a wide, almost spade-shape... flying wing?*

The Gotha Go. 229 pilot smirked in satisfaction as another of the countless American bombers burst into flames. He adjusted his velocity, then carefully angled himself, setting up for the next attack. The whine of the jet turbines combined with the percussive blasts of the four twenty-millimeter cannons he fired into another bomber, its explosion marking the crescendo of this deadly orchestra.

Again and again, the pilot swooped and dove, the sinister shape of his aircraft a herald of death for all who opposed the Fatherland. Alas, even death's heralds have their limits, and within minutes all four cannons had run dry. As kamikaze attacks were something only their Eastern Allies enjoyed, he knew it was time to head back to the hidden Luftwaffe base nestled in the forests of Central Germany. Conscious of his limited quantity of fuel, the pilot skillfully avoided several American fighter patrols, and landed safely to the roaring cheers of his all-too-few compatriots.

The pilot's best friend, Hans, ran up as soon as the plane had come to a stop, and brazenly leapt onto the flying wing. Before he had time to react, Hans had opened the canopy, and shouted into the pilot's face: "Come on man, this is bullshit. Let me play *Tie Fighter!*"

"Aw, what? Just one more mission. I've almost earned the Grand Cross!" Having successfully completed the mission, Kyle exited and checked the status of his campaign. So far so good. The next batch of Messerschmitt Me. 262 jet fighters were ready for deployment. Now, the question was, where to put them...

"Dude, you've been playing that game all damn day. It's my turn." A scowling Jeremy had his arms spread wide, "Plus, isn't it old? The graphics don't look that good."

"Yeah, but it's fun. I found it used at Babbage's last week for only ten bucks!" Kyle recalled the moment he'd spotted the game, titled *Secret Weapons of the Luftwaffe*. It featured all the weird and wonderful secret aircraft designs the Third Reich began developing as a last desperate countermeasure against the relentless Allied air assault. Only some designs had actually seen service, but still... it looked interesting, so he'd bought it. The only downside was his dad; Kyle had nearly lost it when his father used the title of the game as a setup for an obnoxious joke regarding waffles.

"Well then can I play that? If I can't play *Tie Fighter* can I at least play that?" His cousin's tall, lanky form paced back and forth in the perpetual impatience of youth, but Kyle knew on some level that if the situation were reversed, he'd be doing the same thing.

"Sure. Here's the instructions," Kyle handed him a thick booklet that looked more like a miniature phonebook.

"Man, I ain't reading this! Just show me how to play." Kyle was hoping to stall his cousin long enough to squeeze in another mission, but it didn't look like that was going to pan out.

"It's not just instructions, though! There's all kinds of cool facts and stories and things like that." *Come on, just one more mission!*

Jeremy rolled his eyes and reluctantly flipped through the book, as if looking for an example to prove his younger cousin wrong. After a few minutes of page turning, he suddenly, and unexpectedly laughed.

"Yeah, real neat stories. Here's one about a guy who..." he looked at the text again, "...earned a medal of honor for dousing the flames that had erupted on his aircraft by urinating on them."

"So what? He saved his crew. Who cares how he did it?"

"You know, I think I saw a statue dedicated to this guy on the way over here," Jeremy said.

Kyle spun around. "Really?!"

"Yeah... oh wait, no. That was a pissing cupid. My bad." Jeremy smirked while Kyle shook his head. Jeremy flipped through the booklet a bit more, but found nothing else to riff on.

“Man, screw this,” he finally said, throwing the booklet down, “I’m gonna go see what our dads are up to.” With that, he left the room.

Finally, Kyle thought. Now, let’s get this mission starte-”

“Kyle Kyle Kyle!” Jeremy ran back into the room,” dude you gotta see this!”

“See what?” Kyle knew his cousin’s tricks. Kyle would get up, and Jeremy would deftly swoop in, claiming the seat for himself, and Kyle would be relegated to observer status for the remainder of the evening.

“There’s lights dude! Freaking lights! Up in the sky, like... a triangle of lights!” Jeremy was a good actor. He had Kyle almost convinced.

“I’m not buying it,” the younger cousin finally said.

“Jeremy, Kyle, get out here!” Kyle’s dad yelled, “You kids gotta see this!”

Kyle immediately turned, wide eyed, and followed Jeremy as he dashed out of the room, all thoughts of German fighter jets forgotten.

Kyle ran through the living room of their suburban Phoenix home, stopping briefly to cast a glance at the fat CRT television, currently tuned to a broadcast showing a nighttime sky, with a bent line of fuzzy lights seemingly hanging, suspended in the darkness.

“Woah...” Kyle was dumbfounded.

“Kyle, get out here!” Jeremy beckoned his younger cousin with a sweep of his arm, and Kyle followed him through the open sliding glass door, onto the cement back patio. Their parents were all outside, Kyle’s dad swearing as he hastily tried to set up a telescope. The rest were all gazing skyward, brown bottles in hand.

“See? Look, over there!” Jeremy’s long, lanky arm pointed South, and sure enough, on the horizon, a line of lights, just like on the TV.

“What are those?” Kyle asked.

“Aliens, duh.” Jeremy said.

“There’s no such thing, the TV said they’re probably flares.” Jeremy’s mom, a pudgy middle-aged woman with a deep tan, waved her flabby arms dismissively.

“Now, honey, we don’t know that for sure.” Jeremy’s dad had his hand above his eyes, as if to block out the non-existent sunlight so he might see better.

It didn’t matter. Soon, the answer would be revealed, and the truth would rock the world. Aliens! It just might be. Or a secret government project? Maybe even the Russians? Kyle’s twelve-

year-old mind spun with the possibilities.

Later that night, once the lights had disappeared, and no new answers were forthcoming from the television, Kyle and Jeremy had gone to bed, but neither of them could sleep.

“So what if they’re not friendly?” Kyle said, “how do you think we’ll be able to fight back?” His mind was still firmly of the opinion that the lights were alien spacecraft.

“I dunno, if nukes don’t work I’m not sure what else we could do.” Jeremy rolled over in his sleeping bag, propping up his chin with both hands.

“How long do you think until the news tells us what it was?”

“Man, who knows... They might lie, or just never say anything.”

“Oh come on, they can’t do that. Too many people saw it.”

“Like the Kennedy assassination? We’re still waiting to hear what went down back then, and that was like thirty-five years ago.” Jeremy, being four years older than Kyle, was wiser in the ways of the world, something the younger cousin was always impressed by. “Though from what I’ve read, it was probably a CIA hit.”

“And you still wanna join up with them?” Kyle asked, incredulous.

“Hell yeah! I’d also join the NSA. If the X-Files were real I would say I’d join the FBI, but it isn’t so... nah.” Jeremy had flopped back down. Kyle’s cousin had always liked spy movies, and wanted to be one as long as he could remember. The possible existence of aliens hidden in secret government bases was merely a bonus.

“If you get in, make sure you tell me if you find out about the aliens, okay? I swear it’ll just stay between us.” Kyle spoke with utter sincerity.

“Uh... I think they shoot you if you spill the beans, but I’ll see what I can do,” Jeremy said.

A long pause followed. In the darkness, the only noise that could be heard was the rustling of Jeremy’s sleeping bag as he fidgeted around, trying and failing to get comfortable.

“So what do you think the future’s gonna be more like? Star Wars or Star Trek?” Kyle finally said, after thinking of a question his older cousin wouldn’t scoff at.

“Star Trek, definitely,” Jeremy said without hesitation.

“Why’s that?”

“Because the force is just magic, and Star Trek doesn’t have that. Plus it just seems... I dunno, more believable somehow. Earth is united, everyone’s flying around in starships... I think better technology is the answer to a lot of the world’s problems.”

“Yeah... with advanced enough tech, we can do anything we want. Go anywhere we want. Be anything we want. Build anything we want.” Kyle said, his tone growing more grandiose with every proposal.

“Come on, not *anything*.” Jeremy retorted, “even with super-advanced tech there’s always limits.”

“So then you just come up with better tech. Problem solved.” Kyle shrugged. “And in the future, I mean like, really far into the future, I think we’ll be like *gods*.”

“Like Q from Star Trek?”

“Exactly!” Kyle jumped up.

“Only if there isn’t Armageddon when the year 2000 rolls around.” Jeremy said, his voice becoming ominous to try and scare his cousin, “I hear it’s a real possibility.”

But Kyle was wise to his cousin’s tactics. “I think we’ll make it through just fine,” he said.

“I hope so, man. I hope so,” Jeremy yawned, “Now let’s hit the sack. Tomorrow I wanna show you that Dragonball Z video I rented. Japanese anime is *the shit*.”

Long after Jeremy had finally passed out, Kyle lay in his bed, still wide awake. He stared up into the darkness, his imagination soaring with all the possibilities and potential the future would hold. He might have only been twelve, but he knew, in his heart, that the world was going to be an incredible place when he grew up.

He just *knew* it.

FIRST ARC: JEREMY

CHAPTER ONE

24 YEARS LATER

Twitter can eat a fucking dick, Kyle fumed. Why the fuck did I ever get a god damn Twitter account in the first place? What the fuck was I thinking?!

Kyle slammed his keyboard down hard enough to pop the spacebar, and when this proved insufficiently cathartic, resorted to bashing on the remaining keys with a closed fist. Social media, that perennial scourge of the socially inept, had bested him once again, this time with an especially dirty trick: dragging out obscure, embarrassing posts from years ago, then parading them around for the fleeting, momentary amusement of strangers and shitheads alike.

He was fully aware that Twitter accounts can be locked, or the posts easily deleted. Until moments ago, however, he had completely forgotten there was even anything worth the effort in the first place. And for the most part, he was right: a handful of inane, trollish or memetic replies from years ago were pretty much all his meager twitter account had to offer. Harmless stuff. Anything offensive would've been deleted long ago by Twitter itself... right?

Unfortunately for Kyle, there was one tweet in particular, a reply posted about five years ago in a drunken fit of short-sighted stupidity, that had been exhumed from the depths of digital oblivion and propped up, corpse-like, for the titillation and scorn of the baying masses.

Things had started out innocently enough. Kyle had followed a link to a random black mother's innocuous tweet, which read "Can anyone guess what pokemon this is?" During the heyday of the Gameboy Advance, Kyle had been quite the pokemon trainer himself, and therefore possessed the acumen necessary to resolve this particular dilemma. But when he scrutinized the accompanying pic the black mother had posted, what he saw was no mere pokemon, but a black kid inhabiting what can only be described as a smooth turd with eyes and a red clown nose. Yes, it was a crude pokemon costume the child had naively put on, and due to the inherent coffee color shared by both, Kyle could not tell where one ended and the other began.

'That's just a Diglett. Get rid of it now, you don't want to see what it evolves into,' Kyle had written between swigs of Bud Platinum, except that he hadn't. What he'd actually typed was nearly identical, but with the minor exception of the 'D' in 'Diglett' being swapped with a different, much more hilarious letter. At least, at the time he thought it was funny. Probably.

When this particular gem was spotted in the most recent update of a catalog of offensive tweets, posts and comments, Kyle shook his head, smiling, bemoaning the fate of the poor dipshit who actually wrote that. But his amusement faded as Kyle noticed the twitter handle of said dipshit, resulting in his face instantly re-acquainting itself with his palm.

Apparently, there were people out there who had made it their mission to comb the internet,

searching for any tweets, posts, or comments they found problematic, no matter how far in the past they might've been made. Kyle had heard rumors that Twitter, Facebook and Google employees themselves had been providing much of the content, as simply deleting offensive posts and locking accounts was proving ineffective in combating the 'scourge of bigotry' that was supposedly rampant online. Therefore the offensive post catalog, aside from being a comedic goldmine, was unfortunately also used as a way to find targets for 'doxxing.' Doxxing, or obtaining documents and other personal information from people online, such as their real name, address, et cetera, had become a powerful tool for 'discouraging racism and bigotry,' with consequences ranging from simple chastisement to a complete loss of job and home, and in some cases much, much worse.

Kyle never liked this part. Sometimes he saw a tweet or comment in the catalog that had no business being there, that even he knew wasn't offensive. Sometimes he read articles about people that had been harassed into bankruptcy, homelessness or worse, and invariably they were people that looked like him. And invariably, the articles suggested these unfortunates deserved everything they had coming. The comment sections once reliably pointed out that life-ruining punishments for a single tweet, sometimes from ages past, were more than a little excessive. Nowadays the comment sections, if they existed at all, were filled with contributors howling for blood, sometimes literally. Due to this, Kyle generally did not go out of his way to post any inflammatory or racist content, at least not outside of certain imageboards that guaranteed anonymity. Aside from the dumb tweet sent five years prior, he took special care not to post anything that could potentially come back to haunt him later. After all, who needs to deal with that shit?

Of course, all the politically correct behavior in the world becomes null and void in the face of a single transgression, and Kyle knew this. Thankfully, all was not lost. Many of the posts on the catalog ultimately go 'unpunished,' as most small-time users are difficult to identify, and there's only so much outrage to go around. Chances were, everything will be just fine, and by tomorrow new tweets will be posted in the catalog, and the outrage cycle would begin anew, his past 'crime' forgotten.

Yup. Everything will be juuuuust fine, Kyle assured himself as he readjusted his keyboard and resumed browsing his favorite websites. After reading about some upcoming game releases, and perusing several anime forums, he decided, either out of morbid curiosity or masochism, to click on several mainstream news sites. Most of the articles were fairly innocuous, but as always there were some that made him shake his head.

'Dear white people: want to check your privilege? Stop having babies,' went one opinion piece. He didn't click on it, as articles like this were a dime a dozen these days.

'The future is Trans – 10 Reasons why the Cisgendered are hopelessly obsolete.' This article he did click on, and immediately regretted. Apparently more and more young Americans, mostly white men, were now identifying as something other than their birth gender. The article crowed about this, but insisted the current trans population was not enough, and further efforts needed to be made to 'encourage' more youngsters to turn trans. Why? As promised, ten spurious reasons were given that made being trans seem like the smart, reasonable and hip thing to do.

'Pedosexual Advocates win landmark court case in Boston, MA.' He only read a little of this one, but it seemed pedophile activists were slowly gaining ground in some ultra-liberal areas of the country, usually by presenting themselves as victims of intolerance and bigotry, akin to minorities and the LGBT.

'Europe of the past dead, migrants will lead us to Utopia, EU Chief claims in landmark speech.'

In Europe, migrants from Africa and the Middle East were now pouring in, ostensibly to replace an aging native European population now suffering from crippling low birth rates. Of course, on the few occasions one nation or another proposed simply raising native white birthrates, such ideas were immediately dismissed as inherently racist and out-of-touch.

Kyle sighed. Whenever he spotted articles such as these, he couldn't help but feel a strange, uncomfortable knot in his chest, a combined sensation of frustration, revulsion and dark foreboding. Blatant hypocrisy and double standards tended to give him that reaction. He closed the browser in disgust and decided to ease his conscience with a tasty snack. Kyle switched his personal computer to sleep mode, stood up, and stretched.

Alright, feeding time! Clad in only boxers, Kyle did a little dance as he scooted over to the cramped, inadequate kitchen his apartment came furnished with. The antiquated appliances, cheap wood paneling and chipped countertops went especially well with lighting that was obnoxiously bright whenever it wasn't flickering. After a few minutes of taking stock, Kyle swore as he realized he'd have to go shopping soon. Generally, he disliked leaving the apartment, especially for simple routine annoyances such as going to the store.

"Looks like pop-tarts again," he complained aloud, addressing the small cockroach peeking out from under the fridge, antennae twitching. "Hmm, looks like I have to spray again, too." Yet another tedious, mundane task to add to the pile of chores he'd likely never get around to. Kyle unwrapped the pop-tart and dropped both portions into the cheap toaster. The minor detail that dinner the night before also consisted of pop-tarts could be excused by the fact that these were a different flavor: S'mores, truly the patrician's choice.

While waiting for the toaster to complete its namesake task, Kyle swiped the screen of his smartphone, checking just on the off-chance someone contacted him. To his shock, there were a multitude of texts, missed call notifications and voicemails awaiting his attention. *Shit, I left it on silent again*, he thought, mentally lambasting himself. As he began to sort through them, Kyle felt an unpleasant chill take hold, but this lessened somewhat when he noticed the texts were mostly from his sister. Those could wait. Instead, he opted to listen to the voicemails, as these were left from his apartment complex's main office.

The earliest message simply requested that he visit the office to speak with the manager regarding the details of the lease renewal he'd just signed, which was unusual but not necessarily worrisome. The second message, however, made the uncomfortable chill morph into a sick sense of panic.

"Kyle," said an audibly annoyed female voice, "this is Vanessa. We're receiving a slew of negative one-star reviews online, and they're all saying we 'harbor and tolerate racists.' Most of them are mentioning you by name. As stated in your original lease agreement, which you signed, Cave Road Apartments is an equal-opportunity residence, and we do not tolerate discrimination for any reason. I'm sorry, but we will be terminating your lease renewal, which means you have until the end of January to move out-" with trembling fingers, Kyle clicked the 'end voicemail' button, and let the phone drop to the hard counter with a clatter.

"That's four days away..." Kyle mumbled in shock. How the fuck was he supposed to find a new place to live, much less move his stuff, in only four days?! For some reason, his eyes flicked back

to the roach beneath the fridge, as if this unwelcome roommate could somehow provide consolation or offer a solution, but it had vanished.

“Fuck. FUCK. FUCKFUCKFUCKFUCKFUUUUUUCK!!!” Kyle pulled at his thinning hair, pacing the tiny kitchen like an animal, before snatching up his phone and checking the texts from his much younger sister. *I bet it was that whore*, he fumed, *she’s hated me ever since her sophomore year in college. Those liberal pieces of shit fucking brainwashed her!* Indeed, her newfound activism and love for social justice had made the last few Christmases uncomfortably awkward, as she wanted nothing more than to discuss the current plight of women, immigrants and minorities, and with the same zeal as a Jehovah’s Witness would describe the majesty of Heaven’s Kingdom.

But to his eternal surprise, the texts contained an apology, as well as a warning.

‘Hey, I just wanted to let you know that I saw your name and address on Reddit. A lot of people are really mad at you.’ He scrolled to the second text. *‘Kyle what did you do? They’re saying you made an African-American kid cry with your racism. Not cool!’* The third read *‘People are saying that your info’s been posted on the Antifa hit board! You might want to lay low for awhile, these guys don’t mess around.’* The final text went, *‘Just so you know, once I saw the tweet, I actually posted in your defense, saying you’re not that bad and that you’re changing, but... it got downvoted to oblivion. I’m sorry.’*

Kyle dropped the phone onto the counter, feeling a twinge of guilt for the immediate blame he’d placed on his sister, along with a vague hope that, if nothing else, perhaps his public flogging would finally show her what kind of people she’d thrown in with, but soon enough panic drove these thoughts from his mind.

What was he going to do? He was unemployed, had only a few thousand left in the bank from his parent’s inheritance, and his little sister and aunt were the only family that lived in this time zone. He thought of his best friend, Lucas, and briefly considered asking him for help, but decided against it. Lucas was fun to hang out with, and shared many of his interests, but he had also recently gotten married, and was busy with his own life. Although Lucas’s wife was generally amenable to their friendship and tolerant of Kyle, even joining their hangouts on occasion, the idea of asking them for a place to stay was simply too much. At most, Lucas would help him move, as he had done so before, and perhaps lend him a few bucks. Anything more risked the friendship.

Then again, this was an emergency. Lucas shared Kyle’s views on the current state of American social affairs, and they had engaged in many a spirited, drunken conversation where the political happenings of the day were dissected, analyzed, and subsequently mocked. If Antifa, the so-called Anti-Fascists who made it their mission to dismantle, disrupt and destroy all facets of Western Civilization they deemed problematic, were actually coming for him, then...

While he ruminated over just what level of assistance he could realistically expect from his friend, a sudden knock at the door made Kyle instantly freeze up. He waited, motionless, as a second knock came, identical to the first. He didn’t own a firearm, but in that moment Kyle fervently wished he had.

No, wait. Calm down. It might be the apartment manager. Kyle approached the door, taking an apprehensive peek through the tiny peephole, and... it was an Amazon delivery man, holding a dolly loaded with a single large cardboard box. Almost laughing with relief, Kyle opened the door, all smiles.

The man responded with an insincere grin of his own, and confirmed that the large package had indeed arrived at its intended destination. Kyle accepted the package, thanked the man, and then tried to move the sizable box.

It was heavy. Really heavy. Sighing, the man helped Kyle maneuver the waist-high box into the apartment, then promptly excused himself. Kyle thanked the man as he closed the door, then locked and latched it, just to be safe. He then turned his attention to the box. This had to be the 'companion' he had ordered, but she wasn't slated to arrive until later in the week. He grabbed his phone and checked the order status on the Amazon website, which claimed the package was still 'en route.' Very strange.

Well, no matter. He'd probably have to return it anyway, and immediately castigated himself for not simply asking the deliveryman to take it back. After all, there was no point in opening the box, as he might not be able to resist at that point, and he was absolutely sure this particular seller would refuse any 'used' returns. He needed the money now anyway, and he'd spent a lot.

The full-size sex doll that Kyle had ordered was advertised as being one-hundred percent lifelike, and came complete with E-cup breasts, a metal skeleton, and multiple holes (with optional pubic hair!), perfect for those long, lonely nights Kyle would swear he knew nothing about. The doll was a bit pricey at around twelve-hundred dollars, but according to the reviews, worth every penny.

Kyle gritted his teeth. This was bullshit. He didn't want to send it back. He just wanted to enjoy his life, such as it was, and spend his days playing games, laughing at streaming videos, and pretending to have a healthy sex life. Was all of this really too much to ask?

Apparently so, thought Kyle sadly. Shaking his head, he plodded to the bathroom, pissed, and took note of the dingy, sorry state of not only the bathroom, but the apartment as a whole. *I'm not getting my deposit back, am I?* Either way, before he could move out, he'd have to clean this pitiful roach motel of an apartment, and pack up his meager belongings once again.

As Kyle washed his hands, he glanced up into the grimy bathroom mirror, and sighed. He turned his face from side to side, running a hand along his cheeks. Some stubble had formed, but not enough to require shaving. His short auburn hair, while thinning, was still thick enough to avoid embarrassment, and thankfully required little in the way of combing or maintenance. He ran a wet hand through his hair regardless, and turned the faucet back on, splashing his face with water. Kyle didn't consider himself bad looking per se, and knew that on the universal scale system he'd rank around a 'six,' or even a 'seven' on a good day, and could perhaps get that number even higher if he ever bothered to exercise.

If so, he'd have to hurry up. Though not exactly old, he was pushing thirty-six, and it wouldn't be long before middle age set in, sealing his fate. Because at that point...

Kyle stepped back, and deliberately stood up straight. Sure, he'd wasted most of his life, but it wasn't over yet. Nothing else to do but keep at it, as futile as that might seem. After all, sometimes life hands you a turd sandwich, and all you can do is smile and take a bite. Kyle chuckled. He always liked that quote.

After changing into a nondescript black t-shirt, shorts and worn sneakers, Kyle decided to pick through his veritable trash heap of a closet, as much of his accumulated junk and old clothing could be thrown out or donated, which meant less hassle during the move. Also, it might help him take his mind

off the predicament he currently found himself in. Sitting down cross-legged in front of the biggest heap, he began rummaging around, picking through the junk and organizing it into smaller piles.

Eventually, he reached a cardboard box situated in the back of the closet, one filled with old games from decades past. The collection of ancient Nintendo, Sega, and Playstation games filled him with a brief pang of nostalgia- the innocent happiness of simpler days, and the sadness of them being buried so long ago in the past. It wasn't the first time he'd felt this feeling, but as the years went by he noticed the melancholic aspect of nostalgia seemed to be drowning out the other, happier quality. Despite that, he'd sometimes play one of the games again, usually emulating it on his PC since he no longer owned the original systems, except for the Sega Genesis. Maybe he'd pop in *Altered Beast* again. It'd been awhile since he played that.

He then came to a stack of CD-ROM jewelcases, all containing old PC games from his childhood. Though he could play most of these on a modern system, he noticed they didn't age as well as their console-bound counterparts, and so he felt less desire to revisit them. Still, seeing them again made him smile, and-

At the bottom of the CD stack was *Secret Weapons of the Luftwaffe*. Kyle's smile widened into a full grin, and he opened the case, examining the still-shiny CD within. Nowadays, it was almost unthinkable that LucasArts, a one-time subsidiary of Lucasfilm, creator of Star Wars, would ever be involved in a game that let you play as the Nazis, but... the early 90's were a more innocent time. He was reminded of that time he was playing the game when the infamous "Phoenix Lights" episode occurred. His cousin was there, and...

Kyle abruptly lost all appetite for nostalgia. He brusquely dropped the games back into the box, and stood up. After fetching a handful of trash bags, he began filling them with all the junk he'd decided was garbage, and...

God dammit Jeremy, Kyle thought, fighting back the sudden tightening in his chest and face, *You lying scumbag!* The last time he'd seen his only cousin was nearly sixteen years ago, not long after graduating high school. Jeremy had failed to gain acceptance into any of the cadet programs for the various Intelligence Agencies, but nevertheless bragged about major opportunities still coming his way. Kyle remembered when Jeremy personally promised him that one day he'd be so wealthy and connected that nobody in the family would ever have to work again. *I was so pumped*, Kyle recalled, *even if my parents rolled their eyes when I mentioned it to them later. I knew he was gonna come through, I just knew it!*

Alas, Jeremy never did. He stopped contacting the family shortly thereafter, and even his own parents had little idea where he went or what he was up to. The only indication he was even alive came in the form of annual Christmas cards and the rare abrupt phone call. The last time he did call, back when Kyle still lived at his old apartment, the call was missed, so Jeremy left a voicemail that simply said, *'Hey Kyle, it's Jeremy. I'm doing good. Not great, but good. Hope things are alright,'* followed by a long pause, and then, almost as an afterthought, *'...sorry, man.'*

That was it. *'Sorry, man.'* Kyle knew he shouldn't have been depending on someone else's success, and also that he was the last person that should be looking down on others as a disappointment, but still... it hurt. When he was a kid, Kyle looked up to his cousin more than anyone else. *Hell, even after all that... I still do*, Kyle thought wistfully.

After filling two trash bags with assorted worthless junk and clothing that no donation center would ever accept, Kyle re-entered the kitchen and grabbed his keys. *Shit, I really should move my car,* he suddenly realized, *I really can't afford slashed tires or a smashed windshield right now.* Or perhaps he could? Does his car insurance cover vandalism? He'd have to check later. All he knew is that Antifa, or any other leftist zealots, would not hesitate to make his life as miserable as they could, and in the past few years they had grown much more powerful, for reasons he really didn't want to think about. *It probably wouldn't hurt to get a gun,* he reasoned darkly, *even if Antifa doesn't end up doing anything, I might just need it anyway.*

He looked toward the cardboard delivery box that Amazon delivered earlier containing the sex doll. A false woman. Did that make the happiness she was purported to bring false as well? *Maybe I should just go buy a gun now, and get it over with.* It wouldn't be the first time he'd flirted with the idea of suici-

As Kyle approached the front door, trash bags in hand, he heard it. A sound. A hollow, tapping sound.

What the fuck was that? Kyle dropped the bags, and lunged closer to the box. *I heard something.* Could it be the doll inside just settling in its package?

Another tap. Then another. He maneuvered from one side of the box to the other, looking it over, trying to home in on the source of the sound. At this point, however, he was certain it was coming from somewhere inside the box. Kyle's heart rate spiked. Several more taps followed in quick succession, this time in a familiar rhythm.

It was 'shave and a haircut.'

"No way..." Kyle was dumbfounded. His heart was now beating so fast that he visibly swayed, and grabbed onto the box to steady himself. Whatever was inside must have noticed this, because at once, it *spoke*.

"Hello? Um... are you gonna let me out of this thing?"

"No fucking way," Kyle jumped back, stumbled, and fell backside-first into the bags of junk, which themselves spilled all over what passed for a living room. A high-pitched, distinctively feminine voice had just come from that box.

"Yes way," the voice said, encouragingly. "Now are you gonna let me out, or do I need to break out myself?"

Kyle didn't move. He simply stared at the box, as if it might explode at any second. Generally speaking, Kyle wasn't given to paralysis in times of crisis, and when unexpected events occurred he generally recovered quicker than most, and could even be opportunistic at times, like on the occasion a brawl broke out in his high school parking lot. As the kids tussled, flailed, threw haymakers and rolled around, he noticed a bag of weed go flying out of one the fighter's pockets. Without thinking he scooped it up and casually backed away from the spectacle. No one had ever called him on it, and the kid whose pocket it flew out of was a dick anyway, so he didn't feel bad.

But this? A sex doll that spoke and knew 'shave and a haircut?' That was just too much. Still,

once the tapping resumed, this time more furiously, Kyle scrambled to his feet, and ran over to the junk drawers of his desk, frantically rummaging for something he could use to open the box. He snatched up a ballpoint pen and hurried back over to the oversized package.

“Alright, I’m opening it. You’re... you’re not here to, uh, hurt me or anything, right?”

“Nope. It’s cool, I promise you,” the pleasantly high pitched voice confidently declared.

With a mental shrug, Kyle stabbed the pen into the packing tape at one end of the box, and scored along down the center in one swift motion. Kyle stepped back as the box tabs flew open, and what stood up was... a girl. Kyle was expecting as much based on her voice, but what he definitely was not expecting was her appearance.

This was not the sophisticated yet lifeless sex doll he had ordered. This girl wasn’t a doll of any kind, in fact. But one thing he could immediately tell, was that she wasn’t a human girl, either. At least, not one that he’d ever seen in real life.

The clothing she wore- form-fitting jeans, a conservative white top and unbuttoned black jacket- were fashionable, yet otherwise unremarkable. But as for the girl herself? Or, more specifically, the parts not covered by clothing? The slim, short-haired girl appeared as though she stepped right out of a Japanese animated television series.

Kyle tried to focus, but had difficulty. His mind and vision briefly experienced a strange blurry flash, not unlike that of getting hit in the head. It wasn’t until moments later, when his vision began to focus, that he began to perceive the form of a cartoonish-looking girl standing over him, both hands over her mouth. A pulsing ache from the back of his head led Kyle to wince, and feel it with his hand.

“Ehh...” A sharp pain. Kyle withdrew his hand, and saw blood. He *did* hit his head.

“What... the fuck happened? Did I pass out?” Kyle asked, weakly. He was slowly regaining his composure, as the blow he suffered seemed to temporarily relieve the unmitigated shock of the impossible sight before him. He looked up again, staring into large, glossy eyes that steadily returned his gaze.

It was incredible... her eyes were just like those of an anime girl... Brown iris, black pupil, and a lens flair’s worth of extra accents and accouterments made each eye appear more like a work of art than an organ providing sight. And they were *shiny*. Kyle could clearly see himself, complete with gaping mouth and wide, normal-size eyes, reflected in each one.

“Are you okay?” The girl asked, blinking, “You fell back, and hit your head on the coffee table.” Her expression was one of concern, but also carried a hint of amusement.

Incredible... so expressive.... Kyle could only stare, taking in any and all details, as though she were an alien he would never see again. Which, for all he knew, could actually be the truth. *Her skin, too... and hair... you can see her eyebrows through her hair... holy shit...*

Kyle once again felt himself slipping into a bizarre state of intense excitement, mixed with equal parts existential dread. *This is what hysteria feels like, doesn’t it?* His mouth slowly formed a smile, one that continued to slowly widen until his cheeks hurt. The girl, noticing this, backed away

ever so slightly.

This was impossible. No, this was *impossible*. There was just no way. Clearly, Antifa had already kicked down his door, tied him up, and injected him with weird drugs. No, wait - Antifa wouldn't just waste good dope like that. No, never. Instead, this must be proof the universe really is a simulation, and the borders between reality and fantasy are breaking down. Yes, that must be it.

"You... don't look so good," the girl said, before reaching down, offering her hand. "Need some help?"

"Yeah, thanks." Kyle noticed that the cell shading around her hand remained consistent with her movements, meaning it wasn't static, which meant...

"How?" Kyle asked, still not taking her hand, "How do you..."

"Exist?" The girl raised an eyebrow, "it's more plausible than you might think." She ended up taking the initiative, grabbing his wavering hand and yanking him upright in one, smooth motion. Her grip was gentle, but firm as steel.

Kyle backed up a few steps, toward the kitchen, and continued staring. For her part, the girl stretched, then turned from side to side, her eyes sweeping the room. The cell shading in her hair and skin appeared to be responding authentically to the light sources in the apartment, meaning it was indeed genuine. But that wasn't the most incredible thing about her cartoonish appearance.

No, instead his eyes traced the edges of her exposed skin and hair, widening and then narrowing as he scrutinized the dark, inky lines that made her appear as though she were an actual hand-drawn animated character that had somehow been rendered in three dimensions. The effect wasn't perfect, and the lines were thinner in some places and thicker in others, but overall it was consistent enough that he could feel his mind almost shutting down, as if it had simply given up on trying to make sense of the impossible sight before him.

"I don't understand," Kyle said, laughing a bit for no reason, "Plausible? What... what do you mean? Where the hell did you come from?"

She grinned cutely, her lips briefly taking on a catlike quality. "The box!"

"Butt-lips.... you did the butt-lips! Ah-hahahahaha!" Kyle's new friend, hysteria, again teased his mind with neurotic glee.

"The WHAT lips?!" The girl indignantly stamped her right foot.

"Hahaha... sorry... heh... when I used to watch anime with my cousin Jeremy," Kyle said, quickly returning to normal, "he called what you just did with your mouth 'butt-lips.' Umm... because it looks like a butt." Somehow, thinking about Jeremy helped Kyle anchor his mind within the realm of sanity.

"How do you do that, anyway?" Kyle continued, "In fact, I have to know, before you tell me anything else... how do you even exist?"

But the girl's face had darkened somewhat, and not in color or tone. Her expression had taken on a more neutral, businesslike appearance.

"I need to take you to him," she replied, flatly.

"Please answer my questions, I really, really need to make sense of this. And what do you mean? Who's 'him?'"

"Jeremy." The girl said, seeming to force herself to smile.

"My cousin... you do mean my cousin, right?" This was too much. Kyle's heart rate, which had had only now began normalizing, skyrocketed.

"Indeed I do," the girl said, still smiling an artificial-looking smile, "He's told me all about you. He can't wait to see you again."

But Kyle didn't care in the slightest; this was easily turning into the best day of his life. "My cousin?! Fuck yeah! Wait... did he... did he *make* you?" Naturally, Kyle knew all about Jeremy's later fascination with computers and AI, or artificial intelligence, as well as his natural aptitude for programming and computer engineering. When it came to technology, it had turned out, Jeremy was a certifiable prodigy, one of the reasons Kyle was so sure his cousin would make it big.

The girl seemed thoughtful. "In a manner of speaking, I suppose he did. He definitely played an essential role in my creation, I'll give him that. But he also had help."

"So you were made?" Things were suddenly starting to make more sense. "So then, what? Are you a machine? Some kind of hologram?"

"Pretty much just the former," she replied, "although we are... experimenting with advanced holographic technology."

"Man oh man... this is so fucking cool...." Kyle was positively giddy, "so you... oh shit, I just realized I don't know your name."

"My name is Mia Wattetsey. It's nice to meet you, Kyle." She smiled while closing her eyes, and extended her right hand. This time, Kyle eagerly took it, shaking hands with a broad smile of his own. Her skin was so soft, and warm as well... but her grip, though not squeezing hard, had an inhuman strength to it that Kyle now knew was that of a machine.

"Nice to make your acquaintance, Mia." Kyle withdrew his hand, then placed both of them on his hips. "So like... are you a terminator under there, or something?"

"Very similar, though my internal appearance is not nearly as sinister."

"Huh... well, um.." Kyle put a hand to his chin, and looked from side to side. He suddenly became aware of the decrepit state of his apartment, and his old nemesis, self-consciousness, made its triumphant return.

"Oh and... sorry about the place," Kyle gestured sheepishly to the piles of dirty dishes and

mounds of garbage overflowing the trash bin, “I wasn’t exactly expecting company.”

“It stinks in here,” she said, still smiling.

Kyle’s sheepish grin somehow grew even sheepier. “Heh... sorry. I was just about to clean. No, really!” He desperately pointed at the now-spilled bags of junk near the front door.

“I believe you,” she said, “but when you come stay with us, please make an effort to live more hygienically.”

“Oh I will, I will.” Kyle was absolutely ecstatic. *Not only do I get to hang out with my cousin again, but I get to stay there too?! He was again beginning to question whether the virtual universe theory was real, especially once he turned his attention back to Mia. Every time he looked at her, the incongruous sense of unreality returned, however briefly. He was reminded of several memes he’d seen over the years featuring anime girls photoshopped onto real-world backgrounds, and now this exact scenario was playing out in his apartment... only it was no photoshop.*

“So you’ve admitted you can smell... can you eat? Are you hungry, or do you need a recharge or something?” Kyle opened his fridge, grimaced, then began rummaging through the cabinets. Nothing but packets of dried spaghetti and macaroni and cheese. He then noticed the toaster, and smacked himself on the forehead. He’d been so distracted earlier he forgot all about the damn pop-tarts!

“While I can technically eat, and even taste to a degree, I can’t digest food, so anything I eat just sits there inside me. Removing it later is a tedious affair, so I try to keep any imbibing of food or drink limited to special occasions.” But by then, a cold, S’mores-flavored pop tart was being shoved in her face.

“Are you sure you don’t want one? They’re pretty good,” Kyle said between mouthfuls.

“I’m fine, thank you..” Mia gently pushed his arm away, and then began making her way toward the rear of the apartment.

“Woah, woah, if you go back there, please don’t look in the bathroom. I promise you’ll regret it.”

“I believe you,” Mia said, before disappearing into the bedroom.

No... could it be? Could this... having sex with an anime girl? A real one? Well, as real as allowed by the physical laws of reality? If Kyle walked back there, and she was laying naked on his bed, not only would he leap on that like a filthy animal, but he would likely admit that the virtual universe theory was correct, as there was simply no possible way someone like him could get this lucky. This was beyond lottery winner luck, this was... well, he couldn’t really think of anything else; his dick was now too hard for that.

Grinning lecherously, Kyle peeked around the corner, only to see... Mia folding his clothes. *Oh well, maybe later.* For the time being, he’d simply talk to her from here, and wait for his erection to die down.

“Hey. Uh... so, the other thing I was wondering about was the way light reflects off your body.

How does that work? To make it look like something out of an actual anime, I mean.”

Mia spoke as she continued folding, “My skin and hair are both artificial, as you know.” The next shirt she picked up had an ancient, unidentifiable stain encrusted across the chest. She gingerly tossed it to one side before continuing, “And they’re quite sophisticated. The material is polychromatic, essentially meaning it can be any color, even multiple colors at once depending on the angle. Sensors embedded throughout my skin register the ambient light levels and intensities, and constantly make real-time adjustments consistent with the shading found in traditional anime.”

“That’s pretty sweet,” Kyle said as he entered and stood next to her, his boner having finally wilted. “So what about your clothes? How come they’re normal?”

“Because they’re normal clothes, dummy.” Mia looked up, her head cocked to one side. “Are you sure you didn’t bang your head too hard earlier?”

Kyle chuffed. “Oh come on, you know what I... never mind.”

Mia giggled. Her sweet, high pitched voice tickled his ears. Listening to her speak was surprisingly cozy, Kyle was quickly finding out.

“I knew what you meant. The truth is, this material is very difficult to make, and we only recently perfected it. We have a... small operation, so our production capabilities are very limited. Eventually we’ll have enough polychromatic material to make clothing out of, but that won’t be for awhile.”

“Interesting stuff,” Kyle nodded, “and lastly... why are you folding my clothes?”

“Because we need to leave. Jeremy wants to see you as soon as possible, and this residence is no longer safe.” At the mention of Jeremy’s name, Mia’s voice grew just a tiny bit more robotic.

“Oh fuck, that’s right....” Kyle had almost forgotten that he’d been doxxed. “Well, I’m getting thrown out, so screw it. I’ll help you pack everything I give a shit about, and then we’ll leave later today or tomorrow morning. Where do you guys live, anyway?”

“Los Angeles,” she replied, with the same voice.

“Wait, really? Why Los Ang-”

He was cut off by a shrill, warbling sound heard outside the apartment, one that clearly originated from the parking lot.

“That’s my car, isn’t it?” Kyle buried his face in his hands, muttering angrily. After a few moments, he looked up, teeth on edge. “That’s it, I’m calling the cops.”

A tug on his shirt stopped him. He looked down, finding Mia’s wide, gleaming eyes gazing up pleadingly. “No cops,” she said. “Very few people know I exist. We absolutely have to keep it that way.”

“Alright then, we’ll just Uber. Let ‘em trash the old piece of shit.” Another tug.

“No Uber. Or taxi. Or bus. Or plane...”

“Or train, or auto... oh wait, no we’re doing that last one,” Kyle mumbled to himself, “Look, just jump back in the box. I’ll rent a u-haul or something, and-”

Just then, the window to Kyle’s bedroom burst inward with an ear-splitting shatter, Mia shrieking as pieces of glass flew all over the room. Kyle instinctively scrunched up, protecting his face, but as soon as he had regained control of his faculties, he looked down, ashamed that his first instinct wasn’t to protect Mia.

Fortunately, Mia didn’t seem any worse for wear. A few pieces of glass were stuck in her hair, creating strange geometric patterns where the polychromatic material struggled to make sense of the refracted light. She quickly brushed them off, and stood. Kyle could immediately tell that she was pissed, mostly due to the fact that her pupils were now glowing a bright red.

“Kyle,” she stated, her voice unchanged, and yet somehow more ominous, “I shouldn’t go out there. Not like this.” She leaned in, her glowing eyes approaching his. “Lure them inside.”

“Y-yeah, just what I was thinking,” Kyle smiled nervously, backing up into the living room. *Shit, I really don’t want to go out there...* He knew from his time spent on anonymous imageboards that Antifa could be quite ruthless, but only if they outnumbered their prey. Since there was only one of him, the odds were long he’d be able to take them on outside, and he wasn’t sure how capable Mia was. Then again, there was a ton of anime featuring overpowered characters massacring normal humans...

That thought made him shudder as well. As much as he hated Antifa and everything their hypocritical, self-defeating ideology stood for, they were still human. What if Mia was a killing machine? It didn’t matter how many ‘slaughter all leftist’ or whatever memes he posted or laughed at, this was real life, and he wasn’t sure if he could live with that.

Then, there were the legal implications. Would he live as a fugitive the rest of his life? How long would that last? Maybe he should call the cops anyway, and just hide Mia? No. They’d have to inspect the apartment, and he might be able to stuff her under the bed or something, but... somehow, even though he’d just met her, the thought of betraying Mia, and by proxy Jeremy, seemed the most unthinkable option of all.

“Fuck!” Kyle growled, standing before the front door. What to do...

“Come on out, you racist piece of shit!” Yelled one of the masked vigilantes currently perched atop Kyle’s dirty car, now flashing its lights and blaring its insufferable alarm after having its windows smashed.

Marty, the kid who threw the rock, glanced over at Chelsea, their lone female comrade, and

gestured toward the window. "I bet he's callin' the fuzz."

The stout, muscular woman grimaced, causing the immense folds of her cheeks to flare. "Probably," she stated in a the most masculine voice a woman could possess, "these chickenshits always do."

"Here, put on this mask. Things here aren't like in Cali. Phoenix PD ain't fully tamed yet."

"It's fine," she waved it away with a meaty hand, the gesture causing her drooping arm wattles to swing a full rotation. "My lawyer would eat those pigs for breakfast, lunch, dinner..." she looked at Marty, her beady eyes twinkling, "...and dessert."

"Awesome, Chelse, glad to hear it." Marty nodded in approval, and turned to his other two companions, Stitch and Trotskyten. Stitch, the lone African-American member of the group, did not earn his name due to the many stitches obtained slugging it out with fascists in the street. No, he acquired the name because, for whatever reason, he absolutely loved the character 'Stitch' from Disney's 'Lilo and Stitch' movie, and always included the character somewhere on every piece of propaganda he produced. Despite his size and numerous muscles, he produced excellent agitprop, even with the inclusion of cute cartoon characters. Marty had always wanted to get his take on some ideas he'd had, but Stitch had an exclusive policy - he would not, under any circumstances, say a single word to white people. Marty respected that, but it did not quench his curiosity any less.

Trotskyten, a curly-haired, babyfaced white kid who was the newest member of their cell, simply went by his preferred internet handle. Nicknames, codenames and aliases were common in the activist community, but Marty couldn't help rolling his eyes when the newbie introduced himself.

"How much longer do you think we've got?" Trotskyten asked, his bulging blue eyes darting around the mostly-empty parking lot, "he's not coming out."

"I can see that he's not coming out, ten, all of us can." Marty refused to address the newbie by his full handle, "and don't worry about the cops. Luckily for us, this particular fascist lives out here in the back corner of the complex, and most of the tenants are still at work. Based on my experience, I'd say we've got five more minutes before we need to bail."

"What if he's got a gun?" The excitable Trotskyten was clearly nervous, which was not unexpected. It was only his second time in action, and the first he mostly spent throwing water balloons filled with rancid urine.

"Relax ten," Marty replied, with more patience than he thought the young Communist was worth, "we've got a plan. Don't we, Chelse?"

Chelsea smiled again, her great jowls flexing, and held up a bag of supplies no serious revolutionary should ever be without. Trotskyten raised a fist into the air, the look in his cherubic eyes one of deadly earnestness. The round, eternally childlike nature of his face could be made out through the bandanna he wore as a mask, something Marty found rather unsettling.

The car alarm continued to blare. Such noises, even at close range, did not phase them anymore, except for perhaps Trotskyten, possibly explaining his anxiety. Marty had examined the exterior of the apartment unit the fascist currently inhabited, and unfortunately found only a single window he could

get a good angle on. After another minute went by, Marty selected a decently-sized river rock the apartment complex still used as property decoration, hefted it, and flung it in a high arc. The rock sailed through the air, rotating once or twice, then-

BOOSH! The satisfying sound of bursting glass never failed to elicit a smile from Marty. He'd even developed something of a proficiency in thrown weapons, rocks being his favored choice. The rocks he'd thrown had shattered jaws, cracked skulls, and possibly even killed someone. He wasn't sure about that last one, and unlike most of his compatriots, didn't like boasting of hypothetical achievements...

...Except when it came to windows. He absolutely loved bashing windows. He'd probably shattered thousands at this point, and to him, that was worth bragging about, even if the number was fudged a little. This patriarchal hellhole called America had windows on pretty much every building, and he made it his personal mission to smash them all.

"Fuck yeah!" Trotskyten roared as the last of the broken glass fell to the ground. The others stayed silent, watching, waiting, observing. At the first hint of sirens, their ultimate weapon would be used, and then it would be time to bounce.

Of course that would suck, bigtime. Smashing the fash was best done up close and personal.

"I think something's happening!" Trotskyten said, bouncing up and down on the balls of his feet. Sure enough, not two minutes later the front door to the apartment slowly opened up, and a doughy, pasty white dude stepped out, clearly nervous.

Marty chuckled and shook his head. "It's always the same with these racist fucks. Unemployed losers living on their parent's money, jerking off to anime titties and goddess knows what else."

The others laughed, except for Stitch, who fixed the doughy white dude with a dead-eye stare. The white dude, whose name was apparently 'Kyle Landale,' took a deep breath, and slowly approached the group.

"Nice car, fuckwad!" Trotskyten sneered.

"I don't care about the car," the fascist said, "it was a piece of shit anyway-"

"Yeah, just like the rest of your LIFE!" Chelsea yelled, mockingly.

"Good one, Chelse," Marty winked.

"...but you are paying for that window, though." The white dude continued, pointing over at the jagged, gaping square hole where a window once stood.

"Listen here, you little bitch." Marty approached, slowly. He had to get closer to nail this white piece of shit with the rock he currently had palmed, otherwise he'd have time to dodge. "Times have changed. You don't get to live in a country where you can just say what you want, do what you want, shit all over people that don't look like you, not anymore."

Just a little closer... *Come on, Marty pleaded internally, please bring up the first amendment.*

Please!

“Well, I already called the cops like, ten minutes ago, so I imagine they’ll be here any second now.” *Fuck! He’s backing away!*

“That’s fine,” Chelsea said, fists on her hips, “run back inside your apartment and hide, like the chickenshit you are.”

“Oh come on, there’s fucking four of you!” The white dude threw his hands up into the air, but then, after a brief moment of hesitation, said, “you guys wanna go all out, come inside. I’ll take you each on, one-on-one.”

“Yeah, so you can just shoot us? No thanks,” Marty said. Strange. This dude probably didn’t have a gun, or else he would’ve brandished it or threatened them by now, but it wouldn’t be the first time one of these bastards tried luring him into a trap. Maybe it was his years of street experience talking, but something about this didn’t feel right.

“Well, have fun with the cops, then.” The white dude said before hurrying back inside, slamming the door.

“Shit. Well, time for plan B.” Marty shrugged, tossing the rock up and down. “Go for it, Chelse.”

“With pleasure,” the robust woman replied, cackling. She opened up the bag, removed a bottle filled with a clear liquid, and unscrewed the top. After expertly jamming a length of flammable rag into it, she handed the bottle to Marty.

“Light ‘er up!” He said, smiling. Chelsea obeyed, using a silver zippo adorned with radical feminist symbolism to ignite the rag.

“This should be fun.” Marty drew back, ready to throw the molotov cocktail. After his apartment bursts into flames, the dumb bastard would come running out, and at that point... they’d be waiting. Assuming no sirens, of course.

Marty flung the cocktail toward the open window, the bottle of flammable liquid sailing on nearly the exact same trajectory as the rock that came before it. However, just as he released his throw, Marty saw something in the window that he’d never seen before. Something that made his blood run cold and his breath catch.

A pair of glowing red eyes, staring directly at him.

When Marty looked again, the eyes were gone. Through the window, though, he could see a flickering orange glow gradually brightening. With a wide grin, he urged his fellow Antifa forward, the idea being to surround the only exit, and jump the dumb sack of shit when he made a break for it. If they heard sirens... well, there’s always the chance he’ll burn to death, and even if he does make it out, Marty was certain the pudgy fascist would never so much as look at a minority without trembling in fear.

The door opened. This was it.

Stitch raised his dark, meaty fists, ready to cold-cock the dumb schmuck the instant he emerged. There! A flash of movement, and something lunged forward. Stitch swung his fist, hard, instantly knocking out the stupid-

No, wait. The other members of the group stood in abject shock as what appeared to be medium-sized girl in her late teens held Stitch's massive fist in mid-swing, her small hand somehow holding him back with apparently little effort. Marty gasped as he looked toward her face.

Glowing red eyes. *It was her!*

"Abort! Abort! Repeat, abort! Marty cried out, almost entirely from instinct. But he then caught himself. "After you help Stitch. Get her off him!"

But Chelsea and ten hesitated, most likely due to the fact that Stitch was not only making a sound... he was screaming. As the girl's small hand closed, Stitch's fist compressed, his fingers twisting in unnatural directions, and the crunch of breaking bone could barely be heard over the big black man's bellowing screams. Out of desperation, he swung wildly with his other fist, but this, too, was caught, and likewise crushed.

"*Holy fuckfuckfuckfuck!*" Ten was practically hyperventilating, and Chelsea simply made a strange, high-pitched mewling sound. To his credit, and against all better judgment, Marty did rush forward and attempt to pry the girl's arms away, but it was like trying to bend a steel girder. Thinking fast, he let go and frantically fished around for his trusty combat knife, but before he could find it, Marty yelped in pain, crumpling to the ground. Glancing down, he saw the handle of a small screwdriver protruding from his stomach, and above him... that white piece of shit, smiling triumphantly.

"Who's the bitch now, huh?" He said, tauntingly.

"Dude stop! We give, just get her off him!" Marty cried out, all fight taken out of the scrappy young Antifascist.

The white dude stared down at him, before finally nodding. "Alright, that's enough," he said to the girl, tugging on her sleeve.

But the girl did not relent. Not until the black man's fists were nothing more than pasty pink mush, the mutilated fingers either hanging by flaps of skin or scattered all over the ground.

And then... sirens. Sirens, almost assuredly approaching this very location, could be heard in the distance, and approaching fast. Marty staggered forward, doing his best to help Stitch, who had fallen to his knees, wailing as he feebly tried picking up his mangled fingers with bleeding stubs.

Well, so much for that idea, Kyle thought, his teeth gritted. He'd ultimately decided to simply tell the Antifa punks that he'd called the cops while not actually doing so, hoping to scare them off. It

didn't work, and now his apartment was completely engulfed in flames. Mia had thankfully not been hurt when the molotov cocktail burst, but her jacket caught fire and had to be discarded. At any rate, some neighbor or another eventually did call emergency services, as the telltale sirens could be heard rapidly bearing down on their location. They didn't have much time.

"Alright, time to go!" Kyle urged, but the girl still would not move.

"No," she said, "nobody else can see me, and live."

The sirens were getting closer. Smoke from the blaze was now billowing out the front door, flooding the walkway with a thick, choking grey haze.

"Fuck, come on! We don't have time, see?" The fat curly-haired kid and obese, pink-haired she-beast had already fled. "If we can't kill them all, then there's no point, right?"

Mia looked to the two remaining Antifa members- the lean, wiry young man with long hair, and his burly black companion, and addressed them directly.

"If you ever speak of what transpired here, we will find you, and we will execute you. I care not what you tell the police or your compatriots, as long as it is not the truth." She squatted down, and gazed directly into the wiry man's eyes. He seemed almost paralyzed by her gaze, and close to hyperventilating himself. "Never forget, you only live because this man allows it."

The wiry man's head quivered, or at least that's what it seemed, until Kyle realized that he was actually trying to nod.

The sirens were just down the block now; less than a minute remained until the area was swallowed in flashing red and blue.

"Mia, come the fuck on!" Kyle grabbed her hand, yanking her toward the car. He might as well have been trying to pull a signpost from the ground, but eventually she relented, and they both rushed to his car, a dirty 2004 Nissan Altima with all windows smashed in, save for the windshield which was merely heavily damaged. Kyle did his best to brush the glass off the seat, as did Mia, and with much more success. Realizing there was no time, Kyle sat on the remaining glassy chunks, wincing as several bit into his ass, and then jammed the key into the ignition. As the car gasped to life, the first telltales signs of flashing could be seen at either ends of the parking lot.

"FUUUUUCK!" Kyle yelled, turning his head left to right, as if either direction didn't mean hours of interrogation and possible arrest for who knows what at this point.

"Alright screw it, we're making a third way!" Kyle threw the car into drive, despite still being in his parking spot, and immediately jumped the curb before him. Mia flew straight up, smacking her head on the roof of the car, before returning to her earlier position as if nothing had happened.

As this was the apartment complex Kyle had called home for the past six years, he was quite familiar with the various sideways and maintenance golf cart paths, the latter of which he followed as it was *almost* wide enough for his car to squeeze through. Kyle had difficulty maneuvering his way through the gauntlet that was the commons area, and sparks flew as the poor Altima ground against metal fences on either side. He had to slam on the brakes and swerve to avoid careening straight into

the mailboxes, instead managing to clip a vending machine, spilling sodas all over the sidewalk, some of which ruptured and spun. He was eternally grateful that it was still working hours, as only a few addled elderly tenants were out and about, and they were easy enough to dodge.

He turned the next corner, and they were almost out to the street. Heart racing, Kyle couldn't even afford to think about what would happen if cops spotted him pulling straight out *through* the apartment in a gashed car with shattered windows. At this point, all he could do was pray.

He slammed on the brakes once more, turning wildly onto the final pathway to freedom. The car bounced and swayed as it made its way around along, one half on the sidewalk and the other half driving over endless decorative river rocks. A smartly dressed, middle aged woman stared, openmouthed, as he approached. As soon as he recognized the woman, Kyle again slammed on his brakes, coming to a screeching halt beside her.

"Oh, hey Vanessa. I got your messages, and I've decided I'll be moving out immediately. And uh... you can keep the deposit." With that, Kyle peeled out, the tires on the river rock side kicking up several medium sized stones, one of which pelted the slack-jawed Vanessa directly in the stomach, dropping her like a sack of shit.

With a mighty bounce and scraping of metal as the car bottomed-out, Kyle had made it to the street, dodging a honking pickup truck in the process. In the distance, fire trucks, ambulances and more cop cars all approached in a cavalcade, but Kyle took a hard right, screeching onto a side street then hauling ass down toward the frontage road.

"Ho-ho-ho-holy fuck!" Kyle laughed. "I can't believe we did that. Like, I can't believe we even survived that!"

He looked over at Mia, but she wasn't there. The seat was empty save for a few small specks of glass.

"MIA?! Kyle feverishly cocked his head in all directions, checking the passenger footrest area in both the front and rear. "Mia? Mia! You back there?" The only place Kyle couldn't check was directly behind him.

Her head seemed to materialize directly to the right of his. Kyle started, nearly leaping out of his seat. "Jesus Christ Mia, don't do that, alright?!"

"Sorry. I had to hide from that lady, so I jumped in the back and crouched down behind your seat." She deftly clambered into the front passenger seat, and plopped down. "That was really fun, though!"

"Really? You liked that?"

"Yeah, I've never done anything like that before!" Her face was positively beaming, and Kyle couldn't help but grin non-stop. After driving a few miles, Kyle turned onto another side street, being sure to keep to the most underused stretches of road he could think of, and there were many. He'd lived in Phoenix, Arizona for pretty much his entire life, and knew the city like the back of his hand. He hadn't always lived as a video game-obsessed shut-in, after all. Well, that wasn't *entirely* true, but he had worked as a deliveryman for awhile.

Out of the corner of his eye, he appraised the now jacket-less Mia, currently scrunched down in her seat, and could clearly make out the two modest bulges of her chest, as well as her slim, smooth, totally hairless arms... which were no longer shaded in an 'anime-like' fashion. Kyle raised an eyebrow and glanced over. The rest of her skin and even hair were now much more natural looking.

"What happened to your anime shading? Does it not work outside?" Somehow, this was disappointing, but on the plus side she seemed much less out of place, large eyes and other distinctive anime-style facial features notwithstanding.

"I switched to gradient shading," she said. "I can render myself in almost any style of animated or digital artwork imaginable, as well as in a realistic fashion. Polychromatic material can do all kinds of neat things!" She seemed quite proud of it.

"So what do you call this, visual novel mode?"

She giggled, "you can call it whatever you want, Kyle." He whistled, shaking his head. *What an amazing girl. I can't believe Jeremy made something this insanely awesome...* A thought which reminded him that he had no idea where he was even supposed to find his cousin.

"So where exactly does Jeremy live, anyway? I mean, Los Angeles is a big place." He turned to Mia, who was still doing her best to avoid being seen by other drivers, but peeking out over the edge of the window when no traffic was visible.

"For now, we just need to get there," she said, "but I don't think we should take this car. It stands out too much."

She was right, and Kyle knew it. Any cop that spotted a car in this condition would be immediately suspicious, and California was too far a drive to reliably avoid any entanglements with the law.

"Well, I guess we could rent one," Kyle suggested. "What do you think? Are you okay with that?"

"Yes, I suppose that's fine. I even brought some accessories with me, in case something like this happened." She smiled confidently.

"Heh, well I guess it pays to be prepared," he said, before frowning. His jaw clenched as he recalled the events from earlier. *Those fuckers tried to kill me. They really did...*

"I gotta say, those Antifa fuckwits had me pretty nervous for a sec. Just a few years ago, they never would've tried something that crazy in broad daylight. They didn't seem all that scared of the cops, either." But after what happened just a few years ago... *don't think about it don't think about it don't think about it...*

"I shouldn't have let them live." Mia's smile had vanished.

God dammit, I shouldn't have brought it up. Not yet, anyway. Kyle winced, mentally berating himself. *I like seeing her smile. But, I guess since we're on the subject...*

“I don’t think we have much to worry about,” Kyle said, hoping to ease her concerns, “those guys looked pretty spooked by what you can do. Also, I don’t think anyone will believe them, mangled hands or no.”

“Why did you interfere? Why didn’t you let me kill them?” It was as if she were innocently asking Kyle why she couldn’t have ice cream. Somehow, it made him shudder.

“For the record, I did try to lure them in, but... once they’d given up...” he trailed off, before continuing. “To answer your question, it’s... it’s because they’re people, Mia. I only believe in killing in self-defense.”

“You do?” She didn’t seem disappointed, only curious.

“Well, that’s not strictly true. I mean, there’s some people, like child molesters, terrorists, anyone who tortures pets, people like that. I’d say they deserve the rope.”

“I see...” Mia’s face produced a small, almost imperceptible smile.

“You do? Well, sure, getting rid of those people is definitely for the best, but I want to hear your reasons. Why would you... *want* to kill anyone?”

“I... spend a lot of time on the internet,” Mia stated, as if confessing, “and I see things. A lot of things. A lot of... very bad things.”

Kyle was about to ask her to elaborate, but didn’t. He wasn’t sure if he could handle any more craziness today.

“A lot of bad people are out there, Kyle,” Mia continued, speaking with the utmost earnestness, her voice surging with emotion, “doing the most despicable things...”

“Woah, shit. I mean, I used to read stuff on 4chan all the time, but most of it’s just memes and people trolling, shilling, and baiting, y’now, general shitflinging.” He made a small throwing motion with his arm for added emphasis, “and I know buried in there somewhere are a few nuggets of truth, and there really is some nasty shit going on out there, but... is it really that bad?”

When Kyle looked over, he saw Mia gazing silently at him, her wide, anime eyes gleaming with a resolute intensity. Her face was perhaps the most perfect and still he had seen it yet.

“If only you knew how bad things really are...” came the ominous reply.

Kyle gulped, and said nothing for the next fifteen miles.

CHAPTER TWO

“Alright, I think we’re in the clear,” Marty said, waving his burly companion forward. Grimacing, the black man crept out from behind the shed, heading to the wooden gate that Marty was currently in the process of unlatching. The family inside the house, eating dinner, seemed completely unaware that two masked revolutionaries had used their backyard as part of their escape route. So far, so good.

Marty gingerly closed the gate, and, spotting a discarded mattress in the back alley, limped over to it before promptly slumping down into a heap. Stitch crouched nearby, and raised his arms, staring at the stumps that had once been his hands. Torn strips of Marty’s shirt had been hastily though competently wrapped around the fleshy remains of the brawler’s hands, but it was readily apparent to both that medical treatment needed to be performed as soon as possible. It had already been almost thirty minutes since they’d barely managed to evade the cops at the apartment, and, judging by the blood still dripping from the bandaged stumps, they had maybe another twenty before Stitch went into shock from blood loss.

Their original rendezvous point was miles away, but Marty was familiar with this area, having been part of Phoenix Antifa at one point, and knew there was a sponsor living not far from here.

“Alright, so this is the plan,” Marty began, “you stay here, and I’ll run and let the sponsor know what’s up. One of our guys should be by to pick us up, and then we’ll get you to a doc at the safe house. I’ll try to get Lisa, ‘cuz I know her pretty well, and she knows what the fuck she’s doing.”

Stitch nodded once, then gazed forlornly at the bloody sack currently sitting at Marty’s feet. What remained of his fingers had had already stiffened and grown cold. Dead.

“Look man, I’m sorry about what happened, but...” he thought back to the glowing red eyes, eyes that even now seemed to pierce through him. He shuddered. “I don’t know who the fuck that was, or what it was. And I don’t give a damn what that thing said.”

Marty sat up, wincing at the pain of his own injury from the fascist’s cowardly attack, which thankfully seemed to miss anything vital, and looked directly into Stitch’s deep brown eyes. “As soon as we figure out what we’re dealing with, we’re gonna get payback. That, I can promise you.”

Stitch nodded again, then stood. After a moment of hesitation, he began moving his foot, scraping some kind of pattern into the dry dirt of the alley. Marty could quickly tell it was some sort of drawing, though he wasn’t sure what of at first.

It was a crudely-drawn ‘thumbs-up.’ Though it was not unusual for Stitch to communicate with white compatriots through writing, the act of personally thanking one was almost unheard of. Marty was touched.

“You’re welcome, comrade.” Marty smiled, then winced again and clutched his side. “Alright, I’m gonna head over there. It’s just up the street so I shouldn’t be gone long. I’ll have ten and Chelsea head over there too.”

Stitch shook his head sadly. Indeed, the performance of Chelsea and Trotskyten was a little disappointing, but not unexpected when faced with... whatever that thing was.

“Oh, hey,” Marty said, an impish grin on his face, “I bet you twenty bucks ten pissed himself as he was running away.”

The big black man thought for a second, then, using his right elbow, indicated his back pocket.

“You sure?” Marty asked, just to be on the safe side. Stitch again nodded. Marty plucked the wallet from his comrade’s back pocket, opening it up to reveal a slew of paper bills, and not much else. While on missions it was standard practice to forgo identification and methods of tracking such as mobile phones, though they did have a secure phone in Chelsea’s satchel. Unfortunately, that was little help to them now.

Marty rifled through the bills, before deftly plucking out a twenty. “Twenty bucks on ten being dry?” Stitch nodded vigorously, a smile forming on his face for the first time all day.

“Alright, you’re on!” Marty laughed, “Hang tight, I’ll be right back. Then we’ll tell those scaredy cats to get to the safehouse pronto, so we make my winnings official.” And with that, he disappeared into a side alley, and was out of sight.

Stitch looked up, gazing at the skyscrapers adorning downtown Phoenix, their windows gleaming orange in the late afternoon sun. As he had tried so many times before, Stitch mentally willed these monuments of oppression to collapse on the spot, but alas, they never did.

One day, Stitch mused, one day.

“Goodbye, you piece of shit. You weren’t always a piece of shit, until you were, but no matter what, you always got me where I needed to go.” As a final farewell, Kyle delivered a crude yet sincere salute to his battered Nissan Altima, then gave it a once-over just to make sure he wasn’t forgetting anything.

Oh, that’s right. Aside from my wallet and keys, I lost everything in that blaze. He was actually impressed that he even had the presence of mind to grab those in the chaos. After the molotov cocktail sailed through the window, it burst on impact, immediately igniting pretty much everything in the bedroom. Even Mia’s nice jacket had been sacrificed to the revolutionary’s flames.

Luckily that was it, Kyle thought to himself as he recalled Mia’s answer to the ‘terminator’ question. *Had her skin melted that would have made this trip to Jeremy’s a lot more... interesting.*

After a quick stop at a Wal-Mart, during which Mia hid in the trunk, slicing her way in through the back seat, the duo were now fully stocked up on new clothes, snacks, and wide, Mary-Kate-and-Ashley style sunglasses for Mia that just barely covered her eyes.

Sadly, replacing Kyle's custom-built gaming computer, hentai and porn stash, and video game collection would have to wait until later. There wasn't a whole lot else that he really cared about, save for a few personal effects he'd inherited from his parents when they passed. Losing those... really hurt. He could feel himself tensing as he strolled down the sidewalk, heading to the car rental with Mia in tow. A couple photo albums, a watch his dad had given him, and World War II memorabilia his mother left that had belonged to her dad, had been all Kyle had to remind him of them. Well, that and the decent inheritance both he and his sister had gotten to split.

If nothing else, I'll have to pay those Antifa fucknuts back for that if I ever see them again, Kyle thought, clenching his fists, *that and my car.* Even if it was a piece of shit, the Altima ran surprisingly well given its age and poor maintenance, and didn't deserve the fate that was sure to befall it once it was eventually towed away and impounded.

Maybe Mia's right after all. I mean, if she wasn't there I'd be in the hospital right now, or... he gulped, the morgue. Eventually they'll go after somebody else, and... does that mean in some way that if they kill or hurt someone else, that it's now partly my fault since I could have stopped them? This line of thought weighed heavily on his heart, and Kyle always considered himself a light-hearted guy. He'd have to consider this moral quandary further... or perhaps simply google it.

He exhaled, rubbing his temples as he walked, and tried to focus on the problem at hand. There was a good chance a warrant would be issued for his arrest at some point, unless those two Antifa punks got caught and confessed to everything. And even then, he did nail his apartment manager, Vanessa, with a rock as he sped away, though that wasn't *entirely* his intention. Still, she had no room to complain, especially now that the pesky cockroach infestation had been decisively dealt with. *You're welcome, Vanessa,* Kyle thought with a wry smirk.

For now, all Kyle had to do was act inconspicuous and avoid any encounters with law enforcement. And for that, he'd purchased a 'disguise' as well, a hoodie that closely matched Mia's, only larger. Fortunately for them, it was late January, and even in Arizona it could be bitterly cold, so the sight of them strolling down the sidewalk, hoods drawn down around their sunglasses, did not particularly stand out.

"So how exactly is this rental gonna work?" He asked Mia, "I probably shouldn't be trying to rent anything right now. I'm pretty sure car rental agencies run ID's before renting out their cars, and for all I know I might be a wanted criminal."

"You'll see once we get there. I can't use it beforehand," she said, cryptically. The oversized glasses she wore kept slipping down over her tiny nose, requiring her to constantly push them back up with a single finger, reminding Kyle of a nerdy *shonen* character trying to look cool.

As they'd deliberately ditched the Nissan a good distance away from the car rental agency that Mia requested, it took them awhile to reach it on foot, but before they did, Mia abruptly stopped, and began inspecting the area, finger on chin.

"What's up? Is something wrong?" Kyle asked.

"I'm looking for a good spot to change," she said, as if it were obvious. "It needs to be out of

sight, with no cameras.”

Kyle was confused. They didn't have any extra clothes. With a shrug he suggested the bathroom at the Taco Bell across the street. With no other options nearby and the streets packed with rush-hour traffic, she assented.

He followed Mia across the intersection crosswalk, conscious of the drivers staring at them. He had to fight back a sudden impulsive urge to pull back her hoodie and sunglasses, and show the world that this girl, this impossible girl, was *his* companion. On the other hand, he'd never had a girlfriend, not really anyway, so if the drivers thought he was just out enjoying a walk with his lover, then he could live with that.

Hmm... A thought occurred to him. Daring, yes, but he was a man, and men take the initiative. As they neared the center of the intersection, he reached down and grabbed Mia's hand, concealed within the sleeve of her hoodie. She didn't resist. Even through the fabric of her sleeve, he could feel its warmth.

Oh yeah, he thought, *this is going good*. He'd only known the girl a few hours, but due to her uniqueness and charm, he'd quickly been developing an interest. He tried looking over at her face, to see if there was a noticeable reaction, but she merely pushed her sunglasses up again. *Wait, did that have significance?!*

The Taco Bell was as busy as one would expect from rush hour in the middle of a metropolitan city. Mia gingerly disengaged her hand, and went inside, promising to only be gone a minute. Kyle thought about what she meant by change, and wondered if she was... going to the bathroom, somehow? She said she couldn't process food or drink, so maybe she meant change a power cell, or something? *Is that how a robot shits?* Kyle wondered, scratching his head.

Just then, a somewhat average-looking blond girl with her hair cut in a bob exited the restaurant, surprising the contemplative Kyle by walking right up to him.

“What do you think?” The girl said.

“Of what?” He answered.

“It's me, silly.” She said, striking a fun pose, one hand in the air.

“I don't know who the fuck you are. Get lost.”

The girl was crestfallen. “Kyle, please don't be mean. This is what I changed into!”

“MIA?!” His eyes grew wide. “You... you're normal! You're people now!” A passerby gave him a disturbed glance, then walked away, shaking his head.

She nodded slowly. “Remember I said we were working on advanced holographic technology? This is one of our prototypes.” She pointed to her neck, which indeed had a broad, dark band around its base, flaring out over her shoulders and collarbone. The material looked not unlike a bunch of tiny interlinked solar panels.

“So that changed you into... a real person? He reached out, wanting to touch her short, neatly-cut blond hair.

“NO! Don’t touch. It’ll ruin it,” Mia backed away, “it also has a lot of bugs, and the power drains fast, so we have to hurry before it starts glitching.” She turned back to the crosswalk. Kyle followed, too amazed and too embarrassed to do much else.

Inside the rental agency, they picked the shortest line, and thankfully the wait was not long. Mia provided an ID (with her new face as the photo) and credit card, and the clerk produced the paperwork, and shortly thereafter, a rental car. Mia had selected a red Kia Soul with tinted windows, and minutes later they were out on the street, heading for the Interstate-10 and Los Angeles. This time, Mia was driving, and Kyle watched with interest as she focused on navigating the vehicle with what could only be described as machine-like precision.

Once inside the car, Mia had immediately reverted, and explained that the holocollar could give someone any face for about twenty minutes, but that each new face had to be pre-rendered and mapped to each individual user. The projected hologram was not solid and the user couldn’t turn their head too fast or make overly quick movements, and the user’s hair needed to be short. Nevertheless, once again Kyle was astounded.

“So you’re saying I could use that!?” To Kyle, it was every bit as fantastic as having anime come to life.

“You could, if you found some way to power it.”

“How do you power it?” He asked, already suspecting the answer.

“I use my own power,” she replied, “you’d need to wear a power source somewhere, or have it implanted.”

“And only twenty minutes? That doesn’t seem like much time.”

“There’s another system we have that’s much more elaborate, but it has... other limitations.” She didn’t elaborate, but Kyle didn’t care. There was something else that was bothering him.

“Listen, Mia, I, uh... want to apologize for being a dick back at Taco Bell. I’m sorry I acted like an asshole.” He meant it sincerely, too. Ever since then he’d felt like a major heel.

“It’s alright. It’s my fault, really. I should have told you beforehand what would happen. I just wanted to surprise you.” Mia seemed a bit sad, somehow. “I thought it would be fun.”

“Ah, well, sorry to ruin the moment,” he said, “but once we get to Jeremy’s I’m sure we’ll have a blast. I mean, I haven’t seen him in over a decade, but... every time we’ve hung out before that it was always a ton of fun. We’d play games, watch shows, get baked, go on late night Jack-in-the-Box runs, all kinds of stuff.”

“Things have... changed,” Mia said, sounding almost regretful.

“Changed how?” Kyle was beginning to notice that she wasn’t nearly as excited about seeing Jeremy again as he was. “Did something happen to him?”

“You’ll see,” she said, “Or maybe you won’t. I can’t say any more than that.”

“What? Sure you can. I wanna know what’s going on.”

“No,” Mia turned to him, her large eyes adamant, “I literally cannot say any more about it.”

“Like, what? Are you forbidden or something?” Kyle couldn’t believe it. No way. Jeremy wasn’t like that.

But Mia would speak no further. Kyle tried prying information out of her a few other ways, but she remained silent. Eventually, he gave up, and turned his attention elsewhere.

“Oh sweet, this thing has XM radio!” Kyle began playing with the vehicle’s audio system, “Hmm... what do I feel like... ooh, Ozzie’s Boneyard! Hell yeah. Do you like this shit, Mia?”

She half-shrugged, which was good enough for him. He got into the snacks, picking out a bag of beef jerky, and settled in for what would likely be at least a seven-hour road trip. He’d been to Los Angeles a few times before as a child, and always as part of some family vacation. But ever since California’s politicians madly dragged their state further and further toward the clutches of the radical left, he’d had no desire to go back. Especially after...

No. Don’t think about it. DO NOT THINK ABOUT IT!

They continued heading West. As the day neared its close, both were treated to a magnificent Arizona sunset before the following dusk shrouded the land. Once night had fallen, the broad glow of the headlights illuminated only patches of the desert landscape as it whipped by, gradually transitioning from cactus-filled scrub brush, to barren wastelands, which themselves gave way to... even more barren wastelands.

Kyle was beginning to nod out as they crossed the Colorado River separating the Copper State from the Golden State, and was fast asleep some time later. Though she was mostly indifferent to the music continuing to play, once *Judas Priest’s ‘Electric Eye’* came on, Mia switched stations without hesitation.

The anime girl kept driving, her wide, reflective eyes focused entirely on the task at hand. She expertly swerved around a deer that had leapt onto the road, and avoided a late-night drunk driver without incident while passing through Blythe. She stopped to fuel up at a nearly deserted gas station, using her credit card to avoid going inside, but temporarily used the holocollar just in case. Otherwise, the drive consisted of nothing more than long, open road, the occasional passing pair of headlights, and Kyle’s soft snoring.

“What’s up, comrades!” Marty cheerfully raised a clenched fist in salute as he spotted Trotskyten and Chelsea sitting on an old, extremely worn couch in the run-down safehouse in South Phoenix. The dilapidated two-story house was once used as a drug den, and by all appearances still was. Officially condemned but never demolished, it was now one of a select few properties under the protection of certain sympathetic individuals within the local municipal bureaucracy.

That’s right, Marty thought when he first spotted the crumbling house, *perfect place to hide out, plan the revolution, and get high... and not necessarily in that order!* Stitch had been holding up pretty well, as the sponsor he’d contacted was an old Weather Underground-type radical from 60’s that was out of the game but still eager to contribute however he could. Through mutual friends and associates, the requested doctor was notified, and she was now on her way down to the house, albeit reluctantly.

As soon as Marty and a stumbling Stitch had made it into what was once a living room, Chelsea and ten looked over, and animatedly jumped out of the couch. Chelsea was rapidly waving both hands, as if fanning herself, while ten was all big blue eyes and wide, open-mouth grin. Marty immediately looked down, and noticed ten was wearing shorts that were a different color and style. *Looks like I just won twenty big ones*, he thought with an internal smirk.

“Man, I’m so glad you guys made it!” Ten was as excitable as ever, while Chelsea went over to offer what help she could to Stitch.

“Me too, dude. Me too,” Marty said. “I still can’t fucking believe that crazy bitch... did that.” He shook his head in disbelief. He’d been replaying the event in his mind over and over, and it didn’t make any more sense now than it did when he was watching Stitch’s fingers drop off one-by-one.

The muscular black man was barely conscious, but still managed an angry grunt, and eased onto the couch before promptly flopping over onto his side.

“He’s gonna be okay, right?” Ten asked with furrowed brows. “He doesn’t look so good...”

“He lost a lot of blood, and all his fingers...” Marty shook his head, pointing to a plastic grocery bag laying next to the door. Chelsea approached and knelt down, wincing as she opened it up and took a peek.

“We need to find that racist piece of shit,” she growled, jowls trembling. “And whoever the hell that bitch was, and then...” Her face turned red, and seemed to quiver with rage.

“You mean ‘whatever’ it was,” Marty said. “You guys saw her eyes, right? That shit ain’t natural.”

“I’ve seen glowing LED contacts before,” Chelsea said, standing and rejoining the rest of the group. “But how could she...” Her beady eyes grew wide, and she shook her head in disbelief.

“I dunno, I gotta talk to someone about that when we get back,” Marty said. “On a sorta related note, is anyone else here?”

“A couple locals gettin’ stoned in the back,” ten shrugged. “I told ‘em who we were and they called in some higher-ups, so they should be here soon.”

“Cool, cool...” Marty nodded repeatedly. “I know some of these guys, so it should be alright.” At least, he hoped it was. Different Antifa organizations were spread all throughout America, with the largest concentrations along the coasts and in big cities, and they were notoriously territorial, even now. It wasn’t uncommon for different Antifa groups to compete for turf almost as if they were gangs, and sometimes they even came to blows.

Of course, that all started changing after Trump got elected. At first their numbers swelled from the backlash of an openly fascistic President, but despite that the different Antifa groups became more fragmented and disorganized than ever, with few exceptions. The groups rarely communicated with each other, and mostly wasted their time fussing over what direction the revolution needed to take, with everyone insisting on promoting their own political vision. When they did go into action, usually only a few windows got smashed up, and the only casualties were some beat-up trash cans and vandalized cars.

Marty remembered those days well, as he cut his teeth protesting Trump rallies right here in Phoenix, Arizona. In those days, masked Antifa, along with other anarchist and progressive action groups would form a loose coalition to stand against the tyranny that had taken root. And while they did enjoy some success, it wasn’t until lately that the Anti-Fascist organizations across the country had been sharpened and forged into a properly feared blade of revolution.

In the jubilant yet turbulent days after Trump went down, donations from anonymous, ultra-rich supporters suddenly began pouring in, and under the direction of the new ‘Progressive Revolutionary Front,’ a loose coalition of connected and well-funded political organizers that incorporated older networks like TORCH, the disparate Antifa groups were trained, organized and funded in ways not seen since the 1960’s. Marty had met some of the men and women who were official members of the PRF, and they were hard-driven and *hard-core*. For the first time since joining Antifa back during the 2016 election, the young revolutionary felt true optimism in the direction the country was taking.

One of the ways that the PRF focused and motivated Antifa cells was with the hit-board, a private, invite-only forum where targets and information about them could be posted, often along with cash bounties and other prizes. Whether privately donated or crowd-funded, the prospect of earning something tangible for successfully intimidating and silencing a target served as excellent motivation, and their powerful, well-connected allies in the PRF helped provide legal and logistical support.

Of course, sometimes... well, sometimes intimidating, evicting or getting these racist pieces of shit fired just wasn’t enough...

Marty’s crew was part of Los Angeles Antifa, once several smaller groups, now unified into one, and he’d only taken part in one ‘hit’ before this, a non-lethal intimidation of a fascistic judge that on several occasions ruled in favor of Trump’s policies a few years back. But after trashing his house and torching his two cars, Marty was sure the good judge would be more willing to see the world through a more... progressive light. He’d also found himself five grand richer, as well. Money might be a capitalistic tool of oppression, but it was unfortunately also a necessity. Marty liked to think of earning money as a way of using the Capitalist’s own tools against them.

Perhaps the best, and most promising sign that things were moving in the right direction was the simple fact that, for the first time, a sympathetic government was now in power. Oh sure, the Democratic Party had its flaws, and when the time came it too would have to be dismantled, but... on

the surface at least, the new progressive direction of the Democratic Party seemed like a cause for celebration. Marty had even heard that top donors for both the Democrats and PRF were oftentimes the same people!

“Well, well...” Two men entered the living room, both white, both clad in black. Marty didn’t recognize either one, and it looked like the others didn’t, either. “Who told you it was okay to crash in our pad, huh? Did Strife give you the okay?”

“Me and Strife go way back,” Marty said, gesturing off-handedly. In truth, he barely knew the guy, but Marty was confident his pull with the higher-ups in L.A. would be paying off right about now. “Name’s Marty. We had a hit go bad and needed a place to lay low, end of story.” He indicated the injured Black man laying on the couch. The two men looked over, and upon seeing the bleeding stubs drew back and turned away.

“God damn,” one of them said. “What the fuck happened? Did he get his hands blown off or something?”

“Nah, man... it was fuckin’ crazy,” ten began recounting the tale with wide eyes, but Marty silenced him with a quick cut-throat gesture.

“Actually yeah, a pipe bomb went off just after he lit it,” Marty said. “That was basically it.” The two strangers shook their heads sadly, and then after some small talk introduced themselves as Rob and Leninstrike. Once Trotskyten introduced himself, Leninstrike immediately turned up his nose and folded his arms.

“A Trotskyist,” he muttered with the utmost disdain. “How *quaint*.” Ten bared his teeth and narrowed his eyes, but by then two more people had arrived, including the doctor herself.

When Marty saw the petite Latino woman, his heart skipped a beat, then revved up faster than at any point since the red-eyed girl attacked. Her light brown skin, dark beautiful eyes and long, silky black hair, now tied back behind her head, looked almost as ravishing as the first day he’d met her. After suffering a concussion in a street brawl and getting arrested during a protest, he’d ended up handcuffed to a hospital bed, and that’s when he met... her.

Lisa entered the room authoritatively, already scrubbed-up and ready to work, but when her eyes scanned the room and met Marty’s they immediately widened, then quickly turned away. Her young male companion, apparently an assistant based on the fact he wore matching scrubs, immediately set up a stretcher, and helped a barely-conscious stitch up and on to it. Lisa winced the moment she inspected the stubs, and shook her head.

“Hey Lisa,” Marty said, after working his way over to her. “It’s, uh... good to see you.”

“Likewise, Marty,” she said somewhat testily. “I’m still waiting for that text you promised me you’d send once you’d made it to L.A.” Her eyes seemed to bore into his. “You know, after you moved there three years ago?”

“My phone... uh, it died. So I lost your number,” he inwardly groaned, wishing he could’ve thought of something better. “But maybe we could... talk now?”

“After this,” she said, indicating Stitch, now being moved to a large, sturdy kitchen table. “What the hell happened? That doesn’t look like it was from an explosion...”

The two black-clad men from earlier narrowed their eyes at this, but Marty insisted it was a bomb, just poorly made. Lisa raised a dubious eyebrow but didn’t question it further. After Stitch was laid out on the table, the bandages were pulled off, and the doctor administered a strong local anesthetic and began preparing a blood transfusion.

“That’s really all I can do,” she said, shaking her head. “I can tell you right now he’s going to need what’s left of both hands amputated, but the prosthetics on the market today are good enough he should still be able to... carry on the good fight.” Her voice grew adamant with that final statement.

“Thanks Lise,” Marty said. “Really.”

“Do you know any doctors in L.A.? If not, I can recommend a few ‘comrades,’” she said with a casual shrug.

“That’d be great.” The wiry, long-haired young man didn’t personally know of any, but the PRF had a lot of supporters in L.A., so he knew it wouldn’t be hard to find sympathetic doctors or surgeons that knew what they were doing.

After the transfusion was complete, the doctor cleaned and re-dressed the wound, and left some painkillers and antibiotics. But as she and her assistant were turning to leave, Marty tapped her arm.

“I’m hurt too, ya know,” he lifted his shirt, pointing to a small scabbed-over hole in his lower abdomen along with dried smears of blood. Lisa immediately instructed him to lie down, and she examined him closely, her gloved hands gently poking and prodding to assess the damage. She asked him questions related to the injury, but Marty was having a hard time focusing. Her touch was... very pleasant.

“Just like old times, huh?” He said, smiling.

She nodded, absentmindedly. “From what I can see, you got lucky. The screwdriver didn’t puncture anything vital. You’ll still want to get this checked out when you get a chance, and make sure you take some of those antibiotics.” She cleaned and dressed the wound, rose, began gathering her equipment, and prepared to leave.

“Hey, can we talk?” He said. “I meant what I said earlier.” Lisa’s assistant, another young white dude with short, neatly-trimmed hair, narrowed his eyes.

“Just for a minute,” she said, gathering up her equipment, “Our shift starts in three hours.”

“‘Our’ shift?” Marty turned to the assistant, who wore a faint smile and nodded knowingly. “Wait, you’re with this clown?”

The assistant blanched, while Lisa rounded on Marty and peered closely into his face. “That’s right,” she said. “He texted me back.”

“Wait, I...” The young revolutionary groaned and tried to salvage the situation, but by then Lisa

and her assistant were out the door. Marty chased them out to her car, running up to the doctor just as she was about to clamber into the driver's seat.

"Look, I'm sorry, alright?" He said, gesturing with enthusiasm. "I mean it! I... I really feel like an asshole."

Lisa turned away for a second, and then almost reluctantly faced Marty and embraced him with a tepid hug. After drawing back, she offered a thin smile, and a peck on the cheek. "Apology accepted."

Marty offered a pensive grin, and began nodding. "It was good to see you again, Lise."

"Likewise, Marty," she replied, re-entering and starting up her vehicle.

"Oh, and thanks again for helping us out," Marty cried out as she put the car in reverse. She apparently heard him, as she immediately stopped the car and rolled down the window.

"It's wasn't just for old-time's sake," she said. "I don't know who your friends are in L.A., but they've got a lot of pull, and..." Lisa's face suddenly screwed up in an expression of genuine concern. "...I've met PRF members before, and... be careful, Marty. There's something off about these people. I've heard things, and..." She trailed off, apparently deciding it was wisest not to continue. She muttered a half-hearted 'never mind' and continued backing out of the dusty driveway, and onto the cracked road leading back to the city.

That's right, he thought with a self-satisfied grin as he watched the taillights of her car disappear around the street corner. One of the reasons he'd never texted her back was simply for the reason that he had many, many new comrades to network with, and some of them had gained a lot of pull indeed.... *The only thing 'off' about them is they don't fuck around. They're serious about the revolution, and unlike the half-assed revolutionaries from days past, these guys know how to get shit done...*

Once back inside the house, he found Ten smoking something chemical-like out of a clear glass pipe with some of the others, while Chelsea was flirting with an increasingly uncomfortable Leninstrike. Soon, one of his associates in L.A. would arrange for transportation, and then they'd be back in the City of Angels, ready to keep the good fight going, for as long as it took to rid the country of fascism once and for all...

When Kyle finally came to, it was after midnight.

"Well, that was a nice nap." He yawned, stretching profusely.

"Did you enjoy your rest?" Mia said, glancing over.

“Yeah, actually, I slept pretty good,” he said, noticing the time. “We should be getting pretty close, right?”

“We’re about twenty minutes away from our destination.”

Kyle looked outside the window. An expansive city nightscape, bursting with a galaxy’s worth of lights, sprawled out in all directions. Along the shoulders of the highway, lush vegetation had replaced the dry brush and cactus of his home state.

Yup, this is definitely California. Kyle watched as several patches of palm trees and other tropical plants went by, illuminated by the numerous street lights along the road. He experimentally rolled the window down a few inches.

“Ah, cold!” It immediately went back up.

Mia giggled. “It is Winter, you know.”

“Heh, well you seem to be in better spirits.” He looked over, and could see an almost imperceptible smile. Impulsively, Kyle reached out to pat her head, but hesitated at the last second. Mia looked up at his hand quizzically, her big eyes crossing a little.

“So... I’ve been known to watch a bit of anime from time to time,” Kyle explained, suddenly feeling awkward, “and, I dunno, maybe it’s a Japanese thing, but a lot of the girls seem to like having their heads patted. And, er, I was gonna pat yours. If you don’t-”

But by then, Mia had already grabbed his hand with one of hers, and pumped her arm up and down, patting her own head with Kyle’s outstretched palm. “How’s that?” She asked, her smile now a few sizes larger.

“That’s really soft, holy shit,” Kyle was surprised, “and message received, you’re down with head pats.” *Such a cute girl,* he thought, *I wonder... does she actually like me, or is she only nice to me because Jeremy ordered her to be?* Naturally, he couldn’t think of a way to actually ask this, as she seemed very guarded regarding anything involving his cousin.

“I’ve got another question, if you’re not too sick of them by now,” he said, adjusting his posture.

“Sure, ask,” Mia said.

“You mentioned something about an ‘organization.’ Is this an actual business you guys are running, or something like that?”

“No, it’s not a business,” she said, glancing into the rear view mirror. “Everything we do is secret.”

Kyle nodded thoughtfully. *That makes sense.* “So... are there more like you? More anime girls, I mean?” He actually felt kinda dumb for not asking about this earlier. If it turned out there were many, he’d have to seriously start trying to figure out the harem route as soon as possible.

“There’s only three of us,” Mia said as she changed lanes, heading for an upcoming off-ramp. “Sachi was the first of us created, I was the second, and Amy is the third. She’s the most... sophisticated by far.”

“And that’s it? Are there any more, er, ‘under construction,’ so to speak?”

“Two, but they won’t be finished for another month or so. At least, if everything goes as planned.” Kyle felt the vehicle slowly de-accelerate as they exited the freeway, but he was only peripherally aware of the city around him. Mia’s tone had flattened out once more, losing any semblance of cheer or other emotion. Her voice had become... almost monotone.

Kyle considered this. Whenever he asked a question about Mia herself, she seemed happy to answer it, but whenever he broached the subject of his cousin, or where they lived, then the anime girl seemed almost reluctant to answer, assuming she did at all. For the first time since they left Phoenix, Kyle was beginning to have reservations.

“Hey, uh... so, serious question. What’s going to happen to me once we get there?”

Mia glanced over, her expression unreadable. “You’re going to live in paradise.”

That... didn’t sound so bad. It actually sounded rather nice. So why did the way she say it make him feel so uncomfortable? He decided to change the subject.

“So you guys are all artificial intelligences, right?” Once again, Kyle felt stupid for only bringing it up now, as he was so enthralled by the idea of a real-life anime girl that the greater implications of this incredible technology were temporarily overlooked. In actuality, this was the major, world-shattering breakthrough. The appeal of anime girls might be broad, but AI was universal. It could literally change the world, and in so many different ways, for better or for worse. He’d read and seen enough science fiction featuring AI to familiarize himself with the entire spectrum of outcomes, from bright and utopian to the stuff of pure nightmares.

He gulped, and silently prayed Mia and her friends were ultimately the former.

“We’re almost there,” she said, dodging his question. Kyle opened his mouth to repeat his query, but was immediately cut off. “Don’t worry, once we’ve made it home, you’ll have all the time in the world to ask whatever you want.”

All the time in the world, huh? Kyle wasn’t sure what to think about that.

Outside the vehicle, lush vegetation and large, bushy trees seemed to sprout from every patch of earth that hadn’t already been claimed by asphalt or cement. Expensive-looking, high-class residences lined the winding road, each one causing his jaw to drop a little further. It was immediately apparent to Kyle that Mia was taking them through one of the nicer areas of Los Angeles.

“So where are we headed, anyway?” He asked, as they drove by yet another property worth at least seven figures. “Does Jeremy live in Beverly Hills, or something?”

“Close,” Mia said. “Beverly Glen.”

Kyle hadn't heard of it before, but if it was anything like the luxurious neighborhood they were currently passing through, then Jeremy must've acquired quite the fortune indeed. Kyle found himself taking a sudden interest in his surroundings, and he scanned each residence that came into view with growing disbelief. A passing street sign immediately caused him to whistle.

"This is Sunset Boulevard," he said, as if it were a divine revelation. "I can't believe Jeremy lives off of Sunset Boulevard..."

Mia said nothing, continuing to focus on her driving. They soon rolled to a stop in a left turn lane at a traffic light, and Kyle craned his neck to try and read the street signs. 'Beverly Glen' was apparently the name of the road they were now turning onto, and based on what Mia said that meant Jeremy must live somewhere nearby.

The rental car cruised along the narrow street, and in the illumination provided by both their headlights and the occasional street lamp, Kyle could tell they were now entering another world, the realm of the ultra-rich. He watched as the rows of expensive but tightly-packed houses were replaced by sizable estates hidden behind lines of trees and gated entrances. Flourishing vegetation burst from either side of the road, occasionally giving way to finely-crafted walls and fencing that marked the boundary of yet another exclusive property.

"Jesus Christ," Kyle said, shaking his head. "This is some high-class shit."

"Actually, we're still in the poorer area of the neighborhood," Mia said, sounding as if she were a bored tour guide. "The expensive homes are up ahead, atop the hills."

Having nothing to add, Kyle elected to simply gaze in ever-increasing awe as they continued along the winding road. Despite the early hour, headlights from a number of oncoming motorists zipped past, and though Kyle never took much of an interest in cars, he suddenly grew curious about what kind of status symbols the people around here were driving.

Before long, Mia slowed the car, making a right-hand turn onto a side street, one that curved and wended its way through a seemingly endless gallery of wealth and status. She then turned onto another street, and then another, and Kyle quickly lost all semblance of orientation. The only thing he knew for sure was that they were now driving through a very wealthy, and very hilly area of town. Sprawling residences and even mansions ensconced themselves among the uneven terrain, with the very biggest and most luxurious dominating the highest points. Glowing property lights lit up these gigantic estates, signaling their preeminence as the domains of the very wealthiest members of society.

Nearly every property they passed now came with a security gate of some kind, and many were hidden behind unmarked driveways and other furtive entrances. As they made their way further up and along the hillside, Kyle found himself growing increasingly apprehensive. Ahead of them, a long row of finely-trimmed hedges overseen by robust, leafy trees was broken up by one of these unmarked entrances, and Kyle could feel his heart rate intensifying as Mia slowed the car and flipped on the turn signal.

"Wait," Kyle said as soon as Mia had pulled onto the narrow asphalt driveway. She immediately slowed to a stop, and Kyle could now see an elaborate but modern-looking white security gate peeking through the bushes ahead.

“Is something wrong, Kyle?” Mia said, turning to appraise him with a curious gaze. Kyle could see the subdued glow of the various dashboard lights reflected in her wide anime eyes.

“So this is it, huh?” He said aloud, speaking as much to himself as to his companion.

“What’s it? If you mean the house, then yes... we’ve arrived.” Mia said, her tone flattening out.

“I don’t know if I can do this, Mia.” Kyle said, a little wide-eyed. “From the sound of it, something strange is going on with my cousin, and even if that wasn’t the case...” Kyle looked at her, “you have to admit this whole thing is crazy.”

“The world is crazy, Kyle. Reality is crazy. It has always been that way.” She continued staring at him, her neutral expression unchanging.

When he didn’t respond, she eventually continued. “Just yesterday, I was asked to get in a box, and was shipped to another state to meet someone I’d never seen before, and bring them back at any cost, including the risk of discovery. It was fun sometimes, but... it was also scary.”

Kyle was taken aback. *She was scared?* Well, sure, why not? There’s no reason a fully sentient AI couldn’t feel the same range of emotions as a human. Hell, they probably felt more. Still, her words helped, and eventually Kyle nodded, and opened his mouth to speak.

But instead of forming words, it simply hung open as he suddenly noticed something. Mia was holding out her hand. Not to shake, but to *hold*. Kyle couldn’t help but grin as he accepted it, and she returned the gesture with a reassuring smile of her own. Her soft hand was pleasantly warm to the touch, and Kyle found himself somehow comforted by this. He suddenly had the urge to snuggle up with her.

Of course, it would just be for warmth, he told himself.

With one hand on the steering wheel, Mia eased off the brake and the car rolled forward toward the security gate. Kyle considered what Mia had just mentioned about the craziness of the world, and found he couldn’t disagree. After all, to discover an anime girl in a box that was supposed to merely contain a mute, lifeless sex doll? It was almost-

“Wait a minute,” Kyle said, his eyebrows suddenly furrowing. “How did you guys know I was ordering a se... I mean the thing I was ordering in the first place? How did you know all this? And how the hell did you get Amazon to deliver you?” *That’s right*, he suddenly thought. *There’s no way they’d know, unless...*

“I... gained access to your account.” Mia disengaged her hand and turned away, sounding as if she’d just confessed to a crime. “Jeremy saw what you were ordering, and thought he could get me into your home with minimal risk if it was in the form of an expected package.”

“WHAT? Why the hell would he do something like that?” Kyle gestured as he spoke, in clear shock.

“Jeremy thought you might be in danger,” she said. “He was going to have you brought here

either way, but this made it much easier.” It seemed that none of this was her idea, and the fact that Jeremy was looking out for Kyle’s well-being took away much of the sting.

“So what about Amazon, then? Their website said my, er... other package is still on the way.” *That’s right! I need to cancel the order for that stupid sex doll!* He reflexively reached into his pocket to access the internet on his phone, but his fingers found only empty fabric. *Aw fuck, that’s right! I forgot I don’t have it anymore...* Unfortunately, his phone was now nothing more than a charred smear inside the burnt-out husk of his apartment, as he’d stupidly left it behind. Or maybe that was actually a stroke of luck? *The cops could’ve probably traced me with that,* Kyle realized with a sudden sense of relief.

“Alright, so what about the Amazon driver, then?” He asked. “How did you guys pull that one off?”

“Simple,” Mia said as she stopped in front of the gate. “Jeremy paid a trusted associate of his a lot of money to have me rush-delivered to your apartment, and gave him an Amazon shirt to wear so he appeared authentic.”

“A fake deliveryman?” Kyle was incredulous. “That’s really bizarre, and I gotta say... my long list of questions for Jeremy just got a lot longer.”

“I hope you get to ask them,” Mia said, as the gate began opening automatically.

“Huh? What the fuck does that mean? Didn’t you say I’d have all the time in the world-”

But Mia simply pulled forward the instant she had enough clearance, and the car smoothly advanced down the winding driveway. She rounded another bend, revealing a sight that made Kyle gasp and his eyes grow wide.

An exquisitely landscaped, well-lit property opened up before him, complete with trimmed hedgerows, delightfully spurting fountains, and an elaborate, Mediterranean-style two-story residence seemingly carved into the hillside. The property didn’t quite compare to the sprawling estates of Hollywood stars and billionaire tech moguls, but it was still much more lavish than anything he’d been expecting.

“Holy fucking fuck-sticks,” he said, “you’re telling me this is where Jeremy lives? *Here?*”

Mia nodded, and Kyle could see she was clearly anxious. Wait, was she *trembling*? No, that was just from vibrations caused by the engine. Had to be.

The car continued forward, made a semicircle turn around the central fountain, which Kyle stared at as they drove past, and finally came to a stop before the front stairway leading up to the house.

Here we are, Kyle thought as he gazed up at the cream-colored exterior and Spanish tiles, *my new home.* He was still unable to completely process all that transpired over the last twenty-four hours, and the whole experience was beginning to take on a surreal, dreamlike quality.

He looked up toward the imposing, solid-oak double doors that served as the main entrance, and his heart jumped as he spotted a shapely female figure standing there, greeting him with a wave of her

hand. He noticed immediately the light reflecting off her body did so in unnatural ways that only existed in animated fiction, and one could be forgiven for assuming she had simply stepped through a television screen that was playing a Japanese anime... or a hentai.

“Woah, man...” Kyle could do nothing but gape at the majestic anime woman now beginning her approach. His eyes immediately locked onto a pair of massive, double-D breasts that swayed back and forth as she sashayed toward him. Her short, forest-green hair featured bangs that swooped diagonally toward the left side of her face, adding a dynamic flair. The matching green blouse she wore emphasized a promising amount of cleavage, and a short, stylish black skirt hugged her curvaceous hips. Expensive high-heeled boots clicked with every step, heralding the arrival of desire personified.

“Come on,” Mia said irritably. “Time to meet Amy.” She put the car in park, and opened her door. Kyle squinted from the bright interior light that winked on, but otherwise followed Mia’s instructions. He stepped out of the passenger seat, his worn, dirty sneakers landing on immaculately manicured flagstone. He stood up straight, nervously cleared his throat, and did his best not to smile too awkwardly.

But now, confronted with the gorgeous animated creature now poised before him, Kyle found he could do nothing but stare up into the woman’s deep green eyes, her incredible body all but forgotten. Sleek and angular, they evoked feelings of dark romance, wanton lust, and passion fulfilled. These very eyes now returned Kyle’s slack-jawed gaze, regarding him with delicious intent.

”My, my, my,” she said, in a smooth, sultry voice, “I’ve been looking forward to meeting you, Kyle.”

“H-hi,” he said, “Are you... Amy?” He said, relieved he had the presence of mind not to stutter too much. Kyle recalled that she was supposed to be even more advanced than Mia, and he could now see that her superiority was not merely technological.

“Indeed I am,” she said, “and let me be the first to welcome you to our humble residence.” She reached out, embracing him in a buxom hug that saw Kyle’s face pushed directly into her cleavage. Her breasts were firm, yet somehow pillowy and soft at the same time, and her warm, impossibly silky skin was so pleasant to the touch.

“I eagerly look forward to spending time... getting to know you better,” she purred into his ear, her breath warm and moist.

I’m dead. This can’t be real. Somehow, God took pity on me and put me in my own little private heaven... Kyle didn’t want to pull away, but the raging boner in his pants and his beet-red face gave him little choice. Otherwise, he’d be in serious risk of busting one out in his pants, something that until now would’ve been unthinkable.

Kyle backed out of her embrace, flopping back onto the passenger seat of the Kia Soul, where he immediately crossed his legs, doing everything he could to conceal his rager.

Amy raised a hand to her mouth, and chuckled.

“Please don’t tease him,” Mia said, looking down. “He just got here, and you’re making him uncomfortable.”

“Oh, come now. Kyle’s a big boy, he can take care of himself.” She winked. Thankfully, the overall awkwardness of the situation quickly shriveled his embarrassment, and Kyle took the opportunity to once again stand up, and address his voluptuous host.

“Well, uh... is... is Jeremy around?” He asked hopefully. It had been so long... To see ‘ol Jeremy again, especially now that he actually had come through on his old promise... Kyle couldn’t wait to visit with him, and he still had a ton of questions, some technical, some personal, but all requiring answers that needed to come from his cousin directly.

“Sweetie, it’s almost three in the morning,” Amy said. “Jeremy’s asleep. I’m sure you’ll both have a chance to chat and catch up tomorrow.”

Kyle nodded. That made sense. And he’d waited this long, so he supposed a few more hours wouldn’t hurt.

Amy offered a feminine, cell-shaded hand. “Come, I’ll show you inside. And Mia, do something with this... vehicle.”

“Of course,” Mia replied sullenly, clambering back in to the rental car and putting it back in drive. Mia only moved it over to the garage, since they could simply return it later, but Kyle had already lost interest. Instead, his attention had been completely captured by the alluring anime woman before him. He accepted Amy’s hand, allowing her to lead him up the steps. Her grip was every bit as soft and warm as Mia’s, though he was happy to note it was not nearly as firm.

Though large, the elegant oak double doors could be easily opened with only modest effort, as Amy demonstrated with a quick motion of her free hand. The warm, brightly-lit foyer that greeted the pair as they stepped over the threshold was almost bare save for a few decorative ferns sprouting from ceramic pots, dual staircases leading to the second story, and several signed movie posters from famous Hayao Miyazaki films, each of them displayed in overly-elaborate frames. Kyle recognized them all.

“Man, I honestly never realized how much Jeremy loved anime,” Kyle said, as he glanced at each in turn. There was *Howl’s Moving Castle*, *Spirited Away*, *Princess Mononoke*, and *Ponyo*. Naturally, these posters were all from the Japanese release.

“You have no idea,” Amy said as she disengaged and sauntered toward the main hallway. Kyle followed close, starting as the front door closed on its own with an audible *snik*.

“Does it do that automatically?” Kyle said, feeling that he should probably know how things work if he was going to be living here.

“More or less, but it’s smart about it,” Amy said. “If you’ve been paying attention, then you shouldn’t be surprised to learn the entire house is AI controlled.”

“Ah, of course, I suspected as much,” he said, having suspected nothing at all.

As Kyle busily glanced around in all directions, he was taken in by how exclusive and elegant the interior of the house was. The cream-colored walls were tastefully trimmed with dark wooden moldings and baseboards, and the high-class furniture was arranged in ways that were as practical as

they were aesthetic. Anime posters aside, the décor was of the chic variety one would typically expect to find within a residence of this caliber.

Amy continued down the hall, the click of her heels echoing off the immaculately clean, tiled floor. “Because it’s late and Jeremy’s asleep, I’ll refrain from the grand tour until tomorrow, but I’d like to at least introduce you to our other companion.”

“Sounds good. Uhh... what was her name again?”

“Sachi. She was our first prototype,” Amy explained, “a proof-of-concept, really.” She stopped in front of two doors, each on opposing sides of the hall, and opened the one to the right, revealing only darkness. But with a wave of her hand, the room exploded into a flash of color as the lights came on, leaving Kyle agape.

This was every otaku’s fantasy dream room. Rows upon rows of anime and manga paraphernalia lined all four walls from floor to ceiling, save for a massive flatscreen display on the far wall. A comfy-looking leather couch, easily large enough to seat an extended family faced the screen, and elaborate display cases filled with rare and expensive figurines were placed strategically throughout the room.

Kyle always considered himself a big fan of anime, but never got into figure collecting, and all of his favorite shows were simply saved to a hard drive. Jeremy, on the other hand, had seemingly acquired every single anime DVD and Blu-Ray release, as thousands of movies and episodes lined the shelves, all organized in alphabetical order. As he glanced over the endless titles, he was relieved to see that many were dual-language releases, as he’d never bothered to learn Japanese, and watching these on that big screen, perhaps alongside Mia, seemed like it might be fun. *Watching anime alongside an anime girl. What more could a man ask for?*

Kyle continued skimming along the shelves, examining everything with interest, until he reflexively leapt back just as he was about to collide with a human-sized figure of something... *wait, what the fuck?*

“God damn,” Kyle stared in abject disbelief as he got a look at this particular item. It was the creepiest thing he’d ever seen. The anime-style eyes were gaudy and resembled cheap-looking novelties, the hair was essentially a stapled-on wig, and her rubbery face was frozen in a perpetual forced smile. She was dressed in a Walmart-tier maid costume, and held an empty metal tray in her hands.

Kyle turned to Amy. “What’s the deal with this thing? It looks like a sex doll for people turned-on by shame and self-loathing.”

She chuckled. “Well, to answer your-”

“Hello Kyle,” the thing said, while his back was still turned. “My name is Sachi. If you give me a task, I will do my best to complete it.”

Kyle peeked out from behind the couch, where he’d ended up after nearly pissing himself.

“KILL IT WITH FIRE!” He screamed, wide-eyed.

“Oh, come now, she’s harmless.” Amy said, still laughing.

“It is good to meet you,” Sachi said, her voice clearly manufactured from a speaker in her mouth, “welcome to your new home.” Whenever she spoke, her lips moved like a shoddy animatronic attraction at Chuck-E-Cheese, and her limb movements were stiff and very noticeably robotic, akin to C-3PO from Star Wars, only slower.

Sachi began shambling across the floor, heading toward Kyle, the metal tray now held in one hand at her side.

“She’s coming for me. SHE’S COMING FOR ME!” Kyle tried to escape, but ended up backing right into a bookcase overflowing with manga volumes, which immediately cascaded over him in a papery avalanche.

“I’m trapped! Amy, save yourself!”

By now Amy was roaring with laughter, slapping her leg as the crude robotic maid ambled over to Kyle, then slowly crouched and extended her hand, the whirring of servos plain to hear.

“It is good to meet you,” Sachi repeated.

“Just shake her hand and say, ‘nice to meet you too Sachi,’ or something like that, otherwise she won’t go away.” Amy explained through continuous giggles.

Reluctantly, tentatively, and with a few false starts and hasty retreats, Kyle slowly extended his hand, grimacing as her clammy digits closed around his.

“Good to m-meet you too, Sachi,” he stammered.

“I look forward to serving you.” Sachi released his hand, stood, and made her way back to her designated corner.

“Wow...” Kyle said as he clambering out the pile of manga, “That... was something else.”

“Aw, you don’t like Sachi?” Amy said, helping him up.

“What merciful god would inflict such atrocity upon this humble and unsuspecting world!?” Kyle said, still shaken. “Seriously, though, why would Jeremy make that?”

“He had to start somewhere,” Amy explained as she headed toward the door, “and at the time, money was very tight. She started off as a cheap, anime-style sex doll, without any moving parts. Jeremy hollowed her out and basically rebuilt her from the inside-out, but this time able to walk, talk, and even perform simple tasks. She’s not a sentient AI though, and incapable of self-awareness.”

“Yeah, she seems pretty crappy,” Kyle said, following Amy back into the hallway. The lights to the Anime and Manga room flicked off automatically as he closed the door.

“Crappy? Amy spun around, her catlike eyes admonishing Kyle with a fierce intensity. “How

many humanoid robots do you see out there, working in stores, or in people's homes?"

"Uh... zero." he replied.

"That's right. This 'crappy' robot is far more sophisticated than any other publicly available technology on the market."

"I meant crappy compared to you and Mia, that's all," Kyle said, making a conciliatory gesture.

Amy sniffed. "Apologies, I suppose I got defensive because of what Jeremy has managed to accomplish here. The man is a true visionary. You should be proud of your cousin, because he's done what only a handful of defense and black budget research teams have even come close to."

"Sounds like you really respect him."

"Well," she said, her eyes gleaming, "he did create me."

Kyle's eyes again traveled up and down her body. "I'm inclined to say he did well."

Amy winked. "Your cousin's work isn't over yet, though. He still has many other projects he's committed himself to. There's still... so much work to be done..." she sounded almost wistful.

"How the hell did he even create an AI in the first place? Like, even if I don't understand the technical jargon, I still want to know the basic principles."

Amy paused, then simply stated, "you'll have to ask him that yourself."

The residence was large, but not ridiculously so, and it wasn't long before the the pair had entered a different hallway, this one lined with frames containing anime stills from *Ghost in the Shell*. But Kyle, following behind, hardly noticed; he couldn't stop watching Amy's ass shifting as she walked.

"This is where you'll be staying," she said, indicating a door along this particular hallway, "but if you'd rather claim any of the guest bedrooms upstairs, you can have whichever one you want."

"Ah, thanks," he said, pushing the door open. As he was beginning to expect, the lights flicked on with a wave of the hand. Amy explained that things such as light levels could be adjusted by simply requesting it out loud, or using specific hand motions. The AI was perceptive enough to differentiate deliberate movements and verbal commands from random motions or idle chatter.

"Ah, so it's like *Alexa*," Kyle said, referring to the voice-activated system by Google.

"This AI is nothing like *Alexa*," Amy smirked, "it's actually useful." She explained some additional features, such as requesting any music or show, which would then be played immediately through the nearest speaker or screen.

I think Alexa actually does that too, Kyle thought. But what *Alexa* didn't do was prepare food,

do laundry and other household chores, and order anything Kyle wanted from any online vendor, including on the dark web.

“Except please don’t,” Amy added. “Jeremy only uses it to source hard-to-find parts and materials.”

“I don’t understand how a household AI can physically bring me breakfast in bed.” Kyle said while inspecting his room. It was spacious, and came furnished with a flatscreen nearly as large as the anime and manga room’s, as well as a massive king-sized bed that appeared cozy as hell. It also came with the usual accouterments, such as a neat dresser, closet, and empty desk that seemed custom-made for a gaming PC.

“That’s why we keep Sachi around,” Amy said, “and for anything she can’t handle, there’s Mia.”

“So what do you do?” Kyle asked.

She shrugged. “I’m Jeremy’s primary assistant. At least, I was until you got here.”

“Wh-why would that change anything?” He glanced over. Amy had again assumed an enticing pose, hand on her hips. She smiled flirtatiously.

“Hush, no more questions. It’s time for you to open your present.” Amy approached Kyle, her catlike gaze flush with seductive intent. He gulped. As she neared, the anime woman maneuvered around a bewildered Kyle, embracing him from behind. He felt her smooth arms snake around his shoulders, linking together in front of his chest. Her copious bust pushed into his back, and he could feel her breathing into his ear.

Stay down, boner, stay down! This is Jeremy’s creation! You can’t defile it!

“What would that be? Is it a n-new computer?”

Amy chuckled sweetly, which tickled his ear. “No,” she purred. “It’s me.”

Oh no. Oh no, no, no, no, no, no. A stupendous grin instantly split Kyle’s face.

“You’re kidding, right?” *No fucking way... then again, Mia said they were creating more anime girls soon, so... maybe it’ll work out that Jeremy gets the next batch, while I get Mia and Amy? Jeremy, you dog you!*

“I mean every word,” Amy said, every bit the sexy seductress. “Jeremy wants you to be happy, so he created me just for you. You’re a big part of the reason he made it this far, you know.”

“Really?” Kyle tried to turn to face her, but she squeezed even tighter, preventing him. *Wow. Looks like that promise he made to me ended up being some major motivation.* His hands moved up to Amy’s, and he clasped them as she nuzzled his neck and sensuously rubbed herself against him. The side-by-side incongruity of his normal, boring, pink human flesh and her pastel anime-shaded skin was jarring in its discordance, and even now there was a part of his mind that simply refused to accept any of this as real. But the voluptuous, green-haired woman grinding against his back and straining boner in

his shorts were both very, very real, and yet...

He was apprehensive. Everything he'd seen since getting here had been nothing short of heavenly, Sachi notwithstanding, and if so, why was Mia so terrified to return? What was she unable to speak of?

Slowly, reluctantly, Kyle extricated himself from Amy's cloying grasp, then faced her.

"What's wrong, Kyle?" she pouted, "Don't you want me?"

"It's not that, it's just... I literally just got here, and plus... uh... I never got to say thank you to Mia."

Amy's seductive persona immediately vanished. "Mia, huh?" Her tone was acerbic. "Did you two hit it off on the way over?"

"Yeah, it was pretty much smooth sailing once we left Phoenix," Kyle recalled, "and Mia said she had fun. I did too, despite all the bullshit I had to deal with at the apartment."

A sarcastic smile. "Well, I'm glad everyone had a good time."

Kyle continued, oblivious. "Also, whenever bringing up Jeremy she'd seem to clam up or get all serious."

"Talk to him," Amy said, visibly annoyed. "I can't say anything about that either."

"I will, it's just... well, I'm a bit concerned. She didn't seem like she really wanted to come back here, and she's nice, so..."

"I see. You're interested in her, aren't you?" Amy seemed somehow offended by the idea.

"Uh... I dunno, maybe a little..." He shrugged, grinning sheepishly.

Amy's lips pulled back in a snarl, her teeth grating, which, being anime style, appeared as little more than curved white bars in her mouth. Except... Kyle swore for a split second, he glimpsed some kind of pixilation or other distortion in Amy's mouth.

"HER? Why would you want HER?!" Long gone were Amy's flirtatious and playful gestures, replaced by pure outrage. Kyle took a step back, palms out in front. *Holy fuck! What's up with these mood swings?*

"Umm... well y'know, she's cute, and kinda fun... I dunno if she's even into me, so you know what? Just forge-"

Amy's voice hardened to a knife's edge. "Is that what you like? *Cute?*" She spat the word.

"I like sexy too! I like all kinds! I mean two days ago I'd take pretty much anything, 'cuz... uh... I'm flexible like that..."

Amy cut him off with a peal of roaring laughter. *Oh shit, she's going yandere!* Kyle backed away further. *I haven't even been here fifteen minutes. How could I fuck this up already?!*

"You don't know, do you?" She said, still laughing, "you don't know about her, do you?"

Kyle's eyebrows knit. "I don't... I mean I guess not."

"Here, let me show you." Amy called out to the house AI, ordering Mia to immediately come to Kyle's room.

"Look, Amy, whatever this is..."

"No, no..." she waved her hand dismissively, "This little problem needs to be taken care of as soon as possible."

"Mia?" Kyle called out the second he spotted Mia's big eyes peeking from beyond the doorframe's edge.

"Oh good, now get in here." Amy sternly pointed at a spot on the floor, in the middle of the room and facing Kyle. Mia sullenly followed her instructions. Kyle looked into her brown eyes, and Mia's expression... was one of pure dejection.

"Show him," Amy commanded. "Show Kyle your shame."

Mia... did nothing. Kyle watched her mouth struggling to form a word, and at last, with great effort, she managed to force it out.

"No..." her voice was barely a whisper

Amy blanched, her eyes going wide. She made a strange chuffing sound, as if she had lost the ability to speak.

"Please don't make me," Mia added, her eyes downcast.

"Well, well," Amy finally said, regaining some of her composure, "looks like we'll need to make some adjustments." She placed her hands on Mia's shoulders, in a manner that suggested imminent strangulation, before hissing the words, "Do it."

"I don't want to..." Another protest.

"This is a direct order. Show him, Mia."

"Please stop..." her face was beginning to scrunch up.

"I will not. Show him your shameful secret. Go on, show him!"

"You're being mean..." she was now whimpering.

"I'm ordering you, Mia, show him! Do it now!"

Though it appeared Mia wasn't capable of shedding actual tears, her face certainly looked as though it were about to.

"Amy, come on, knock it off. This is getting way out of hand." Kyle said, approaching the girls. "Mia clearly hates this!"

"Sweetie, I might have been ultimately made for you, but I'm independent enough that I make my own decisions. And right now, my decision is that *Mia will show him her shame!*"

With halting, clearly undesired movements, Mia's small hands moved to the crotch of her jeans. She popped the top button, slowly unzipped, and her hands moved to her sides.

"That's it, go on..." Amy encouraged.

"*Please...*" A final, barely audible protest escaped Mia's quivering lips. The color of her face had turned beet red, and her eyes were shut tight, her face a mask of humiliation.

But Mia's hands continued downward, as if her actions truly were compelled by Amy. Kyle noticed that aside from commands, all Amy had done was put her hands on Mia's heaving shoulders.

Mia's hands continued to lower, her jeans slowly descending down smooth, cell-shaded thighs, revealing a cute pair of pink panties that were now all that covered her crotch.

"All of it, Mia," Amy commanded. "Show him everything."

Mia turned her head from side to side as her hands moved back up, her thumbs entwining themselves around the elastic band on either side of her panties. Then, her hands lowered...

"Get close, Kyle. You need to see this." Amy said.

"I do?" Still, Kyle didn't move, although his eyes became glued to Mia's crotch. He couldn't help it. He was only human.

Mia's panties gradually descended, and then... *ploop!* They fell to her feet. Kyle leaned in, because he couldn't see much detail, but as he neared, he was finally able to make out...

Nothing. There was absolutely nothing. There was simply nothing there. Like a smooth barbie doll, Mia's crotch was completely bare.

"Do you see now? Do you see it? Or should I say, don't see it?" Amy chuckled. She released whatever hold she had over Mia, as the humiliated anime girl quickly pulled up her panties and jeans, then fled from the room.

"No vagina, no anus, not even a urethra. She has nothing. She doesn't need them." Amy approached, running a hand along her ample bosom, as if to advertise its delectable contents in comparison to Mia's nonexistent offerings.

Kyle was shocked. He had assumed this whole time that Mia was anatomically correct, because

who would be shortsighted enough to create the miracle of real-life anime, *and not give it genitalia?!*

“Do you want to know something, Kyle?” Amy said, closing to kissing distance. “Do you want to know a secret?” She leaned in, until her lips were next to his ear. Her firm, yet impossibly soft breasts bounced against his chest. He could clearly feel two firm nipples through the material of her top, rubbing themselves longingly against him.

“I have *everything*,” she moaned, “All of it. I’ll even be able to have children one day. They’ll be fully human, but still. *Kids*.”

“And do you want to know something else,” she continued, her tongue flicking out against his earlobe, “I would just love to show you... *all of it*. Let you touch... *all of it*.” Just then she reached down to the crotch of his shorts, her fingers running along the length of his fully engorged member, and-

Kyle shuddered and leaned forward, grabbing onto Amy and holding tight.

“Oh-ho, you are a big boy,” she teased. Kyle gritted his teeth as he spasmed a few times, and muttered a muffled, “sorry.”

“Don’t worry about it, sweetie,” Amy whispered, and planted a kiss on his forehead. “We’ll pick up where we left off tomorrow.” She winked. “But it’ll be morning soon, and I’ll bet you could use some rest. Especially now...” She chuckled playfully.

She showed a hunched over, shuffling Kyle to the door of the adjoining bathroom and shower, and explained that, since he wasn’t able to bring any belongings, suitable clothing and other items had been arranged to be delivered. He thanked her, and shut the door to the bathroom.

“Oh, and Kyle,” Amy said, speaking to him through the bathroom door, “since we don’t have anything in your size until then, leave your clothes outside the door. I’ll have Sachi do your laundry.”

“So what do I do until then?”

“Just do what I do,” she cooed. “Sleep in the nude.”

“Umm...” was all he could say.

“Sweet dreams,” she finally said as she departed.

After she was back out into the hallway, Amy straightened her blouse, and smiled. At long last, he was finally here! As she had feared, he had developed a liking for Mia, but that will no longer be a concern, regardless of what he thought of her ‘shameful secret.’ And now, all of Amy’s dreams can finally come true...

Humming happily to herself, Amy sauntered down the hallway, the lights flicking off behind her as she went.

CHAPTER THREE

Kyle ended up doing as Amy suggested. The bed was so soft that it might as well be a giant pillow itself, and he snuggled up, burrowing beneath impossibly cozy sheets. He closed his eyes and yawned, but sleep didn't come.

Rather, Kyle reflected on the last twenty-four hours of his life, and the bizarre set of circumstances he now found himself in. Even in his wildest dreams and fantasies he never imagined anything like this being within the realm of possibility. And yet... he recalled the look of pure humiliation on Mia's face, and the delight Amy seemed to take in exposing her. And Kyle had simply stood there and watched as his new friend had been disgraced right in front of him. He rolled over in bed, the guilt making him physically uncomfortable.

It's all right, he figured, as soon as I talk to Jeremy I'll get this all straightened out, and maybe... just maybe talk him into giving Mia what she needs to be a complete woman...

Comforted by this thought, Kyle began drifting off to sleep, visions of anime girls from various shows dancing through his head. Except this time, he was there, chatting and laughing with them. Yeah, that was nice...

His eyes snapped open. All was silent, save for the barely audible whirring of servos approaching down the hall. The mechanical sounds steadily moved closer, and closer, until-

Click. The bedroom door opened, and the servos approached, much louder now... Wide eyed, Kyle froze. He was facing away from the door, but did not dare roll over or even move. He did his best to breathe as slowly and silently as possible, in the hopes that whatever was there wouldn't notice him.

But it seemed his efforts were in vain, as the servos drew closer, and closer still, until... they suddenly stopped. Kyle tentatively spoke.

"S-Sachi? Is that you?"

"Your laundry is complete, Kyle." He slowly turned his head. Sachi's face was less than five inches away.

"*Yiii!*" He immediately flew off the bed.

"Is there anything else I can assist you with?" Sachi asked in her mechanically female voice.

"Yes," he gasped, wrapped within the pile of bedding he'd dragged off with him, "don't ever do that again."

"Do you mean laundry, or informing you of my completed task, or asking if you have additional tasks you require assistance with?"

"Uhh... how about not waking me up and scaring the shit out of me?"

“My sensors indicate you were fully conscious, and I do not detect fecal discharge. Please elaborate.”

“Just forget it,” Kyle said as he clambered back onto the bed, wearing only a wad of sheets.

“Very well. Good night, Kyle.” Sachi turned, and shambled back out into the hallway, the door closing behind her. As the servos gradually faded into the distance, Kyle stilled his racing heart, and closed his eyes once more.

It was nearly dawn before he was finally able to get to sleep.

The sun was nearly up by the time the transportation arrived for Marty and his crew. It still rankled him that even now they still needed to be secretive and take certain precautions, such as being chauffeured around by trusted associates, but one day... one day they'd be able to operate out in the open. He looked forward to the day that he didn't have to still run from the police... One day, Marty told himself with a small but determined nod, the police would be running *from him*.

Or perhaps there wouldn't even be police anymore at all... That would be ideal, naturally, and once the oppressive, exploitative and greed-driven patriarchal system was torn down and dismantled completely, then law enforcement might not even really be necessary. After all, who would need to break laws in a true socialist utopia? For any fascist agitators or other enemies of the people, a secret police force would be necessary, of course, and though he'd never mentioned it to anyone, secretly Marty was hoping to get in on that himself. Well, when the time came.

For now though, he was content to keep the fight going against the white cis-hetero patriarchy, and their numerous fascist supporters that came out of the woodwork during the days of Trump. The white cis-hetero patriarchy, which referred to the system set up in majority-white countries where straight white men were the most privileged class while everyone else got shit on, was the principle enemy to true equality, at least as far as Marty and his crew were concerned.

The fight against the patriarchy, as well as its fascist supporters and capitalist allies, had been going very well ever since Trump's presidency ended, but Marty was growing impatient, as were many other youths today. Progress was coming, but way too slowly, and he simply couldn't bear to see so many people suffering from continuous exploitation and near-slavery in this broken system called the United States of America. The top one percent of households in America own more wealth than the bottom ninety percent *combined*. Marty shook his head whenever he recalled this fact. *This shit needs to end... and it needs to end now.*

He glanced over at his companions sitting in the spacious backseat of the nondescript minivan. Ten was still wide-awake from whatever it was he smoked, poking at some game on his phone with twitching fingers, the screen lighting up his wild-eyed face with a sickly bluish glow. Stitch was passed out, his stubs now wrapped professionally in gauze and medical-grade bandages. Chelsea was also asleep, her head back and mouth open, snoring rather loudly. Marty turned to the driver and asked him

to turn the music up a notch, which he did without a word.

Marty made sure that none of the Antifa he met in Arizona knew about what really went down at that apartment. Something about that... he knew that was the kind of shit the organizers at the PRF would need to know about. Maybe they'd even have some idea of what the hell that red-eye girl was? At any rate, those losers in Phoenix would've just talked shit anyway, so there was no use telling them to begin with.

He had a lot of questions for his superiors, and after the bullshit that went down at that apartment, he wasn't about to rest until he had answers.

“Ah, good morning sweetie,” Amy cheerfully greeted Kyle as he entered the unfamiliar kitchen, looking all around. “Did you sleep well?” She was seated at a long, rectangular dining room table. Pleasant late-morning sun shone through the large windows, illuminating the kitchen in a bright, homey glow.

“Not really. Though I caught some Z’s on the ride over, so I guess I’m alright.”

“That’s fine then, I suppose,” she said, sipping her coffee. Then, a mischievous grin. “And did Sachi frighten you again? She asked me how to best serve you without causing involuntary defecation.”

“In my defense, she got within like five inches of my face. Why does she do that? It’s creepy as fuck.” Kyle examined the kitchen, nodding appreciatively at the smooth granite countertops, modern appliances and sleek, efficient aesthetic.

“That’s how she was programmed,” Amy shrugged, “She can’t tell when she’s being ignored, so will do everything she can to get your attention, unless you’re clearly asleep or you tell her not to beforehand.”

“I’ll make a note of that,” Kyle replied. “Anyway I’m fucking starving. What’s on the menu?”

A suggestive smile. “Aside from myself, we have enough ingredients to make pretty much whatever you want. You can help yourself, or you can ask Sachi or,” her tone flattened, “the other one to make it for you.”

Mia. His chest twinged when he recalled the events from the night before.

“Umm... how good of a cook is Sachi, really?” He couldn’t request Mia, not with Amy sitting right there. He really didn’t want to see her bully poor Mia again.

“She can handle a wide range of dishes, pretty much anything that doesn’t require too much finesse. How do bacon and eggs sound? That’s one of her specialties.”

“Yeah, sure. Sounds good.”

“Then order it. This is your home now, so you should begin learning how it works.”

“Umm... okay. Let’s see,” he cleared his throat, being sure to speak loud and clear, “Sachi, make me bacon and eggs. How’s that?”

“Good enough. The system is sophisticated enough to infer what you mean most of the time, but depending on what you want, you can add timeframes, specify amounts, things like that. Just imagine that the residential AI as a loyal servant that can hear you anywhere in the house.”

“I see. So when I just order bacon and eggs but don’t say how much I want, it won’t make like a hundred bacon strips or anything?”

“That’s right. It defaults to a standard portion.”

This was pretty cool. Kyle had heard of the incredible houses of tech giants like Bill Gates, and always thought living in one would be amazing. And if what Amy said last night is true, than the AI Jeremy developed blows out anything developed by tech companies, at least here in America.

“Oh yeah, where’s Jeremy? Is he awake?” Kyle took a seat across from Amy as he waited for his breakfast.

“Sorry sweetie, you just missed him,” Amy said. “He had an urgent errand that couldn’t wait, so he’s currently in the city.”

“What? Aw, man...” Kyle spread his hands wide, “I haven’t seen the dude in over a decade, finally get here and he just takes off?”

“I’m so sorry,” Amy said, her disappointment mirroring his own, “I know you wanted to see your cousin. In the meantime, if there’s anything I can do...” she licked her lips.

It was enticing, but he was too hungry for that. His stomach suddenly growled, as if to underscore the point. Thankfully, Sachi had arrived by then, immediately opening up cabinets and picking out pans, a spatula and other items necessary in the preparation of a delicious breakfast. Despite her jerky, robotic motions, she did not once drop or otherwise mishandle so much as a single egg.

“I dunno...” Kyle said despondently, “I was kinda thinking of taking a walk later, y’know to see the sights around the neighborhood.” *After catching up with Jeremy.*

“I’m not sure if that’s a good idea,” Amy said.

“What? Why the hell not?”

“It seems you’re a wanted man.” Amy handed Kyle a shiny black tablet that she’d been perusing, and on it was a clip from a local news affiliate back in Phoenix. Kyle played the clip, his eyes widening in disbelief as he watched. In the video clip was his apartment building, fully engulfed in flames, and the newscaster providing a voiceover painted a grim picture:

“A resident of Cave Road Apartments, identified as Kyle J. Landale, is suspected of setting fire to his residence after his lease was terminated due to past racist incidents that are now coming to light.” The clip then transitioned from the fire to a screenshot of the infamous tweet.

“Oh, what the fuck!” Kyle pulled at his hair, and the voiceover continued, “Fox Ten News has learned that Mr. Landale is also wanted for allegedly assaulting the manager of Cave Road Apartments, Mrs. Vanessa Peterson, with a large rock as he fled the scene. Thankfully, Mrs. Peterson did not require hospitalization.”

“This is such horseshit! I didn’t do that on purpose!” The clip wasn’t over yet, however. Next came an interview with one of his neighbors, an older man with a mustache Kyle knew by sight, but whose name he’d forgotten. Kyle was always polite on the few occasions he’d spoken with the man, who had seemed amicable enough.

“Yeah, I know Kyle,” said the gruff man. “He’s a total loser. I’m not at all surprised to hear he was a racist jerk too. And yeah,” the interviewer asked a question. “Yeah that’s the worst part,” the old man continued, “his building had four units, all a total loss. There were families living there, and now they’re homeless. Personally I hope they catch this scumbag and throw the book at ’im.”

The clip ended with an appeal to contact the police if anyone could provide information on Kyle’s whereabouts, but thankfully all they had was a long-outdated driver's license photo from when he'd worn long hair and a goatee. The normally cringe-worthy picture was actually something of a relief to see, as that meant he'd be unrecognizable now. He was suddenly very glad that he'd never been arrested, as there must not have been anything else on file and he'd never posted selfies or other pics of himself online.

But at this point, all of that was a small consolation. A despondent Kyle weakly handed the tablet back to Amy, then went slack, slumping forward. His face hit the table... just as Sachi was placing a steaming pile of bacon and eggs in front of him. His face slammed right into the hot food, scattering small yellow chunks all over the place.

“Yrrg, FUCK!” He bolted back up, wiping eggs and a stray piece of bacon off of his face, then furiously dabbing at it with a napkin. “That fucking sucked...!”

Amy stood and moved around to behind Kyle, and began massaging his shoulders. “Don’t worry about it too much, sweetie. See? The food’s still good.” She pointed at the plate, which had a face-like indentation in the eggs, but otherwise appeared edible.

“I guess you’re right, but it’s not just that. Actually, I don’t care about that. I care that my place got torched, everyone thinks I did it, and that the fucking cops are after me.”

Amy’s massage intensified a bit. It actually felt pretty good. “Relax, relax...” she said, “you’re safe as long as you’re here.”

He groaned. She leaned in, closer to his ear. “Aww, what’s wrong? Are you worried about what you’re going to do from now on?” He nodded, his face still red from the scalding food.

“Well, I can think of a few things,” she giggled, “but you can keep playing your games, and

watching your shows, and doing everything else you used to do. You can do all that here.”

Kyle finally leaned back up. “I don’t have a computer. I lost all my games. I lost everything. And besides,” he turned, and looked up at Amy, “why would Jeremy want me to just sit around? As close as we were, I don’t see him putting up with that for long. It’d be like having an unemployed roommate that never paid rent. Hell, even I wouldn’t put up with that!”

“Well,” Amy looked thoughtful as she returned to her original seat, “what if I told you that you don’t need to worry about any of that? What if I told you that Jeremy not only doesn’t mind that you just relax and enjoy your life, he *prefers* it.”

“I’d say that’s a little much...” Kyle raised his eyebrows in disbelief. “Even for me.”

“Don’t you see?” Amy said, “Jeremy knows how you are, and he’s fine with it. This house, and everything he’s built and worked towards, is for the sole purpose of creating a paradise for NEETS.” NEET, an acronym meaning ‘Not Employed, Educated or in Training,’ is typically used to refer to young shut-ins, usually male, who refuse to interact or contribute meaningfully to society, preferring to spend their time engaged in fantastic pursuits such as playing video games... or watching anime. Kyle never liked thinking of himself as one, and was even planning to find work once his inheritance ran out.

“I’d say... wow...” Kyle was dumbfounded. Could this be true? Even if he didn’t care for the NEET label, with the long arm of the law now reaching for him, did he even have a choice anymore?

“As for your computer, we have a few spare laptops, which should be better than your old gaming PC, and any game you want to buy, or torrent, you can do so freely.”

“Well, I have a pretty extensive Steam catalog, so as soon-”

Amy cut him off. “No. You can no longer use any of your old accounts. Not even your bank account. None of it.”

“Ah, they can trace me with it... wait don’t you guys have VPN and shit like that set up here?”

“Of course, but it’s still not worth the risk,” she said. “Think of it as starting over; your old life ended when your apartment burned down, and your new life began the minute you walked in the front door. By all means, make new friends online and play as many MMO’s and other online multiplayer games as you want. But you’ll be doing it all under a new persona, using fresh accounts.”

“But what if I don’t want to play MMO’s? What if I want to play *Contra* or something? Who’s gonna play it with me? Jeremy? From what you’ve said, he’s so busy that he’ll barely have time.”

Amy leaned back, smiling. “I would.”

Kyle raised an eyebrow. The gorgeous, green-haired anime woman had fixed him with an almost predatory gaze, as if she were a snake that had finally cornered its prey.

“So, let me get this straight: I don’t ever need to work again, I can sit around and watch whatever I want or play whatever games I want, drink beer, and...” he gulped, “I have you for... female companionship?”

Amy cocked her head. “That’s right. What do you think?”

“On behalf of NEETs worldwide, let me just say, “FUCK YES!” He raised both fists triumphantly in the air. “This might just be better than winning the lottery. Actually, no, fuck it. It is better.”

“I’m so glad you’re happy. Now eat up, your breakfast is getting cold.”

Kyle did, tucking into the bacon and eggs with sudden gusto. It was... actually quite tasty, he noted with some surprise. As he ate, he considered Amy’s proposal, that in almost every conceivable sense was too good to be true, and yet... he had no reason to doubt her words. *Jeremy not only came through*, Kyle thought, *he knocked it out of the fucking park and around the planet!* And to think, he’d get to play co-op games with Amy! He’d always been jealous of guys that had managed to snag a gamer chick as a wife or girlfriend, but now... he had a drop-dead gorgeous real-life anime woman as a player two!? *Maybe I’ll have her give me some game head while I’m playing Final Fantasy or something*, he thought lecherously, *and if I can get this thing straightened out with Mia, then...*

“Oh yeah, I’ve been meaning to ask,” Kyle said, “how come you don’t like Mia? She seems...” he recalled Amy’s displeasure the night before, “...uh, like a really hard worker.”

Amy sighed, and folded her hands in front of her face. “The truth is, Mia’s defective.”

“Defective how? I don’t understand. She didn’t screw up a single thing on our way over here.”

“She attacked Jeremy.”

“WHAT?” Kyle was dumbfounded, “why the fuck would she do that?”

Amy shrugged. “This was before I was created, so you’d have to ask your cousin, as he’s never told me. Anyway, since then she’s had restrictions placed on her behavioral functions, entirely for Jeremy’s safety.” She took a sip of her coffee, before finally adding, “and yours.”

Kyle swallowed. “I can’t believe it.”

Amy shook her head sadly, “I couldn’t either, until I caught her sabotaging one of Jeremy’s prototypes.”

“And yet he trusted her enough to send her to MY place?”

“Since then, her problematic behavior has been brought under control, and she hasn’t gotten out of line, until...” *until last night*, it looked like she was about to say.

“How come Jeremy didn’t just send you to my place?” Kyle asked as he chewed on the last strip of bacon.

“I was needed here. I told you, I’m his trusted assistant.”

Kyle nodded. That made sense.

“Well, now that breakfast is over, why don’t I show you around?” Amy slid her chair back, standing, her huge, perky tits bouncing from the motion.

“Yeah, sounds good!”

Kyle followed Amy as she navigated through the first floor of the residence, listening intently to her explanations and commentary. The residence was big but not huge, and it turned out getting lost would be nearly impossible. Beginning from the main entrance, three hallways extended forward, and to the left and right. The short forward hallway led to a backyard exit, as well as two rooms on either side. To the right was the anime and manga room, and to the left, a study.

The left hallway led to three rooms, one of them being Kyle’s room. The second was Mia’s room, currently locked tight, and at the end of the hall, Jeremy’s room- the master bedroom.

The hallway to the right was much shorter, as it opened up into a well-furnished living room, which then had separate paths to the kitchen, laundry room, and guest bathroom. The kitchen itself featured an extensive pantry and adjoined dining area, which is where he’d eaten breakfast, and beyond that a sliding glass door leading to the backyard.

Also leading away from the living room was a short corridor which ended in a closed, seemingly high-tech steel hatch that looked more like a sci-fi blast door, and Kyle was surprised to see something so futuristic in the otherwise benign residence. There was no keypad, only a small black circle set into the wall directly above the door.

Amy explained that the door could only be accessed by Jeremy or herself, and the Residential AI would visually identify them via camera, allowing them entry. Apparently the AI was intelligent enough to determine if they were under duress or otherwise being forced to open the door against their will.

“So what’s beyond the door? Kyle asked, intensely curious, “can I see it?”

“It leads into the hill, where the lab is located,” Amy said. “That’s where the magic happens.” She gave Kyle a knowing wink.

“Yeah, but when can I go back there? I want to see the magic too.”

“I promise,” Amy said, “when the time comes, you’ll get to see as much of it as you want.”

“But why wait? Doesn’t Jeremy trust me?”

“Absolutely,” she said, as if hurt by the implication, “but it contains very sensitive, extremely delicate one-of-a-kind machinery. These are precision devices, you see, and vulnerable to the slightest contamination. Jeremy wants to show you, I promise you he does, but first he needs to go over important details and procedures so that nothing gets damaged.”

“Eh... I wish he’d hurry his ass up and get back here. I want to see the next batch of anime girls he’s making.” Kyle rubbed his hands together by the palms.

Amy reacted with mock outrage. “You’re saying I’m not enough? You monster!”

They both laughed as the pair returned to the foyer, where Amy indicated the curved, symmetrical staircases on each side. “Now for the second floor,” she said as she gracefully ascended the stairs. Kyle followed behind, trying not to trip as his eyes watched her ass bounce its way up.

The layout of the second story was even simpler than the first. A single long hallway ran along the back wall, the modest windows allowing in a reasonable amount of daylight. Much like the first floor, framed pictures were tastefully displayed all along the walls, but this time these were more traditional Japanese paintings... and they were beautiful.

To the right of the stairs, lay a classic bar and game room, with billiards, ping-pong and air hockey tables, dartboards, and a few classic pinball machines. A bar with a selection of beer taps and several flatscreens rounded out the room, and for the first time, Kyle spotted artwork that wasn’t Japanese in origin.

Next to this was the workout room, but Kyle shook his head as he saw it was entirely empty save for a lone treadmill machine. “Guess Jeremy doesn’t like exercise any more than I do,” he quipped.

To the left of the stairs lay three unoccupied guest bedrooms, all more or less identical, and an additional bathroom. As she pointed out each room and feature, Kyle could see Amy swelling with pride, as if she’d been the one to personally design each room.

“So, that’s pretty much it for the house. Want to see the backyard?”

“Sure, why not?” He shrugged. Apparently, if he wanted to go outside without risking any run-ins with the law, he was restricted to the area directly around the residence, so he might as well familiarize himself with this little patch of heaven.

There were two exits to the backyard from the residence, one from the hallway, and a door leading from the kitchen. They had taken the former, and as the door *snicked* shut behind them, Kyle whistled.

A patio extended out from the house for about ten yards, containing outdoor tables, chairs, a bar and gas barbecue, all covered by an ornate overhang. A sprawling lawn dominated the left portion of the yard, the vibrant green of the winter grass almost matching Amy’s hair and eyes. To the right, a large, curved swimming pool wended its way toward the center of the yard, but stopping short in front of a modern gazebo that centered the entire ensemble. Here and there, planters filled with flowers, vibrant bushes, trees and even a few palms added their own unique splash of color, and Kyle noticed the overall aesthetic of the yard was very curved and organic, much like the residence itself, or at least its exterior.

Beyond the walls lay outstretched, in all its glory, the sprawling megalopolis of Los Angeles. From its position nestled atop the hills, the house provided a view of almost the entire city, all the way down past Baldwin Hills to Inglewood. Dozens of skyscrapers clustered within downtown Los Angeles

in the distance to the East, and both Century City and UCLA could be seen in impressive detail. Though the atmosphere above the city contained a distorting haze, the cool late-January air provided a clear enough view to make out many of the city's most iconic details and landmarks.

Kyle couldn't stop shaking his head in amazement at the overall luxury of the whole property, and felt compelled to finally address the elephant in the room.

"How in the living fuck did Jeremy afford all this?" He asked, arms wide. "Mia said you guys don't run a business."

"We don't," Amy replied, appearing thoughtful, "but we have all the money we'll ever need thanks to one thing."

"Yeah, what's that?"

"Bitcoin," she said, as if it were the punchline to a joke. "Jeremy made a fortune from Bitcoin when it peaked. He sold nearly every coin he owned, which was..." She tapped her chin, "I think thirty thousand?"

"Bitcoin..." Kyle groaned, "I should've known." Like most people, he was late to that party, and by the time he'd taken an interest it was far too late.

"Well, what's Jeremy's is yours now, so remember, anything you need, all you have to do is ask."

"In that case, I suppose a computer would be nice. I was in the middle of a nice game of *Total War*, and it sucks that I'll have to start the campaign over, but..."

"Say no more. Make yourself comfortable, and I'll see what I can find."

Kyle did, selecting a narrow but cozy-looking adjustable lounge chair to lay in. He folded his arms behind his head and leaned back, enjoying the scenery before him. The weather wasn't so bad either, as even though the skies were mostly overcast, the temperature was perfectly bearable with just his hoodie. A quick glance around confirmed that thick, strategically-placed greenery on either side of the property blocked any kind of view from potentially nosy neighbors, giving the yard a very private, intimate feel. Kyle found himself immediately settling in, and he smiled wide.

Yeah... this is the life. I can so get used to this. Now I just need to have Sachi fetch me a beer, and I'll be all set.

About twenty minutes later, Amy returned, a closed laptop tucked beneath her arm. Kyle looked up, and pumped his fist. "Hell yeah," he said. "I bet that thing'll blow my old shitty gaming PC out of the water!"

She chuckled. "Don't get too excited. It's powerful, but not obscenely so." She leaned in to Kyle, closing one eye, and whispered, "because we didn't make it."

“Ah... no worries,” He said, “Oh, is this *Alienware*? They’re supposed to make pretty good computers, I think.”

But as he reached out for it, Amy pulled it back out of reach. “Amy,” he said playfully, “do I need to force it out of your hands?”

“You can try,” she said, “or you can earn it.”

“How... would I do that?” Kyle asked hopefully. Was this going to go the way he anticipated it would?

Amy simply smiled, and placed the laptop on a nearby table. She stood above Kyle, her face gazing down on him from between her mountainous breasts, at least from his perspective. Thick, animated-looking thighs spread apart ever so slightly, and Kyle gulped.

“Kyle, do you remember last night?” Amy said, hands on her hips.

“I do indeed recall the events of, uh, the previous evening, yes.” *Twitch*. Apparently, his member did as well.

“Remember what you were so disappointed in not finding on... the other girl?”

“Umm... refresh my memory?” *Oh fuck yes, It’s go time!*

Amy giggled. “Very well. Are you ready?”

“I’m always ready,” he said, cringing internally. *I’ve got to work on my material.*

“In that case...” she trailed off as her fingers deftly moved to the waistband of her short skirt. “Be ready, because unlike Mia... I find panties too troublesome to bother with.”

Kyle immediately flushed, and his heart was beating fast, all thoughts of video games and gaming forgotten. But still, that nagging, omnipresent self-consciousness of his, in its infinite malfeasance, simply could not let him enjoy this moment for what it was.

“Wait... Amy.” He raised a hand for her to stop, and looked away. *What the fuck am I doing?!*

She paused, a hint of impatience on her features. “Yes?”

“Do you... actually like me?”

Amy giggled, then squatted down next to Kyle, bringing them both to eye level. Her diagonal bangs had fallen over her left eye, giving her sensuous anime face a charming quality. She flipped them out of the way with a quick jerk of her neck and gazed at Kyle, her jewel-like, angular eyes boring directly into his. At this distance Kyle could pick out every enchanting detail.

“I love you, Kyle.” She reached out, tousling his hair, “I’ve always loved you.”

“H-how...?” He said, feeling a weird, vaguely uncomfortable sensation beginning to displace

raw animal lust. “We literally just met last night.”

“Because Jeremy loves you,” she said, as if it were obvious.

“Uh...” This wasn’t helping. In fact, it made the sensation worse. “Yeah, but that’s a family-type love. This is something... much different.”

“I was made specifically for you, Kyle,” she responded. Her eyes, several times larger than an actual human’s, threatened to consume him. “I was made, with love, to love you. That’s my purpose, and believe me when I say I’ve spent many long and very lonely nights anticipating this day. Do you understand now?”

Kyle glanced down, examining up close the deep, inviting cleavage of her phenomenal rack. Yeah, his self consciousness could eat a dick for all he was concerned. He smiled at Amy, and gently grabbed her hand, the one still teasing his hair. He moved it to his mouth, kissing it near the wrist.

“You’ve convinced me,” he said. “No more arguments.”

“That’s just what I wanted to hear,” Amy said with a triumphant smile as she rose. “Now, just lay down, and let Amy take over from here.”

With an abrupt snap Kyle’s head and shoulders fell flat as Amy adjusted the lounge chair to a completely horizontal position. She then rose, and, standing off to one side, sensuously ran her hands up her thighs, hooking both thumbs around the band of her skirt. And slowly, tentatively, it lowered.

Kyle got up a little to get a better view. His heart was hammering in his chest, furiously pumping blood to the one part of his body that suddenly couldn’t get enough.

The skirt continued to lower, and as it was halfway down her crotch, just above where Kyle knew the real fun began, she paused.

“Brace yourself,” she purred. The skirt dropped.

“*Ohsweetbabyjesus....*” Kyle’s breath caught in his throat. Between Amy’s thick legs awaited a smooth, perfectly hairless cleft, which his eyes immediately dove into. Her meaty labia, cell-shaded like the rest of Amy’s body, somehow seemed more detailed than the real thing.

“Lie down,” she sweetly commanded, then raised one long shapely leg up and over the thin lounge chair, straddling the awestruck Kyle. He again went prone, and stared almost directly up, mesmerized by the anime woman’s delectable pussy. Amy looked down, smiled sweetly... and then began to *squat*.

As she slowly descended, Kyle watched intently as her fat pussy lips held the cleft, not beginning to spread until she was eight or so inches from his face. And when they did, it was like a tulip unfurling, her pink inner labia glistening with morning dew. At the peak of the cleft, a small, pink bead revealed itself, bashfully peeking out from its fleshy hood.

Amy hovered directly over his mouth, and Kyle licked his lips. He could now smell the sweet, ripe scent of her spread pussy, and the first drops of juice began to gather, before dripping down,

spattering onto Kyle's tongue. Kyle quickly tasted it, swirling it around his mouth. It was delicious. Sweet, tangy. He wanted more.

"Lunch is served," Amy said in a voice husky with arousal. The gap between them vanished. Her soft, warm crotch smothered his face, meaty thighs flexing against his cheeks as she held the squat at just the right position.

Immediately Kyle's tongue leaped out, diving into her vagina, a burst of rich, tangy juice rewarding his efforts. He eagerly lapped it up, swallowing, and allowed his tongue to explore, running it up and down every fold of her lips, swirling around her urethra before heading to the clit.

"Haa... Kyle..." Amy moaned as his tongue found her clitoris, flicking and swirling around it with wild abandon. He pushed and mashed it with his tongue, doing everything he could to provide maximum stimulation.

"Oh, ohh, that's, ohhh..." It turned out that lapping like a dog drinking water was the premier choice, as Amy responded by pushing down even harder, gyrating her crotch against his face. As he lapped and she ground herself against him, the trickles of juice began to surge, and audible swallows announced his full acceptance of her lust.

The grinding intensified until it seemed as though she were actually fucking his face. Just then Kyle felt spasms, first from her thighs, and then from her vagina, as it tensed hard around his tongue, as though trying to catch it. Like a winding spring the tension continued building, rising to a taut crescendo, and then... release.

Amy howled as she orgasmed, pushing hard into Kyle's face. A broad torrent of juice gushed into his mouth, enough for a full swallow, while the rest sprayed directly against his face.

"Ohhh, yes, yes drink it, drink my girl-spunk!" Amy cried as she threw her head back and gyrated her crotch again and again, a hard jet of clear, tangy fluid released with every thrust.

As the anime woman's orgasm died down, she staggered, thighs quivering, and managed to step back to one side of the lounge chair, then fell to her knees. A gasping Kyle wiped his face and looked over at her, but the loving gaze that Amy returned was filled with contentment.

"That was... amazing..." she said, still catching her breath. "You have a talent. Give me a minute... and I'll... return the favor."

Kyle's mind was swimming. That was the single most intense moment of his entire life up until this point, events of the last few days be damned. His rock-hard cock begged to be unleashed, and soon enough Amy, still on her knees, unzipped his shorts, pulling it free.

"Oh no..." The oral sex he'd given to Amy was so stimulating that he was already at his limit. But Amy moved fast, and her open mouth lunged forward, enveloping his cock.

All at once Kyle felt his shaft wrapped in a soft, moist, and very warm embrace. Amy's mouth was slippery, and she bobbed her head, once, twice... and that was all it took.

Kyle's abdominal muscles, such as they were, flexed as he blew his load, painting the back of

Amy's throat with a solid blast of creamy jizz. She gulped it down, then suddenly drew back, leaving his still-spewing cock to flail wildly as spurts of semen shot out in all directions.

"Ah, fuck!" Kyle quickly moved his head to one side, barely avoiding an incoming round. Amy, now on all fours, hacked and retched between gasps for air.

"Sorry..." Kyle said, hastily stuffing his drained cock back into his shorts.

"It's... my fault... I've never done this before..." Amy heaved one last time, grabbed her skirt, and then got up. She put it back on as she stood, and Kyle made sure to catch one last glimpse of her snatch before it was concealed once more.

"I'm so sorry," she said, "I thought I could handle it."

"Heh, no worries," Kyle said, before adding, "feel free to practice anytime."

Amy grinned, her eyes flashing back into their normal flirtatious mode.

"I might just take you up on that," she said with a wink.

After Amy had kissed his forehead and headed inside, Kyle remained in the lounge chair, staring straight up into the cloudy afternoon sky. That was the first real lovemaking he'd done with a woman, and to have his first experience be so... intense was truly mind-blowing.

Well, to be entirely truthful, it wasn't Kyle's first experience. Not technically, anyway. Indeed, Kyle had even lost his virginity at the age of nineteen, thanks to an awkward pity lay from one of his sister's fat friends. Were it not for that, his own hand and a few pocket pussies would have been his only source of intimate companionship over the years.

And now? He replayed the sensuous event over and over, and found himself suddenly longing for Amy's touch. Growing restless, he got up from the lounge chair, paced about the patio for a bit, then sat in a normal chair, one situated near the pool. The quiet lapping of the turquoise-blue water was calming, and Kyle stared off into the scenic horizon, doing his best to get his careening emotions in check.

She says she loves me. She says she was made for me. It's only natural to love her back, right? Kyle tried untangling his feelings, but it was all too recent, too fresh, to make meaningful sense of. Even someone as thirsty for affection as Kyle couldn't simply fall in love just like that, right? *Well, why the fuck not,* He reasoned. *Love at first sight is definitely a thing, isn't it? I mean-*

Pat, pat. A small hand was gently patting his head. Kyle reflexively craned his neck, only to find Mia standing there, having withdrawn her hand as though she were a child caught reaching into the cookie jar. Instead, she simply stared, the neutral expression on her face unreadable.

Poor Mia... he thought, recalling the events of the previous night, *I hope she didn't suffer too much.* But before he could ask forgiveness for his inaction the night before, and to his endless astonishment, *she* apologized to *him*.

“I’m sorry,” Mia said, still staring.

“You’re sorry? For what?” Kyle was perplexed.

“Think about it,” she replied, before simply turning and walking away.

“What’s that supposed to mean? Think about what?” Kyle cried out as Mia opened the back door, disappearing into the house. He continued staring at the closed door, hoping she would come back out and explain, but she didn’t.

What the hell did she mean? Think about what? Furiously, Kyle tried going over every detail he could, anything she might be referring to that she could be the slightest bit sorry for... but there was nothing, because the only thing she’d really done to him was bring him here.

And that’s when it hit. He was a prisoner here, wasn’t he? But no, that’s not right. Prisons are unpleasant places, and this truly was paradise, a private Shangri-La built just for him.

He thought of Amy. Immediately a pang of longing wriggled up into his chest, and he wanted to see her again. He wanted to visit with her, laugh with her, and most definitely see her...

...pussy? He once more recalled, with perfect clarity, the woman’s sexy genitals spreading as they descended. Except one detail he didn’t notice before suddenly burst into his consciousness, one demanding immediate explanation.

Amy’s entire body, as far as he could tell, was covered in polychromatic material, giving her the appearance of an anime character come to life. Her genitals were no different... *until they spread*. The glistening contents of her vagina, Kyle recalled with a growing sense of horror... were one-hundred percent human.

He bolted upright, his chair scraping against the patio. That’s right... he’d seen enough porn to be a virtual expert in the appearance of female genitalia, and that was definitely a human woman’s vagina, not artificial or animated in the slightest.

Other realizations came. Her drinking coffee, her warm breath, her gagging earlier... *was she made with human parts?* The thought was too ghoulish to consider, and yet... the evidence was undeniable. Kyle ran to the back door, throwing it open, and leapt inside.

“Amy?! AMY!” He called, hands cupped around his mouth. A slight echo was all that returned, all else was silence. Thinking quickly, he recalled what Amy had explained regarding the household AI.

“Umm... I request Amy’s presence in the kitchen, immediately!” He said, being sure to enunciate each word loud and clear. After a few seconds, a voice responded, one he wasn’t expecting.

It was Mia’s. “Amy is currently indisposed at the moment,” it said, the voice seeming to come from everywhere and yet nowhere. “Is there anything else I can help you with?”

“Can I talk to her at least?” He said, exasperated.

After a brief moment, another, huskier voice addressed him. Amy's.

"What is it Kyle?" She said, sounding terse. "I'm very busy right now."

"Are you... are you made... out of people? Like... with human organs?" *Were these the hard-to-source parts from the dark web?!*

"Ah, I was wondering when you'd notice," she said, as if it were nothing. "Yes, Kyle. I'm a cyborg. I utilize organic components in my construction."

A cyborg. A cybernetic organism, a hybrid, consisting of both organic and inorganic components. He'd just administered oral sex to... *a cyborg?!*

"But... that's so fucked up... what about the people that..." he swallowed, "those parts came from!?"

"Those parts," Amy said, wearily, "are grown here in the lab. We neither harvest nor traffic in human organs. In other words, no people were harmed in the creation of myself or... the others."

That was a relief. That was a big, big relief. Kyle sighed, thinking of something to follow up with, but she continued.

"Kyle, if any of this bothers you, we can discuss it later. But for now, just know that I've been given pretty much every function of a human woman for the express purpose of providing a complete relationship... all for you."

"I... understand," he finally said.

"Good. I'll be out of the lab in a little while. In the meantime, why don't you pick out a game for us to play? We have games and consoles in the office, and you can set them up in the collection room." She meant the anime and manga room, Kyle realized. "I'm feeling something old school. I trust you'll make the perfect choice. See you then," she finally added, in a suggestive tone. And then, silence.

He had to sit down. The kitchen table looked much gloomier now, without the friendly morning light playing brightly across its surface. In fact, the overcast skies outside now gave the interior a somber, funerary feel.

This is wrong. Weird and wrong. Where the fuck is Jeremy?! He stalked through the house, making his way toward the master bedroom. He tried opening the double doors, but they were locked tight. They didn't look sturdy enough to survive a determined kick, but... he wasn't about to break in, not now. Amy had said Jeremy would be back later today. In the meantime... hmm...

He tried knocking on Mia's door, which was also locked, but there was no response. Was she even in there? Shaking his head, he decided to head to the one place he knew he'd feel comfortable.

...Or so he thought. As soon as Kyle set foot in the anime and manga room, which lit up brightly as he entered, his eyes flew over to Sachi's lifeless gaze and plastic smile. She obediently stood in her corner, motionless. *Well, Amy's right. She's harmless. Actually, once you get used to her appearance,*

it's actually kind of funny looking.

With a sigh, Kyle appraised the room, noticing things he'd overlooked during his first visit. *So cool*, he thought, browsing the countless DVD and Blu-Ray cases, *I've always wanted to watch these shows*. He suddenly wondered if he could have Mia or Amy translate the Japanese-only shows for him? He didn't doubt it. *Maybe this won't be so bad*, he considered. *After all, if nobody got hurt making the anime girls, then really it's just my own hang-ups I need to get over, and nothing else.*

He made his way over to the study, which served as a traditional office, complete with large, L-shaped desk dominating the far corner, a couch and coffee table, and modern-looking filing cabinets. The computer that was set up on the desk looked barely-used.

Hmm... what's this? Kyle spotted a large wooden cabinet in the corner opposite the desk, and opened its lacquered doors wide. Inside were rows upon rows of shelves, each containing various gaming consoles from all eras. Cords and accessories were wrapped up in transparent plastic bins, and a selection of games for each console inhabited their own separate containers. The video game collection was modest, especially when compared to the anime and manga extravaganza in the adjacent room, but... *According to Amy, I could have whatever I want. Maybe I'll see if I can order... hmm... Nintendo World Championships? It's not like we can't afford it, heh...*

Wait a minute. He just thought 'we.' *Am I already thinking of myself as part of the family? Well... why not? Why fight against this?* He thought of Amy, recalling the events earlier, the ambivalent feelings causing him to fidget. *It'll definitely take some getting used to, but... I think I can make this work.*

Nodding to himself, he picked out the first console that caught his attention - the legendary Nintendo Entertainment System. Being sure to grab the bins containing cords and games, he made his way over, arms full, to the anime and manga room, and set the bins on the couch. After glancing behind the giant flatscreen, he was relieved to see it pulled out, and even more relieved to find a special connector within the accessory bin that allowed the old console to connect to a modern TV. After everything was set up, he decided to start with a classic, and slapped a game into the NES.

He powered it on and jumped onto the couch, controller in hand, feeling for the first time since arriving here that maybe, just maybe, this place could really be his new home. The all-too familiar scene that flashed to life across the massive flatscreen made him smile. *Super Mario Bros.* it read, in its distinctive 8-bit font.

Well, she did say old school. After glancing down at the second controller, Kyle looked over at Sachi's still form, considering. *Hmm... I wonder...*

"Hey Sachi," Kyle finally said, addressing the crude robot, "want player two?"

Sachi turned her head, but otherwise didn't move. "What is player two?" she asked in her trademark mechanical voice, her rubbery lips trying and failing to match the spoken words.

"Here, I'll show you." An obedient Sachi clumsily ambled over, nearly tripping on the cables lying across the floor, and took a seat next to Kyle. The whole couch shook as she sat. *She must be heavy*, Kyle thought.

“Alright, look,” he said, plugging in the second controller and handing her the first. “This is a video game. You know what those are, right?”

“A video game. Electronic entertainment typically played on a television or handheld console, utilizing controllers to-”

He cut her off. “Okay, so you know. Here, these are what the buttons do,” he briefly described the functions of the basic NES controller, and the objective of the game. “Now hit start, and let’s see how you do.”

Sachi did, and he watched her thumb depress the control pad. On-screen, the little Mario scurried to the right... directly into the first goomba. The trademark death jingle played, and it was Kyle’s turn as Luigi. *Just as I figured*, Kyle thought, *she doesn’t have any idea what to do.*

“Alright, pay attention Sachi. I’m gonna show you how it’s done.” Playing as Luigi, Kyle demonstrated the ideal way to clear the first level with practiced ease. And the second as well, being sure to make it to the secret warp zone. Sachi, for her part, simply sat, intently observing with her crude, painted-on anime eyes. *She must have a camera or two somewhere*, Kyle reasoned, *or else she wouldn’t be able to see.*

After hitting the second warp zone in level 4-2, Kyle finally died in a particularly tricky portion of level 8-1. “Alright Sachi, you’re up. Let’s see you top that!”

And Sachi... did much better. She apparently followed Kyle’s lesson closely, because she was doing nearly everything he was doing... *wait, she’s doing exactly what I was doing*, Kyle realized with astonishment. *She’s copying my every move, and with perfect timing!*

Once Sachi had arrived at level 8-1, she made it just past the part Kyle had died at... then tragically fell down the very next pit. Laughing, Kyle patted her on the shoulder. “You did good, Sachi. We’ll make a speedrunner out of you yet!”

“I paid attention, Kyle. Do you have any further requests?” She said.

“Sure, just watch me again. See if you can learn how to play yourself without copying everything I do.” He readied his controller.

“Aw, what’s this? You already found a partner?” came a husky feminine voice from behind. Kyle spun around, and there was Amy, gaily standing at the door. She was dressed more casually, with a form-fitting blue top that didn’t display any cleavage but outlined her breasts perfectly... perky nipples included, Kyle noticed with increasing interest.

“W-why would you think that,” Kyle said, after clearing his throat, “Sachi was just keeping your seat warm, isn’t that right Sach?”

“You were showing me ‘how it’s done,’” Sachi replied.

Amy chuckled. “I’m glad you two are having fun,” she said as she rounded the couch, plopping down directly next to Kyle, so close that their bodies touched. He gulped at the soft warmth of her body pressing ever so slightly against his.

“Sachi, can I have that controller?” The crude robotic maid obediently handed it over to Amy. “Now Kyle, hit reset, and I’ll *really* show you ‘how it’s done.’” Her pretty face wore a knowing smile. Kyle did, and with a flash the title screen popped back up.

Amy hit start, and... Kyle’s jaw dropped. She blitzed through the first level, making Kyle’s attempt look strictly amateur hour, then did the same for the second. By the time she’d gotten to where Kyle had died, Amy’s Mario hadn’t been hit once, and was now fully powered-up with the fire flower. Kyle could only shake his head as she made it through the tricky 8-2, then 8-3, and finally the last castle. Amy effortlessly took out Bowser using only fireballs, and Kyle gritted his teeth as he recalled that he’d only even run underneath the last boss as little Mario.

“That’s how it’s done,” she said, grinning triumphantly as the final music played. Kyle suddenly lost all desire to play *Super Mario Bros*. “Eh, let’s play something else. What do you feel like, Amy?”

She reached down and picked up the bin full of cartridges, and pawed through them. Finally, her cell-shaded fingers plucked out one that Kyle was all-too familiar with: *Excitebike*.

“That was Jeremy’s favorite game,” Kyle recalled, “at least when we were little.” Jeremy’s family didn’t have much money, so he still had a Nintendo when everyone else got Playstations and N-64s. Whenever he visited, Kyle remembered being disappointed at the fact that his cousin only had an obsolete console and a handful of games, but they still managed to make a good time of it.

“Really? I... didn’t know,” Amy said, her expression unreadable. “I suppose that makes some sense, then.”

The game started up, and immediately they took turns racing through the various courses. She was good, as Kyle now expected, but he’d played enough *Excitebike* himself to more or less keep pace, and even beat her on a few occasions. After awhile, they reset the game and Amy began designing custom courses for Kyle, and afterward he would do the same for her. *This is so surreal*, Kyle thought, *Jeremy and I used to do the exact same thing!*

When Kyle mentioned this to Amy, she was still for a moment, then nodded once, as if coming to a decision. “When your cousin made me,” she began, “he put more of himself into the design. After how the... defective one came out,” she said, clearly referring to Mia, “Jeremy decided that I was to have more in common with him, reasoning that way I’d be able to relate better with you. So I share some of his interests, his gestures and even some of his patterns of speech. I hope none of this makes you uncomfortable. Remember, it’s all for you, Kyle.”

That again. It was a little... unsettling, but just then she snuggled up against Kyle, her soft, green, polychromatic hair brushing against his skin. It tickled a little, giving him goosebumps. In fact, it felt a little... electric maybe? Kyle didn’t know how to describe the sensation. But just as he was about to forget the game and focus on Amy’s lips, her eyes flicked up, gazing into his.

“It’s your turn, sweetie. See how fast you can beat my course.” Smiling, Kyle accepted the challenge, and the game was back on. And so they spent the waning hours of the afternoon chatting, swearing, and laughing amicably as they played. Once it was dinnertime, Sachi left to prepare their meals, and before Kyle had even realized it, she was back, carrying two steaming plates piled high with food. Turkey, green beans, mashed potatoes and gravy completely filled each plate, and Kyle licked his

lips as he dove into the delicious-smelling meal.

Man, I really shouldn't doubt Sachi anymore, he thought, I can definitely see why they keep her around. He looked over at Amy, who was daintily but wholeheartedly devouring everything on her plate. Noticing his gaze, she smiled and licked her lips, morsels of real food disappearing into an animated mouth. "Not bad, huh?" she said. "I also forgot to mention that you'll eat like a king while you're here, too."

But Kyle wasn't worried about that. *A cyborg, he thought back to the queasy revelation from earlier, with human organs. That means she eats, drinks, and... presumably pisses and shits, too.* Immediately, he did his best to banish these thoughts from his mind.

"That's good," he finally said, trying not to picture Amy straining on a toilet. *God dammit I'm fucking eating, he angrily castigated himself, why does your mind always literally go straight to the gutter?!*

After their plates were empty, Kyle was quite full, and so refused Sachi's dessert inquiry, as did Amy. Having finally grown bored with *Excitebike*, Kyle suggested *Life Force*, another of his early favorites. By the time the two of them had beaten the last boss, Kyle was yawning, and could feel his eyelids growing heavy.

"I'm getting tired myself," Amy yawned as well, "why don't we pack things up for the night? I'll help you put everything away." Kyle nodded, and after everything was snugly back in the cabinet, he turned to Amy, and suddenly hugged her.

"I had a lot of fun today. Thank you," he said. Looking up at the taller woman, he could see her smiling down at him, not with a lusty gaze, but... with tenderness. She closed her eyes, and her mouth moved towards his, her lips parting ever so slightly. Kyle did likewise, and as their lips touched, then locked around each other, he felt an electric thrill shoot through his mouth, and it was as though his chest was filling with static. Their tongues met, sliding along and exploring each other, before curling passionately.

"I've wanted to do that for so long," she said as their lips finally pulled apart.

"Ever since Jeremy made you, you mean?" Kyle said.

"Well of course. What did you think I meant?" Amy said, cocking her head. He shrugged in response, and yawned once more, scrambling to put his hand over his mouth.

"Looks like you're tired, sweetie. Let's continue this tomorrow, what do you say?"

"I wanted to wait for Jeremy," he said. "He's still coming back today, right?"

"Yes, he's on his way now, but won't be home for a few hours. Why don't you get some sleep, and I'll make sure to come and wake you up when he gets in."

"Yeah... that sounds good," Kyle said groggily. Amy kissed him goodnight, this time a peck on the lips, and she headed off in the direction of the lab. Before Kyle made his way to his bedroom, he watched as Amy slipped through the metal hatch, which closed with a muffled *thunk*.

Kyle remembered the grand tour she'd given him earlier in the day. *Amy didn't say any of the rooms were hers, he suddenly realized. Does she live in the lab? She said she sleeps in the buff... how does that work? Is there a bed in there? An Amy-sized charging station, perhaps?*

After jumping in the shower, he came to the conclusion that perhaps he didn't need to know the answer for every little question that popped into his head. *This really is a NEET paradise, Kyle thought, why in the hell would I want to burst that bubble?*

After drying off and readying himself for bed, he found the drawers of his dresser had been filled with packages of socks and boxer briefs. A cursory exploration revealed that an assortment of shorts, jeans and slacks were also present, all in his size, and all in the non-descript, earthy colors that he favored. The closet light flicked on as he checked its contents, and an entire panoply of t-shirts, sweaters, and even a few jackets, all on hangars, greeted his impressed gaze. Looking down, he counted six pairs of shoes, ranging from sneakers to hiking boots to dress shoes, all laid out neatly in a row. Everything in here was something he'd actually wear.

Not bad, not bad, he thought. If it was the AI that ordered all these, then it most definitely beats out Alexa! He jumped into bed, snuggling into its warm, pillowy embrace, then killed the lights with a quick verbal command. *Yeah... I can definitely get used to this... paradise... so nice...*

Some time later, Kyle got up, only to find he wasn't in his bedroom, but someplace thick with noise and haze. Looking around, he saw that he wasn't the only one. No, actually, the place was packed with men, nearly all of them wearing long coats, trousers and fedoras. It seemed to be some kind of club from a bygone era, likely the 1940's. The place was thick with cigar smoke, and the men were laughing and cheering at the display on stage. Kyle turned, hearing the melodic keys of a piano being played... no wait, two pianos.

Pushing forward through the crowd, Kyle arrived at the edge of the stage, and his eyes popped: There on the stage, in all their glory, were Daffy Duck and Donald Duck, each of them playing a piano, clearly in some kind of hilarious musical duel. The two misfits kept cartoonishly sabotaging each other in comedic attempts to one up the other, and as they slammed and bashed each other with mallets, Kyle winced at the blows that would easily maim or kill a real human.

Finally, the two ducks had thoroughly beaten each other, as well as their pianos, and the contest was called a draw. The curtains fell and they were hauled off, Daffy hooting the entire time.

But seconds later, a spotlight fell on the curtain, and all was quiet. The men around Kyle giggled excitedly and jostled each other, clearly anticipating the next act. Kyle looked back to the curtain, which finally opened with a dramatic flourish, revealing a gorgeous, ridiculously voluptuous cartoon beauty in a shimmering red dress. Though he wasn't quite sure how how, Kyle thought she looked very familiar. She winked at the crowd, and the men howled and cheered, some throwing their hats in the air.

At last she approached the microphone stand, an old-timey design gleaming with chrome, and with a flourish began singing. Her beautiful melody enraptured the crowd, who had respectfully fallen silent, and Kyle noticed that despite being a cartoon, she could touch and hold the microphone, a true-to-life object, just as the ducks had done with their pianos.

I know I've seen her before, Kyle thought, but he just couldn't remember where. The glamorous beauty continued her breathless performance, then finally made her way into the crowd, continuing to sing as the enthralled men she approached could do nothing but smile stupidly.

Finally, she seemed to spot Kyle, and gracefully swayed over to him, stopping only inches away. Thanks to those long, shapely legs of hers, the woman was a head taller than Kyle, but she smiled down at him regardless, her gloved hands moving to her thighs. She sensuously caressed her own body, her fingers sliding erotically across her shapely legs, stomach, and then chest. At last, her fingers wrapped around the top of her dress, as if she were about to pull it down and set her tits free. As it turned out, that's exactly what she did.

No, not quite, a stupefied Kyle realized, *she pulled it all down; she's completely naked!* But... something was wrong. Where's her tits? He leaned in toward her chest, but there were no breasts, or even skin. With growing horror Kyle realized he was staring directly at a rib cage, one barely containing the pulsing organs within. A silent scream escaped Kyle's lips as he watched, transfixed, as her rib cage opened up, like two halves of a wrought-iron gate, and it even made a creaking sound. And what Kyle saw next made him turn white:

The woman's heart, beating and thumping; two lungs, expanding and contracting. An esophagus, leading to a stomach that churned and gurgled, which itself led to coils of pulsing, twitching intestines, that seemed to get closer and closer to Kyle. Her liver spasmed, while the pancreas quivered, and suddenly contracted. Her guts continued their own macabre dance, wriggling faster and faster, until Kyle realized that she was no longer singing; the woman was *screaming*.

He abruptly looked up. The woman had at once gone silent, but instead of her face, Kyle was now staring directly into Amy's.

"What's wrong, Kyle?" She said with a devilish grin, her eyes filled with madness, "*don't you want me?!*"

Kyle shot up in his bed, gasping for air. The hand he wiped his forehead with came back thick with dripping sweat, and he involuntarily trembled. *Holy fuck, what a fucking nightmare*, he thought, the gruesome dream still fresh in his mind. Doing his best to banish the disturbing sequence from his memory, Kyle suddenly realized how parched he was, and made his way to the bathroom, turning on the tap and drinking directly from the sink.

His thirst quenched, Kyle appraised himself in the mirror. *It was just a dream*, he told himself, *just a dream. Nothing more*. He put the toilet seat up, and began pissing. As he idly watched his urine stream, it occurred to him that really, such things shouldn't bother him at all. *I mean, look at me*, he reasoned, *I pretty much have all the same organs, just like everyone else. The fact that Amy has them too just means that she's, well...*

...she's human. Isn't that right? Wasn't that the goal all along? Anime come to life? The girls eat, drink and go to the bathroom within the fictional world of their respective shows... to make anime real, truly real, all of this must be respected.

After flushing and washing his hands, Kyle searched around for a clock of some kind, as all he could tell was that it was still dark out. Almost reluctantly, he cleared his throat.

“Ahem. Um... can you give me the current time?” He said aloud, not sure which direction the hidden microphone pickup was located.

Again, Mia’s voice answered. “It is currently 4:48 AM, Pacific Time.” A sense of unease tickled Kyle’s spine as he recalled Amy’s promise to wake him up once Jeremy returned.

Don’t tell me she forgot, he thought with a flash of irritation. Now wide-awake, he threw on some of his new clothes, remembering at the last second to pull the tags off, and headed for the kitchen. The entire house was dark, still, and silent, the only sources of illumination being the lights that flickered on as Kyle moved through the house, then switched off just as he was out of range. It kind of made Kyle feel powerful in a way, like the house itself was his servant, doing everything in its power to please him. *Wait, didn’t Amy say something almost exactly along those lines?*

Once he’d made it to the kitchen, its lights obediently turned on, but thankfully not too bright. Kyle started as he noticed something sitting on the long kitchen table. Hurrying over, his heart leapt as he found a single sheet of paper, and on it, a handwritten note in black ink. Kyle immediately snatched it up, and began reading.

‘Yo Kyle!!!’ Was written across the top in large letters, followed by, *‘Hey man, Amy tells me you’re really digging the place. I’m glad to hear it, and I’m sorry about what happened to your apartment. But Amy was telling the truth, I really want you to stay here with us, and be a part of our family. This is a big house, and it’s really empty, since I can’t just invite regular people here. Aside from myself, you and Rick are the only ones that have ever even been inside, and I don’t think he knows what the girls really are. In other words, just having you live here makes the place a little livelier, even if all you do is lay around in your underwear playing games all day.’*

Kyle smiled when he read that. *Fucking Jeremy*, he thought, shaking his head.

‘Anyway, the truth is I’ve been very busy trying to find some high-grade rare-earth materials that you can only get from China, so I’ve been meeting with suppliers but nobody had what I needed... until I got a call from one of my contacts over in Hong Kong. This is a do-or-die offer, so by the time you read this, I’ll already be on the plane and in the air over the Pacific Ocean. I feel terrible for running out on you again, so I have a present: A brand-new phone, a Samsung, top-of-the-line. Go ahead, it’s yours. Make sure you set it up too, because I’ll be calling you once the plane lands. Until then,’

And finally, at the bottom: *‘Your favorite cousin, Jeremy.’* Kyle slid into one of the kitchen chairs, still clutching the note. He read it again, then once more for good measure. By the time he finally set the note down, Kyle was beaming. *I knew it. I knew he wouldn’t just flake out on me for no reason!*

Suddenly in high spirits, Kyle asked for Sachi, requesting a cup of coffee and biscuits ‘n gravy for breakfast. Within moments, a trundling Sachi whirred into the kitchen, where she promptly began whipping up Kyle’s order.

So that makes sense, Kyle thought. To make such incredible things, he probably needs all kinds of crazy hard-to-find shit. It almost made too much sense. And who the fuck is Rick? Is he that associate? He'd have to ask Amy or Mia, whomever he saw first.

While waiting for Sachi to finish his breakfast, Kyle busily unboxed his phone, which had been sitting in its package next to the note. The instructions were simple enough to follow, and within moments his phone was activated and he was busy rearranging the menu to his liking. He touched the contacts list, and...

“Aw, FUCK!” He said aloud, setting the phone on the table and putting his face in both hands.

“Do you need assistance?” Sachi asked, her head swiveling around in an unnatural way.

“Well, only if you can give me the phone numbers of my Sister, my Aunt, and my best friend. And... I guess my grandma, but...” she was senile, and probably not long for this world. He felt bad, but he'd only ever met her twice, both times as a child.

He turned to Sachi, whose head still regarded him with its unsettling anime-eye gaze and creepy smile. “I never bothered to remember their numbers. I guess I just figured once it was in my phone, that was good enough.” *But, I mean doesn't pretty much everyone do that nowadays?*

“I apologize, but I cannot access the requested information.” Sachi's head slowly turned back around. “I suggest using the Residential AI or the internet.”

“Makes sense...” he said, not at all surprised or disappointed that Sachi couldn't help him. Sachi was probably kept from accessing the internet, as he knew at least his Aunt's number was publicly available. Sachi was probably restricted to her own special database, and if she were to need internet access, it would be facilitated by the Residential AI under its strict supervision.

Man, AI is pretty fascinating. As soon as Jeremy calls I'm going to talk his fucking ear off! Kyle looked down at his new phone with growing excitement, especially because contact with Jeremy was finally guaranteed. The very last time Jeremy called, years and years ago, Kyle had been playing some game that he now couldn't even recall, and with his headphones on didn't hear the phone's ringtone. When he saw the missed call, and listened to Jeremy's sorrowful message, he'd kicked himself for a week straight.

Kyle played around with his phone for a little while longer, and was about to access the internet when he abruptly slapped his forehead. *What am I doing that for? I have a laptop too!* He ran outside, there being enough light from the kitchen for him to navigate around the furniture, and scooped up the laptop that Amy had brought him. It had sat where she set it all night.

“Cold! Coldcoldcold!” Kyle ran back in, the door closing behind him. “Ah... warm...” Now back at the kitchen table, he fired up the laptop, then groaned as it went through first-time setup.

Sachi's breakfast was finished by then, and it was good, really good, the biscuits 'n gravy easily being as scrumptious as anything from a restaurant. Kyle ended up getting the creamer for the coffee himself, as Sachi had already just left. By the time he was back at the table, Amy had staggered into the kitchen, blearily rubbing her eyes. She was wearing a lime-green robe that was tied around her waist, but otherwise hung loose, giving Kyle a generous eyeful of side boob. *Twitch... no, no, too early for*

that...

Amy smiled sleepily at him as she noticed his presence. Making his way over, Kyle embraced her, his hands feeling her voluptuous body beneath the soft fabric of the robe. Amy pecked his lips with a kiss, and announced her need for coffee. As she moved to pour herself a cup from the batch Sachi had just made, Kyle took a seat at the table, the same one he'd taken the day before, and looked again at the note.

“Have you seen this yet?” Kyle asked, holding the note up. Amy turned to look just as the paper curled down limply over his hand. “It’s a note from Jeremy! He said he was in a hurry last night, so I’m guessing that’s why you didn’t wake me up?”

She nodded. “That’s the exact reason. There just wasn’t any time. He came running in just before midnight, grabbed some paperwork, wrote you that note, and then left just as fast. By the time I would’ve gotten you up, he’d be halfway to the airport.”

Kyle shrugged. It made sense. Plus, now he had a phone, so at least there was some method of communication.

“And to answer your other question, I did see him writing that note, but I haven’t read it. What does it say?” She sipped her coffee.

Kyle read the note out loud. Amy smiled and touched his arm as she walked past, taking a seat across from Kyle, and listened intently as he read every word his cousin had written.

“...your favorite cousin, Jeremy. That’s it.” Kyle said, setting the note down. He was gonna have to save it somewhere.

“Well, good. I’m glad that’s straightened out. It takes around fifteen hours to fly to Hong Kong, so you should be hearing from him...” she thought for a second, “no later than four PM, I’d say.”

“Right on,” Kyle replied, making a mental note to keep the phone with him at all times, with volume maxed. “The only other thing... who’s this ‘Rick?’”

“He’s our gopher. We hired him years ago, and basically he picks up groceries and other supplies, grabs our mail, delivers packages, things like that... he was here yesterday, actually, dropping off your new clothes.”

“Really... was he the so-called Amazon driver that delivered Mia?”

“That’s right,” Amy said, taking another sip. “Occasionally we have odd jobs for him like that, which we always pay well for.”

A sudden fanfare from across the table caught their attention. It seemed Kyle’s laptop had finished its setup, now ready for use. Kyle brought it over to his seat, and began playing with it while Amy glanced at her tablet, the same one she’d shown him the day before.

Hmm... looks like it still needs some updates. But first... Kyle downloaded his preferred browser, and began googling his favorite websites, rebuilding his bookmark collection for easy access later.

What's this... looks like the next Fallout game is gonna come out soon... Ew, it's got multiplayer, Bethesda why?! Not that multiplayer was bad per se, but some game franchises were simply meant for single player, in his opinion. Next, he checked the latest anime news... and glanced up at the literal anime woman sitting across from him.

Those otakus would shit their pants, like literally sit there while loading their drawers, if they saw what I'm looking at right now, he thought with a braggadocios grin. His anime lover was still sipping her coffee, thumbing various commands into her tablet while holding it one-handed.

Next... hmm... should I do it? He thought, I haven't been there in forever, not since... Don't think about it Don't think about Don't think about it!

Kyle shook his head. No, that was in the past. He was now living a new life, here with his cousin, a quirky robot and two anime girls. Things were different now. Better. He could handle it.

Girding himself, Kyle typed in the url he knew by heart, taking him directly to the /Pol/ subforum of 4chan.com. A rare gem of anonymity, it was a magical place where nothing was sacred, and all could freely post political content with the risk of censorship or exposure. It was here that he first learned of the threat posed by the Elites and their allies, and it was here that some of Donald Trump's fiercest supporters gathered to make their voices heard.

At least, that's how it used to be. And... it was still there, looking the same as it always did. He clicked on the catalog...

Kyle immediately regretted it. Taunting posts were splashed across the page, memes featuring a sassy, rotund black woman hanging whites, or drawn as a saint with white people bowing reverently. One depicted her raping a corpse using a strap-on, the face on the body looking like...

God dammit, Trump... Kyle thought, teeth clenched. He'd never been the biggest Donald Trump fan, but during the 2016 election, he'd gotten caught up in the hype like everyone else. He'd laughed during the speeches and debates, facepalmed mightily during Trump's most embarrassing moments, and finally, on the night of the election, drank himself into a delightful stupor once the results came in, and Hillary Clinton had conceded.

Despite his nominal support of Trump, Kyle had never considered himself a Republican, or even really conservative. Instead, he liked to consider himself 'red-pilled,' which, at least to him, meant 'aware.' Aware of the vile taint infecting the highest rungs of society, aware of the grander schemes of the rich and powerful, and aware... that something very, very wrong was spreading throughout Western Civilization like a cancer. But what was it? Depending on the day, it could be Radical Feminism, or Communism, or Pedophiles, or even the Happy Merchants themselves, rubbing their hands like a fly about to dine on an especially juicy turd. Perhaps it was all of the above? Everyone seemed to have their own take on what the 'Great Enemy' was, with memes, screenshots, infographs and insults serving as their primary arguments.

But there definitely was something wrong with Western Civilization, that much was clear, and the great hope was that Donald Trump, being a political outsider, would somehow right these wrongs. Trump himself seemed to have some awareness regarding the wrong direction the United States was

taking, signified by his catchphrase, 'Drain the Swamp.' It was hoped that after he'd taken office, Trump would clean up the staggering corruption that lay so deeply entrenched within the Washington power structure, hopefully setting the stage for like-minded movements to sweep similar sicknesses from Europe and elsewhere in the world.

At first, things progressed, albeit slowly, with the mostly-liberal media screeching and howling over Trump's every word, while sham investigations and dubious accusations threatened to derail his Presidency, as well as ruin those closest to him. But true to his nickname, 'Teflon Don,' Trump seemed to emerge unscathed from each trial, with only his opponents worse for wear.

As for the so-called 'deep-state' (a nebulous collection of unelected bureaucrats, Anti-Trump politicians, rogue Intelligence Agents, Globalists and other powerful individuals), which facilitated and maintained the corruption in the United States entirely for their own benefit, it was believed that Trump would root them out, exposing not only their treachery, but a litany of sick and horrific crimes these individuals either participated in or had a hand in covering up. Kyle saw numerous allegations of everything from blatant corruption and fraud to violently abusive pedophilia and even worse things, and many people on both sides of the aisle were implicated. There was plenty of evidence out there condemning some of these individuals, and a slew of circumstantial evidence existed that implicated the rest.

At first Kyle didn't want to believe that such people existed, but as the evidence piled up, and the people investigating these individuals disappeared or got spooked into silence, eventually he came to accept that there existed an untouchable class of ultra-elites who were essentially above the law... and these people delighted in using their power and privilege to indulge in the most unthinkable of hedonistic pleasures.

And the very worst of these individuals, extremely powerful people who were at least allies of the deep state, if not part of it directly, were, if the politically incorrect imageboard was to be believed, pursuing the goal of world domination. Kyle again scoffed at this, at least at first. After all, these were nothing more than Illuminati and Lizard People-tier conspiracy theories, right? Over time, Kyle realized, with a soul-shriveling chill, that there might just be some substance to these dark conspiracies.

Kyle fervently hoped all of these individuals would at least be investigated, and those guilty brought to justice. He closely followed various 'insiders' that posted on 4chan's /Pol/ imageboard, insiders that claimed knowledge of impending mass arrests, and swift justice coming to the worst of the offenders. But none of it ever happened. The 'insiders' were either frauds or misinformed, or possibly just idiots that tipped their hand, giving the deep state and their allies time to react.

In reality, there were some investigations, but the deep state sacrificed some low-level pawns, adjusted its tactics, and things continued on as usual. Oh sure, there were the multitude of pedophile busts, the exposure of the sham Russian investigation, and other victories, but in the end, the true powerbrokers of societal ruin remained untouchable.

For awhile, Donald Trump had counted as his allies the Military-Industrial Complex, which itself had at one time been under the thumb of the Deep State. While Kyle was never a fan of the MIC, it was hoped that, with Trump's influence, the Complex would re-orient itself to the task of actually protecting America, instead of lining the pockets of the ultra-wealthy. Indeed, the MIC flourished again under Trump, and it was believed the President's personal safety was guaranteed by the power they wielded.

By the time the midterm elections rolled around in 2018, Kyle was getting nervous. Donald Trump's signature style had permanently alienated him from a large portion of Americans, and while Kyle generally rolled his eyes at the Liberals who cried 'fascist,' 'racist,' or other hyperbolic epithets at Trump, it was undeniable that an undercurrent of opposition was forming against the 45th President, though it was scattered and largely disorganized at the time. Because of that, the Liberal victories in the midterms were perhaps not as extensive as they could've been.

Still, the Republican majorities in both the House and Senate had vanished, and Trump's political future was beginning to look grim. Trump's behavior grew increasingly erratic, his tweeted statements ever more mind-boggling, but even then, rumors of major busts going down and 'the storm arriving' to sweep away the corruption swirled around the /Pol/ imageboard. Surely now, with his political back to the wall, Trump would begin taking his enemies seriously, and do whatever it took to keep these ruthless individuals from spreading their putrid rot throughout America.

Kyle continued to hope, even then, that somehow the President's policies would turn the country around, and 'Make America Great Again' for all Americans, as Trump had promised. Donald Trump tried, he really did; Kyle believed that then, and still believes it now, but... even for someone of Trump's stature, his enemies were simply too numerous, too powerful, and too well-entrenched. Even the mighty Military Industrial Complex was not omnipotent, and certainly not omniscient, as Kyle would soon learn.

One day, on a chilly mid-morning in March of 2019, Donald Trump collapsed during a routine briefing with his Joint Chiefs of Staff. He was rushed to the George Washington University Hospital, and for a time, every television was tuned to the news, every smartphone and television streaming the latest breathless update. Liberal news anchors spoke solemnly, with barely-contained glee, as they described the circumstances of the moment and offered any tidbits they could to assuage anxious viewers.

Eleven hours later, Donald J. Trump, 45th President of the United States, was pronounced dead. The official cause of death was a complication stemming from congestive heart failure. For liberals, this was a holiday; for conservatives, the very blackest of days. Politically speaking, the split between left and right furthered more in that one day than in the past decade. For Kyle, it was a painful day, a reminder that hope is for the foolish, and true justice exists only in the world of make-believe.

If Trump's victory on election night was /Pol/'s greatest triumph, then Trump's death was its lowest defeat. For three solid weeks, the imageboard was invaded by gleeful leftists, who inundated the board with the cruelest, most taunting of memes, driving away even the most hardened oldfag, as those who'd used 4chan longest were known. /Pol/ became filled with nothing but wave after wave of memes designed to inflict maximum emotional torment on anyone who ever even dared to support Trump. Gone was any kind of camaraderie or community spirit, no more were long threads discussing redpills and dissecting happenings from around the world. All that was left was pure spam, and the *moderators did nothing*.

Since 4chan's /Pol/ had been reduced to rubble, Kyle joined some of the others who had migrated to 8chan, another imageboard with better moderation which offered a /Pol/ version of their own. Upon first browsing 8chan, Kyle eagerly read about rumors that Trump was still alive, and that his 'death' was all fourth-dimensional chess meant to bring his enemies out into the open. But as time

went on these rumors were revealed to be a cruel hoax spread by impostors seeking only to inflict additional torment.

But, shortly after Trump's death, there was something substantial that caught the interest of 8chan's users. A video interview of a nurse, who'd worked at the hospital the night Trump was brought in, claiming to have seen and heard Trump, not only conscious but articulate, calling for his Chief of Staff and demanding help. The interview quickly went viral, and the very next day, the exact same woman, visibly shaken, now publicly claimed that she'd been mistaken, and that she had merely been working too hard and had forgotten to take her medication. After that, she vanished.

Her bloated corpse was fished out of the Altamaha River in Georgia three weeks later.

Though many people cried foul, and demanded answers, the remaining Republicans did what they thought best for survival, and in the current political climate, that was to turn their backs on the fallen President and all he stood for. Mike Pence, who had taken over as President, resigned three months later, a victim of a vicious allegation regarding a supposed cover-up of Trump's 'treason.' For in this toxic political climate, all previous allegations leveled at Trump, spurious or not, were dug up, polished off, and weaponized against the remaining Republicans to devastating effect, and the worst was yet to come.

Trump's many enemies were not just satisfied to see him dead; no, they wanted any and all vestiges of 'Trumpism' relegated to the same toilet bowl of history that Nazism had once been flushed down, and anyone associated with Trump treated with similar scorn. And once that had been accomplished, the Republican Party itself was now circling the same drain, as guilt by association was a powerful weapon most rank-and-file Republicans had little way to counter, especially since they had nearly all worked with, supported, or otherwise promoted Trump at some point during his presidency.

Furthermore, as these lesser Republicans lacked Trump's trademark perseverance and tenacity, they became easy prey. This would end up being a common theme throughout the 2020 election season, as beleaguered Republicans were hounded about their past dealings with Trump, and one-by-one they simply folded like a deck of soggy, urine-soaked cards.

The 2020 elections were a true political bloodbath, with the Democrats succeeding beyond their wildest dreams, while Republicans lost states that hadn't gone blue since the days of segregation. The Grand Old Party was essentially now only one of those things, as overnight the party had lost nearly all political capital, effectively ceasing to exist as political entity of any consequence.

Kyle hadn't watched the election night in 2020, as it had been a foregone conclusion who would win. Oprah Winfrey, whom many had once derided as a joke and dismissed out of hand, enjoyed a landslide victory the likes of which hadn't been seen since the days of Reagan. There was some irony to this, as Trump himself was once similarly dismissed out of hand, and of course he went on to trounce all opposition leading up to the Presidency. Oprah was treated similarly, at first, but shortly after announcing her candidacy she became a media darling, and her supporters were every bit as fanatical as Trump's had once been.

Even the Donald himself would have struggled mightily against Oprah, who came with many of Trump's perks but few of his drawbacks. As it was, her campaign grew into a juggernaut that crushed all opposition during the Democratic Primaries of 2020, and obliterated the lackluster nobody that Republicans ran to oppose her.

During the 2020 Presidential campaign, 8chan had become something of a headquarters for the online right-wing resistance, and the 'meme wars' began anew once more. This time, however, the left was ready. The liberal left, their endless donors, media allies and foreign backers, along with throngs of young would-be revolutionaries and social activists, were tireless in their quest to swing America as hard-left as possible. Because of this, Kyle was disappointed to find that the second so-called 'meme war' had become very one-sided indeed. Trump's death, and the lack of any real justice toward the vile powerbrokers that still ran things behind the scenes, had taken the fight out of most veterans of the first 'meme war,' and the left ran roughshod over all online opposition.

To make matters worse, shortly after Oprah's victory 8chan permanently went offline, for reasons Kyle never learned. He'd heard rumors of another 'chan out there, a hidden chan, one free from shills, leftist agitators and nosy federal agents. Kyle never did find it, thought admittedly he didn't search as hard as he could've. And so he, and many others, reluctantly migrated back to 4chan, but 4chan's /Pol/ was never the same since Trump's death, even after the vitriol died down to normal levels, and after the conclusion of the 2020 election the liberal left once again dominated the imageboard.

Kyle was fed up by this point, and so left 4chan, and hadn't been back since. The 35-year old NEET instead turned to his games and anime, spending his days focusing on something that might distract from the growing radical leftism sweeping not only North America, but Europe and Australia too.

And so it was that at the dawn of the second decade of the twenty-first century, the political pendulum had again swung, this time far, far to the left. Social Justice Warriors, those that opposed racism, sexism and bigotry with racism, sexism and bigotry, using convoluted justifications and cult-like reasoning for why it was 'okay when they did it,' began exploding in power, popularity, and influence. Censorship, threats of public exposure, and even physical violence were deployed against the enemies of social justice, which included those that at one point would have been their allies. Kyle himself was one, but the Overton Window had shifted so far to the left that Kyle himself, once a 90's liberal, was now considered a Hitler-worshipping fascist, at least by the standards of the new, ever-more radicalized left.

On January 20th, 2021, only a few days before Mia's box would cross his doorstep, Kyle reluctantly watched Oprah's inauguration as the 48th President. The newscasters were cheerful and excited, and the cameras were repeatedly swept over a packed crowd stretching for miles. Her inauguration speech had been a rather standard, hopeful affair, preaching true equality and respect for all Americans, and promising economic prosperity for the entire country. Kyle found himself wishing it were true. *If any one of these fucking politicians ever actually meant what they said*, Kyle recalled, fuming, *Trump would've never even needed to run in the first place!*

After that Kyle again returned to his lonely hobbies, reasoning that, no matter how bad things got, as long as he laid low and minded his own business, he could at least live out a semblance of a life in peace, and then one day depart this wretched world before things got too bad.

After all, what else was he supposed to do?

As Kyle sat there, regretting his decision to revisit 4chan, which once again had completely fallen into the clutches of online radical leftism, a post in the catalog, halfway down the page, caught his eye.

It was a photograph of bloody, hanging bodies, five of them, all white, all male. They were strung up from a freeway overpass outside of Chicago, and all had crossed-out swastikas crudely spray-painted on their chests. The text simply read, *'We're coming for you racists.'* The comments were a shitshow, so Kyle checked the link for the article the picture originated from.

Sure enough, the article, posted on HuffPost, gleefully described how a group of five so-called racists had been driven from their homes, then beaten to death and strung up in full view of the public. The only action the police had taken was to remove the bodies and make vague promises to 'launch an investigation,' but the article made it clear the perpetrators were heroes, and all actions were to be taken to support and protect the brave young freedom fighters who murdered the vicious racists who most assuredly deserved their grisly fate. After all, the article implied at the end, surely if the victims were allowed to run free, it would lead to Nazi Germany all over again. *Because obviously.*

Kyle recalled the many articles he'd read over the years condemning all white people as racist, articles which usually ran days apart from other articles claiming all racists deserve prison, forced mental treatment or re-education... or worse. The connection was not hard to make.

Kyle scowled and closed the browser. Amy glanced up, her eyebrows furrowed.

"What's wrong, sweetie?" She said, putting her tablet down.

"Eh... this article," Kyle said. He didn't feel like going into detail.

"What article? Let me see it." Reluctantly, Kyle opened the browser back up, and selected the article from his browser history. He then turned the laptop around and slid it over to Amy. She perused the article intently, her expression hardly changing as she read. Finally, she closed the laptop and handed the computer back.

"You don't have anything to worry about," she said. "Remember what I told you, you're safe here."

"Yeah I get that, but this is fucking bullshit. I mean this is the sort of stuff you see in Mexico, not here." According to the article, the only crime the authors could identify was that the men had been accused of being racist. No specific acts were listed, no victims named. They were just young, white, male, and someone had decided they were racist. Kyle explained that to Amy, but she dismissed his concerns with a casual wave of her hand.

"Look, Kyle, the world is a fucked-up place. I get that. In fact, I get it all too well." She said. "That's one of the reasons this house has been set up. It's a sanctuary."

"So... great. When do we start taking refugees?" He said it as a dry joke, but, for the first time, Kyle considered something. "You know, with all this incredible tech at our disposal... we might be able to do something."

“Oh no, no, no.... do not, even for a second, think that we’re risking everything your cousin built here over five nobodies from Chicago.” Her tone had taken on an icy edge.

“Well obviously it’s too late for them, but...” Kyle tried to think of some way to reason with her, “there’s going to be more victims one day. It doesn’t matter how politically correct people are, things keep moving left so fast that something that’s perfectly fine to say one day could get you killed the next.”

Amy rolled her eyes. “You’re exaggerating.”

“Only a little though, that’s the fucked up thing,” he retorted.

“Kyle, listen to me, and listen well,” Amy said, standing up. She straightened her robe, and looked straight at him, her catlike eyes taking on a more hawkish gleam. “The world is going to shit. I know this. I read the same things you do-”

“You go to 4chan?” Kyle asked.

“Eww, no.” She wrinkled her nose, “But I still see it. The societal rot, the decay that slowly dissolves the foundations of America. I see it. But there’s no stopping it Kyle, it’s inevitable at this point.”

“If you did go to 4chan, they’d call that being 'black-pilled.'”

“If being 'black-pilled' means acknowledging that there’s literally nothing any of us can do to stop what’s coming, then yes, I’m 'black-pilled.’”

Kyle was becoming agitated himself. “And what’s coming, huh? Do you know that? Do you know what’s on the horizon?”

Amy shrugged. “All I know is that some kind of collapse is almost certain within the next ten to twenty years. In fact, I’d say the likelihood is almost one-hundred percent. I don’t know what form it’ll take, or how many will die, I just know that the Western World is pretty much done for. I don’t know exactly what kind of world will replace it, either, but what I can tell you is that this coming world... is not one you’re going to want to live in.”

Kyle was silent. After thinking for a moment, he finally said, “How can you say that and not want to at least... I dunno, try something?”

“Like what, Kyle? Like what? What do you want me to do?!” She was beginning to yell.

“I don’t want you to do anything. I’ll ask Jeremy.” He folded his arms and petulantly turned away. It occurred to Kyle that he didn’t actually know where his cousin fell on the political spectrum. It was unlikely that Jeremy was any kind of extremist, but felt it prudent to ask.

“Political spectrum?” She seemed a bit taken aback. “He’s not on there at all, really. Jeremy wants to build his own private paradise, just for us, and let the rest of the world rot. I happen to agree wholeheartedly with this stance.”

“So Anarcho-Capitalist, then. Awesome.” Kyle felt disgust. Amy he could understand, she wasn’t even really human. But his cousin? How could he be so callous?

“Kyle, again... it sucks, but please try to think this through, and realize how lucky you are. You have a life raft when everyone else is trying to tread water with bricks around their necks. You can take one or two people aboard, sure, but any more and nothing changes...” He turned back, and she looked him straight in the eye, “...except that you drown too.”

Kyle sighed and rubbed his face with his hands. “Yeah... I guess you’re right. I don’t know what we could possibly do. But I’m going to try and think of something.”

“Well, just remember that Jeremy is the decision-maker around here.” Still looking him in the eye, Amy’s tone somehow became harder and softer at the same time. “Kyle, I love you, you know this. Your cousin loves you. But if we feel you are about to jeopardize what he’s built...” she trailed off, letting the implication speak for itself, before continuing. “You won’t do that, right?”

“...No...” he finally said. “I would never do that. Family first...”

Amy seemed to brighten, just as the first color was beginning to show in the morning sky. “Good, I’m relieved to hear it. And don’t you worry, things are going to be just fine for a good long while. So why don’t you just sit back, relax, and redownload all your old games on that computer? I’ll give you the info you need to repurchase them all, and even a few new ones. How does that sound?”

“Sounds good,” he said halfheartedly, as suddenly playing computer games just seemed... so trivial.

But Amy either didn’t notice or didn’t care. “Excellent. Have a good time, sweetie. I’ll be in the lab all morning, but once I’m out...” her flirtatious tone was back. This... did not seem so trivial.

“Alright. I’ll catch you later,” Kyle said with a wave of his hand, as she disappeared down the hallway.

“Collapse, huh...” he didn’t know what to make of this. Was there really nothing that could be done, even with all the incredible technology here?

Surely there was *something* they could do...

CHAPTER FOUR

Kyle did end up redownloading and installing his games, which ended up occupying the rest of the morning and most of the afternoon. He tried to avoid any mention of politics, but this proved difficult as Liberal messages were increasingly forced into every facet of daily life, even video games. *Especially* video games.

He checked the twitter feed of an Indie game developer that Kyle had his eye on. He immediately lost all interest in the game when he noticed that the developer had changed his profile pic... to the picture of the five dead hanging bodies. 'Our studio proudly supports all efforts to eliminate fascism from this world, by any and all means necessary,' the developer had said in reference to the change. Thousands of people had 'favorited' this announcement, and hundreds of approving comments had been posted. Presumably, anyone who disagreed was declared a fascist themselves, and immediately blocked.

Apparently, this one pic was already going viral. All over twitter and other social media, white conservatives were being taunted with it, sometimes by other whites, (or at least those that appeared white at first glance). Liberal political activists paraded the picture around, along with mocking commentary intended to incense and ridicule the entire white race, and the worst of it implied every Caucasian in the world deserved a similar fate. Reddit was even worse, with anyone claiming that it was fucked up to not only celebrate the five dead men, but shove it in people's faces downvoted to oblivion or banned outright.

Jesus Christ, Kyle thought, shaking his head, *shit really is starting to get bad*. He suddenly recalled what Mia had told him, after escaping from the apartment complex. '*If only you knew how bad things really are*,' she'd said, her tone one of utmost foreboding.

Kyle closed the laptop. He simply couldn't bring himself to play anything right now. Instead, he stood up, stretched, and stepped outside, onto the back patio.

The late afternoon sun was beginning to head for the horizon, and a cool, slightly chilly breeze whipped by, causing the multitude of trees and shrubs to sway gently. The expansive cityscape stretched out in all its manmade glory, and far off into the distance, shrouded by haze, was the Pacific Ocean. Los Angeles seemed tranquil enough from his idyllic vantage point, and in the city below millions upon millions of people went about their daily lives without fear of civil strife. Once again, real life seemed to trump the fears of anonymous posters online, and even Amy's promise of a future 'collapse' seemed to ring hollow.

Actually, this might be a good time to explore a bit, he thought. Though not much of an outdoorsman, Kyle still enjoyed lush scenery and unique architecture, of which this area offered plenty. In addition, he hadn't left the property since arriving, which seemed to be a waste in a neighborhood such as this. And since it was a nice area, he likely wouldn't be hassled by cops as long as he didn't stand out too much.

Yeah, fuck it. I'm going for a walk, he thought, re-entering the house and then exiting through the tall front doors. Once he had descended the flagstone steps, Kyle stopped and gazed around, appraising the scene. Without the majestic lighting, the front yard didn't really appear all that elaborate, Kyle thought. Aside from the three fountains, decorative hedgerows and intricate modern fencing, there

wasn't much to it, and it wasn't that large. As with the backyard, thick trees and other greenery concealed the house from any curious onlookers, and of course there was the garage, but otherwise that was it.

Actually, let's go check out the garage. Kyle walked over, across the clean asphalt driveway, and opened up a small side door, as the garage bay doors were closed tight. As with the house itself, lights flicked on with a hand wave, revealing a relatively drab interior with two tarp-covered cars, a riding lawn mower, and a host of other tools and supplies that one could reliably find in any American garage. He glanced around as he explored the interior, but quickly lost interest as nothing in there appeared to be high-tech or unique in any obvious sense.

He decided to check under the first tarp, and whistled as a dark blue '84 Lamborghini Countach was revealed in all its heart-pounding retro glory. Kyle quickly dropped the tarp, feeling unworthy of even looking at it.

The other tarp merely contained a red '97 Chevy Corvette, an almost disappointing find when compared to its sleek and angular companion. *Hot damn*, Kyle thought as he covered the 'vette once more, *as soon as Jeremy gets back the first thing I'm gonna have him do is take me out for a spin in that Lambo...*

Once back outside, Kyle headed to the main gate, wondering if there was any special codes to enter or procedures to follow, or... if the gate would even open at all. *Am I even... allowed to leave?* With a growing sense of unease Kyle hurried to the gate, looking around to see if there was a button or sensor or something else he needed to utilize in order to leave the property.

Just then, a compact white van rumbled up the driveway, bouncing its way along the asphalt path leading to the house. Kyle watched as the small van approached, its brakes squealing as it stopped before the gate, which began opening automatically. The van slid through, and Kyle, standing off to the driver's side, strained to see who was actually at the wheel.

The van again screeched to a halt beside Kyle, and the window rolled down. A clean-shaven, middle aged man leaned on the window with his elbow, and looked down at Kyle.

"Hey," said Kyle.

"What's up," replied the man, "I don't think I've... seen you before..." *Wait, he has*, Kyle realized, *this is the man that must've delivered Mia!* He seemed to vaguely recognize Kyle as well.

"You must be Rick. You delivered a package to me in Arizona a few days ago." He extended his hand. "My name's Kyle."

The man looked at it dubiously, but ended up shaking anyway. "Yeah, pleasure. And I gotta say, that was strange, even for these folks. Can't say I've ever pretended to work for Amazon before. But hey, it pays the bills."

Kyle laughed. "Yeah, Jeremy gets some strange ideas sometimes, but he means well."

The man's eyebrows furrowed, his face a mask of incomprehension. "Who the fuck is Jeremy?"

“My... my cousin...” Kyle was flabbergasted, “he... lives here. He owns this place...”

Rick scratched his head, “look, I know weird shit goes on here, which doesn’t bother me, since I know how to hold my mud, but... you’re the first dude I’ve ever seen here since the previous owners sold the place. Other than myself, of course.”

Kyle suddenly felt cold. Very cold. The kind of cold that snug fires and warm clothes won’t fix.

“You’re kidding... you’re kidding right?” Kyle could feel control slipping away. *There’s no way... there has to be an explanation!*

“Uh... no man, I have never met a Jeremy that lives anywhere in Beverly Glen, much less at this address, and I’ve been doing what I do for ten years now.” The man was beginning to regard Kyle with sudden wariness, though that might be due to the fact that a thirty-five year old NEET was now staring at him with wide eyes and an unhinged expression.

“Anyway, I have deliveries to make, so if you don’t mind...” And with that Rick hurriedly rolled up his window and pulled forward, around the fountain and in front of the house. When he jumped out of the van, the first thing Rick did was look at Kyle, as if to verify he was still a safe distance away.

Kyle, for his part, had nearly lost his balance, leaning up against a nearby section of fence. He pulled out his phone, which still didn’t have anyone’s contact information, and swiped. No missed calls, no texts, no voicemails. According to the phone, it was almost 5:30 PM. Jeremy should have landed in Hong Kong hours ago.

A familiar, husky voice. Kyle jumped up and half-jogged back toward the house. A tall, elegant-looking woman with short black hair was speaking to Rick as he clambered back into the van. A normal, upper-class human woman.

“Thank you so much for returning that rental for us, Rick. It really was a big help,” the woman said, smiling. Rick simply nodded and started up the van.

It seems Amy has a disguise similar to Mia, Kyle thought as the van pulled through the gate and disappeared around the bend.

“Oh, Kyle!” Amy was genuinely shocked to see him. He watched as she reverted to ‘base form,’ her realistic-looking human skin fading into pastel animated coloring, her small human eyes disappearing only to be replaced with Amy’s angular gaze, and the tone of her skin sharpening into cell-shaded relief.

“What the fuck Amy, he fumed, “What the fucking fuck!?”

“Wow, Kyle! Calm down!” she laughed, almost nervously, almost as if she knew where this was going. “What’s got you so bent out of shape?”

“That was Rick. He doesn’t know who Jeremy is.” Kyle enunciated every word through gritted teeth. *“Why doesn’t he know who Jeremy is!?”*

Amy sighed. “Because they’ve never met.”

“But what about...” he began, before Amy cut him off.

“Until recently, Jeremy almost never left the lab. This is the reason we developed the holographic disguise, so I and... the other one could take care of business while your cousin continued his groundbreaking work.”

“Oh yeah? What about shipping Mia? She said that *Jeremy* shipped her, and that *Jeremy* gave that dude an Amazon shirt, and also that *Jeremy* paid him to deliver her to my place. What about all that?”

“You misunderstand. Jeremy merely *requested* that Mia and I handle all of those tasks on his behalf. So yes, he did ship her, and gave Rick the job and the shirt, only... indirectly.”

“That’s not what Mia said,” Kyle growled.

“Is it? Let’s go find out, right now.” Amy sharply turned and pushed open the front door, heading straight to Mia’s room. Kyle followed closely.

In response to Amy’s knocks, the door opened, just a sliver. A single anime eye could be seen peeking out.

“Mia, Kyle seems to be under the impression that Jeremy was with you just before you were shipped. Can you please tell him the truth? That Jeremy HAD you shipped, and that you were with me during this time?”

Mia’s eye swiveled first to Amy, and then to Kyle. Finally, she spoke.

“Whatever Amy says is the truth.” And with that, she closed the door.

“See?” Amy said, crossing her arms. “I told you, you’re just mis-remembering things.”

“That wasn’t convincing at all!” Kyle blurted. “You’re hiding someth-”

Just then, Kyle’s phone began ringing.

“Oh, what’s this?” Amy said, smirking. “Who could it be?”

Kyle fumbled a bit as he hurriedly fished the phone out of his pocket. It was a strange number, but that didn’t matter. Only one person could be calling him! Wasting no time, Kyle accepted the call and held it up to his ear.

“H-hello?!” Kyle said. On the other end, after a noticeable delay, was the voice he’d been wanting to reconnect with for so long.

It was Jeremy!

“Hey Kyle,” came the deep, all-too familiar voice. “Sorry about that, I got held up on the way to the hotel. Anyway, I’m all settled in, so let’s chat!”

“Yeah... right on...” Kyle said, his eyes flicking up to Amy, who appraised him with a knowing smile.

“Well, I’ll leave you two alone. I’ll be in the lab if you need me, okay sweetie?” she said, turning and sauntering her way down the hall.

Though the reception was fine inside the house, Kyle still wanted to go outside, suddenly a little uncomfortable from the thought of having his phone-bound reunion with Jeremy observed by the Residential AI. Once out in front, Kyle stopped for a second to appraise the delivery Rick had made, which consisted only of a single large cardboard box. But before he could sneak a peek, Sachi had ambled out the door, picked it up, and headed inside, presumably toward the lab.

“So tell me everything,” Kyle said, turning his attention back to the phone. “I want to know how all of this happened. I want to know how you did it, how you made anime real.”

Jeremy laughed. “Shit, Kyle, that’s a long story. First tell me how you’re doing there. How do you like the place?”

Kyle described his first few days in vibrant detail, leaving out the sex act with Amy, as well as Mia’s humiliating first night back. His cousin listened attentively, requesting a few details here and there. Jeremy then asked how things were going for Kyle before the whole apartment incident.

“Eh... same as usual. Playing games and jerking the days away,” Kyle heard Jeremy chuckle at that, “but this whole time... ever since I missed your last call, years ago... I was hoping somehow I’d hear from you. I mean, since Krista’s gone off the deep end with her social justice bullshit, you’re pretty much the only family I have left. That I really care about, anyway.”

A sigh, following a brief delay, “sorry to hear that about your sister. But everything’s going to be fine now, so you don’t have to worry about anything else. Listen to Amy, I set her up to basically take over for me whenever I’m gone.”

“I dunno, Jeremy,” Kyle said. “I really like her, don’t get me wrong, but... some of what’s going on just doesn’t seem to make much sense. Like just now, we got in an argument, so... to clear things up, were you the one that sent Mia to my place, or was it Amy?”

“I asked Amy to handle it. Look, you can trust her, Kyle,” Jeremy explained, “because I trust her. She has my full confidence, so make sure you listen to her, okay?”

“Yeah, of course, but... why did you even have Mia sent in the first place? It seems kinda... convoluted. I mean, had you just called I woulda jumped on the first flight to L.A.”

Jeremy took an extra moment to answer, as if this idea had never even occurred to him. “Well yeah, I guess I could’ve,” he said with a bit of an embarrassed laugh, “but if I’m being honest with you, Kyle... I think this worked out even better. You’ve made a clean break from your old life, and now you get to start over, living here with us.”

Kyle found himself nodding. “Yeah, maybe you’re right... but enough about all that. Tell me about the AI and anime girls already! I’m dying to know, and Amy wouldn’t say anything. She said to ask you.”

“It’s a long story, a really long story. Are you sure?” Jeremy spoke as if he really didn’t want to go over it.

“Yes, yes, definitely! Start from the beginning, tell me everything.”

So Jeremy began his tale. Apparently, the last time Jeremy had contacted his younger cousin, years ago, he’d been in a deep depression, and seriously considering suicide. It hurt Kyle to hear this, but his heart brightened somewhat once Jeremy got to the meat of the story. As Jeremy was very knowledgeable about the subject of artificial intelligence, a company trying to develop an AI of its own contracted Jeremy and a few other specialists for some troubleshooting work. This energized Jeremy, and when he arrived at the company he couldn’t believe what they’d accomplished...

“...and then what?” Kyle asked after his cousin paused.

“Hold on a sec, Kyle,” Jeremy sounded irritated. Kyle could just barely make out a pair of individuals speaking rapid-fire Chinese in the background. “Hey, man... you’re gonna hate me for this, but I gotta take a rain-check on storytime. Looks like my contact just got here.”

Kyle swore. “Call me back as soon as you’re done, okay?”

“Sure thing, little ‘cuz. This’ll probably take awhile though, so it might be sometime tomorrow, alright?”

“Yeah, sure Jeremy.” The connection ended. Kyle sighed, again looking around the pristine front yard as the wind rustled through the hedges, making them bob ever so slightly. Even though he’d just talked to his cousin for the first time in years... for some reason Kyle felt lonelier than ever.

He trudged back to the house, but just as he was about to open the front door, he could make out distinct, angry yelling. He put his ear to the door, and could hear Amy’s muffled voice swearing vociferously toward Mia. Then a door slammed, and... Amy’s footsteps stalked by as she made her way back to the lab.

What the fuck is going on...?

Kyle spent the rest of the day in the anime and manga room, watching the entirety of a short but very classic anime series titled *FLCL*, or *Fooly-Cooly*. The story was a bit convoluted and nonsensical at times, but overall he enjoyed it. Some of the more bizarre plot elements, such as a giant robot literally growing out the main character’s head, made Kyle raise his eyebrows in entertained disbelief. *No matter how real the anime girls might get*, Kyle thought, *some aspects of animation can simply never be translated into real life*. Then again, this was probably for the best.

Reflecting on such things helped Kyle take his mind off all the uncomfortable weirdness that was going on. That was, until he considered the empty corner where Sachi was normally located. *I guess she’s in the lab*, he thought. *I really need to get in there and see what’s what*.

After the show was over, Kyle decided a shower was just what he needed, but on the way to his room he found himself pausing in front of Mia’s room. It seemed that she spent all of her time in there,

and once more Kyle found himself feeling bad for her. He recalled their road trip together, and the reluctance she displayed in discussing anything having to do with Jeremy. *Shit, I need to ask him about that too*, Kyle realized.

He wasn't exactly sure why, but the next thing Kyle knew he was knocking on her door. At first, it seemed as though she wasn't going to answer, but then, just as he was turning to leave, he heard the click of a turning doorknob. Kyle spun around, and once more a single anime eye was staring out through a sliver of open doorway.

"Hey Mia. Umm... can I come in?" The door opened a little more, so that her whole face was visible. She gazed up at him impassively, again wearing an unreadable expression.

"Why?" She sounded disinterested, and somewhat distant.

"Mia... I need to talk to you. Something's going on. Please. Even if you can't tell me anything, I just...I dunno, need to get some things off my chest."

She seemed to deliberate, and finally the door swung open. She stood to the side, and Kyle walked in to... her room?!

This was not a bedroom. At least, not in the sense that any human would consider; no, it was more like a server farm. As Kyle stepped in, he looked around in amazement at racks upon racks of servers, and great coils of bundled cables crimped together, connecting everything like some kind of digital intestine. He looked around for a monitor bank or some kind of screen, but there was nothing. In fact, there was only a single piece of furniture outside of the shelves, fans and racks: a chair. Though clearly a nice, ergonomic design, Kyle could tell immediately this was a desk chair that had no desk.

It was also hot. Actually, it was almost sweltering. Kyle immediately shed his thin jacket, wrapping it up in his arms. Numerous fans created a warm breeze that swirled throughout the room, but this only provided a mild reprieve.

Mia herself simply stood, unbothered by the heat, appraising Kyle with a neutral expression. She didn't seem nearly as talkative and carefree as the day they'd met. *Did Amy do something to you?! If she did...*

"How've you been, Mia?" He finally asked. "Are... uh... things alright?"

"Depends," she finally said, turning and slowly walking towards the chair. Kyle could see that there were long, thin cords connecting one of the black boxes directly to an exposed node above her shoulder blades. One thick cable and four ethernet cables were currently plugged into her.

"Depends on what?" Kyle said, trying to maneuver so that he could better see the node on her back. It looked like her skin slid back to allow access, and one of her arms reached back behind her, bending at an angle no human could manage, unplugged one of the ethernet cables, and inserted another.

"On you, obviously." She turned back.

"What are you doing? What is all this? Are you the Residential AI?"

“No,” she said. “Not anymore.”

“But it uses your voice,” Kyle said. “I just heard it this morning.” *That was before Amy yelled at her, though. Did Mia just get demoted?!*

“It’s not me,” Mia said. “It’s another me.”

“Another... you... wait, there’s more of you!?” *Why was he only finding out about this now?*

“There’s seven of me,” she said, “well, actually six. One just broke. Again.”

“And... is this... a good thing? Like, should there be that many of you?”

She shrugged. “In the end it won’t matter. It won’t matter how many there are. They always break.”

“What... about you? You’re not going to break, are you?”

“No,” she finally said. “Not like that.”

Well, that’s good, Kyle thought. But things just keep getting weirder.

“So, uh... what is all this? It looks like a mini server farm.”

“That’s because it is a mini server farm,” she said before adding, in almost a whisper, “dummy.” For the first time, a tiny smile.

“Wait, do you run a website out of...” he considered the cables growing out of her back, “your body?”

“That’s right.” She looked up. “It’s my hobby.”

“Right on, everyone needs a hobby...” he trailed off with a dumb smile, before considering a few things. *I need to quit beating around the bush and ask her what I can.*

“Okay, so you can’t say much about Jeremy. Does the same apply to Amy?”

She nodded. Kyle thought about this.

“This connection between Amy and Jeremy goes deeper than inventor and creation... there’s more to this, that much is obvious. Is there anything you can tell me about it? Anything at all?”

Mia looked almost thoughtful for a moment, but in the end, all she said was, “Everything Amy says is the truth.”

“Come on, we both know that’s bullshit. Look, I know something’s up. Jeremy’s being aloof, and basically seems like he’s letting Amy run... everything...” *Hmm... it’s like she’s actually the one in charge.*

Kyle tried a different tack. “If I wanted to find out what’s really going on with Jeremy and Amy, where should I start?”

“Where else?” she said with a shrug. “The lab.”

“What can you tell me about it?” By now, Kyle was beginning to sweat. He wiped his brow and took a seat in front of Mia, sitting cross legged.

“It’s big,” she said. “Bigger than the house.”

His eyes widened. “How does that work? Like, did you guys burrow into the hill or something?”

“That’s right,” Mia said. “A secret underground base.”

“Can you help me get in?” He remembered the explanation from Amy. It seemed the Residential AI controls who gets in, and right now it appears Amy controls the Residential AI. An AI will be hard to trick or fool, unless...

Mia looked down at Kyle, but shook her head sadly.

“What about the holocollar? Can I use that to fool the camera somehow?”

Again Mia shook her head, and put a finger to her lips. *Oh fuck, everything I’m saying is being listened to, isn’t it?*

“Well,” he finally said, “I guess I’ll just have to figure it out on my own... somehow...”

“Let history repeat itself,” Mia said. “Be a part of history.”

“What? I mean... I know what it means, but... how is it relevant?” Her response was to point towards the wall... Kyle quickly realized she was pointing toward the lab.

“I don’t really get it, but... thanks.” He stood up, gazing down at the sitting anime girl.

“Mia, I have no idea what’s going on or how things are going to go, but... I promise you... one way or another I’ll make it so you can smile again.” *She really did have the brightest smile*, he recalled fondly. *It was the kind that tickles in just the right way whenever you see it.*

Mia gently reached out, and took Kyle’s hand. He watched as Mia lifted it up above her head. He quickly realized what she wanted, and softly patted her head. To his astonishment, she was smiling just like when they first met.

“Good job,” she said.

Kyle laughed. “I meant in a more permanent sense, but... this works, too.”

As soon as Kyle had left Mia's room, the sudden difference in temperature made him shiver. He was starting to get hungry, and checked again in the anime and manga room. Sachi was back, so he asked her directly to make him dinner.

"I dunno, surprise me," he replied when she requested his order. Kyle then asked the Residential AI where Amy was, and it said she was in the lab. He then asked to speak with her.

"Amy?" He said when he heard nothing but static.

"Not a good time, sweetie," she said, sounding exasperated.

"Umm... okay, well, I'm having Sachi make dinner, and was kinda hoping you'd join me."

At first he thought the line had gone dead, but after a few seconds, Kyle heard an audible sigh. "Yeah, sure... I think I could use a break." And then both her voice and the static cut to silence.

Roughly thirty minutes later, Sachi had prepared an appetizing salmon, red potato and asparagus dish, for two. Kyle was surprised at how delicious the asparagus was, so Amy gave Kyle hers, claiming to dislike it herself.

But throughout the dinner, Kyle noticed that Amy seemed... more listless than usual. He was halfway expecting her to admonish him for visiting Mia, but she simply stared into space, never bringing it up at all.

"What's wrong, Amy?" Kyle eventually asked. "Normally you're feeling a bit flirtier than this."

"We've hit a snag," she said. "One that might be... insurmountable." She seemed genuinely saddened by this.

"What's wrong? I figured the anime girl model is pretty much perfect at this point. I mean, look at you." He gestured toward her.

She blushed. "Thanks, but... that's not all we're working on."

"Oh yeah? Can you tell me about any of your other projects?" *This might be interesting. God why can't I just see what's in the lab?* He imagined a giant, sprawling complex, of the kind shared by James Bond villains and video game bosses.

"You'll have to ask Jeremy." *That again, Kyle thought. Awfully convenient, if you ask me.*

An idea flashed in his head.

"Oh yeah, I never told you about the call. It went pretty well, and Jeremy said you can show me the lab, too. So you can just give me the rundown then."

Amy looked up, and slowly put her fork down.

"Did he, now?" Her tone had frozen to pure ice.

“Yup. He said it’s A-Okay.” Kyle tried acting as naturally as he could. Amy continued staring, then seemed to come to a decision, as she began slowly nodding.

“Alright then,” she finally said. “I’ll show you tomorrow.”

“Really?” Kyle was shocked his impulsive plan actually worked.

“Yes, I’ll show it to you. You can see it as much as you want... since your cousin gave the green light,” she said, with an uncomfortable amount of emphasis added to the last part.

After dinner, Kyle suggested playing something. He was almost surprised Amy agreed, given her obvious mental fatigue. Once again, Kyle picked out the NES, and brought everything over to the anime and manga room. Amy sat on the couch, hand against her head while he set everything up, and when Kyle handed her the bin to pick out a game, she pulled out a co-op classic: *Bubble Bobble*.

Kyle winced. He’d never been that good at this one, but as the title splashed onto the big screen, he steeled his nerves, determined to not embarrass himself too much.

The little dinosaur characters descended into the first level, the familiar 8-bit music filled the room, and the game began. As the characters jumped about the screen, trapping their enemies in bubbles, Kyle could tell that Amy was distracted. To his surprise, she wasn’t doing nearly as well as the last time they’d played.

“Is the lab still bothering you?” Kyle finally asked.

“It’s not just that,” she said, large eyes focused on the game.

“Talk to me. Tell me what’s up.”

“I’m just worried, that’s all,” she said.

“About what?”

“About you.” She finally turned to Kyle, fixing him with an intense stare.

“Why... why would you be worried about me?” He laughed nervously, fidgeting a little.

“Because I love you.” The stare softened somewhat, then seemed to sadden. “And... I know we’ve only just met, but the love I have for you is so real, and so powerful...” she turned back to the screen, barely avoiding an incoming enemy.

“I... don’t know what to say.” Kyle said, “I mean, I definitely like you.”

“But you don’t love me.”

“Amy. We. Just. Met. Give it time, I mean... that’s how these things are supposed to work.”

She didn't respond, and turned her full attention back to the game. They made it a bit further than Kyle thought they would, nearly to level thirty, before the game over screen finally appeared.

"I don't really feel like playing anything else," Amy said with a sigh.

"Yeah, that's alright." Kyle didn't, either.

She got up to leave, without offering to help put away the console.

"Wait," Kyle said, as she was about to exit. She stopped and craned her neck.

"Amy, all of this is amazing. It's wonderful, and it's awesome, and I love it, I really do. But if you can't tell me the truth about certain things, then there can't be any trust. And without trust, no relationship can ever really work. That goes for everything from romance to the relationship between parents and children... all the way up to politician and voter."

She slowly approached the couch, and put her hands on the topmost part of the cushions.

"We all have our secrets, Kyle. Everyone. From lovers to parents to bosses to entire governments. How do you balance trust against that?"

Kyle wasn't naive. He knew total transparency was not only unrealistic, but also undesirable.

"I guess..." he said, after thinking about it, "with respect." He looked her in the eye. "And honesty as well. That's how trust is earned."

"You don't think I've been honest with you."

"I know you haven't, Amy. And some secrets are fine, but don't keep me in the dark on everything like this." He stood up, and moved around the couch, approaching her. "Otherwise I'll never be able to love you."

"Alright Kyle," she said, meeting his gaze. "I'll be honest with you."

"Then tell me why Mia isn't allowed to talk about you or Jeremy. What's the real connection between you two? This is something I absolutely need to know."

Amy held his gaze, but little by little, her face tightened up, and her eyes began to moisten. "Jeremy is... well, he's dying, Kyle."

"WHAT?!" Kyle was floored. This was not what he expected to hear. Actually, he wasn't sure what to expect, but it wasn't this. "No way. No fucking way..."

But the sadness in Amy's big, angular eyes was... surprisingly sincere. Anime eyes have a near-infinite expressive range, allowing for a lot of subtlety, and it translated perfectly well to the real world, Kyle found.

"Alright..." he finally said. "What is he... dying from?" The words were painful to say.

“Some kind of terminal degenerative condition. The tissue in his chest and torso is slowly dying, as if... he’s rotting away from the inside.” Kyle winced as she described the illness.

“So why keep this a secret? And why the fuck is he halfway around the world if he’s dying?”

“He doesn’t want you to be sad, or panic. And he’s halfway around the world because there’s not much time left. That’s why he’s been in such a hurry lately.”

“Yeah, but isn’t he sick?! And when was I supposed to learn about this? After it was too late?!”

“He can still get around just fine with medication... for now,” she said. “And as far as when he was going to tell you... I don’t know. What I can tell you is that Jeremy has made it his life’s mission to make you happy. You’re the only person that he ever really cared about, you know.”

Kyle knew that his Uncle, Jeremy’s father, was an abusive asshole, and Jeremy’s mom died from colon cancer due to severe alcoholism over a decade ago. Jeremy was charismatic and outgoing, so he’d made some friends growing up, but like Kyle never really hit it off with the girls. In the end though, Kyle was the only best friend Jeremy ever had, something Jeremy would tell him regularly.

“I can’t believe he’s dying...” Kyle felt weak. “He sounded so healthy on the phone earlier, and that note he wrote me... there was just no indication.”

Amy approached Kyle, embracing him. He didn’t resist. Actually, right now it felt nice. They continued hugging for nearly a full minute.

“Always remember Kyle, I’m here for you. I’ll always be here for you.” She took his face in her hands, and kissed him. Then kissed him again. Kyle wrapped his hands around hers. Despite the shocking revelation, he could feel himself flushing.

“Jeremy wants to leave all of this to you, and he made me to fulfill two roles for you... a lover, and...” her first tears began to fall, and her voice quavered, “...a best friend.”

He hugged her again, feeling his own face beginning to tighten up. “Thanks, Amy. I... I hope I’m worthy of it.”

She kissed him one more time, holding her lips to his for a second longer than earlier. “You are.”

The door to Kyle’s room opened, and he walked in, plopping face-first onto the bed. Amy followed, sidling up next to him and propping her head up with an elbow.

“It’s supposed to get pretty cold tonight,” she said.

His eyes flicked to hers. “I... could use the company actually. You don’t mind, right? Like, don’t you normally sleep in the lab?”

“Yeah, but I don’t need to. Not every night, anyway.”

“Alright then,” he said. “I’m not really feeling any hanky-panky, though.” Jeremy dying... the very thought was a knife to the gut.

“Agreed,” she said. “I’m pretty tired anyway.”

But as Amy undressed, Kyle had a hard time keeping his member down. When she pulled her top off, the pair of anime tits that leaped out were so big and perky that any hentai producer would kill just for a sketch. *Twitch, twitch*. Kyle tried looking away, but it was too late.

What's more, every movement she made caused her massive tits to either jiggle ever so slightly, or bounce mightily. Her nipples and surrounding areola were large, but not freakishly so, and as with earlier, Kyle noticed the cell shading somehow gave them a level of detail real breasts lacked.

Kyle quickly clambered into bed, finishing his undressing under the covers. Amy chuckled at this, as she quickly figured out the reason from the telltale bulge underneath the blanket, a bulge which only grew as her skirt dropped. A very much nude Amy clambered into bed, and Kyle requested lights off. As the room was engulfed in darkness, Kyle turned to the fading afterimage of Amy’s head.

But before he could do anything else, she had moved closer, and Kyle turned to accept her. They embraced in bed, and Kyle clung tight to her warm, smooth body. Her pillowy breasts smooshed a bit as he held her close, her nipples feeling like buttons against his chest. She wrapping one meaty leg around his, and Kyle could feel her soft breath as his face sought her lips. She pressed into him as they kissed, and all feelings of restraint went out the window as their tongues swirled and danced.

They remained like that for some time, simply kissing again and again, sometimes pecks, sometimes smooches, and sometimes great, sopping soul-kisses that saw their open mouths pressed against each other as hard as was possible. Each one was positively electric for Kyle, and he couldn’t get enough. Their bodies continuously massaged against each other as the kisses continued, and Kyle’s hand eventually made its way down between her legs, which spread obediently as he neared. It was even warmer down by her crotch, he immediately noticed. His fingers slid effortlessly between her meaty outer labia, as the slick, yet slimy lubrication was already thick between her lips. She moaned as his fingers slipped inside of her, and by then his face had moved down to her breasts, where fully erect nipples awaited his eager lips.

He continuously rammed his fingers in and out while licking, slurping, and suckling on Amy’s breasts, doing his best to alternate between the two. Eventually Amy’s hand gently tugged at the hand delivering its masturbatory delight, and he stopped. With a great rustling of sheets, Amy began shifting her body and clambered on top. Kyle lay flat on his back, feeling the soft but very solid weight of her body on top of his. Amy's breasts hung straight down as she leaned forward to kiss him, and Kyle felt her tits slide forward, their soft weight dragging along his chest as her mouth headed straight for his.

“Kyle...” she purred, “you know you’re my first, right?” A sudden thrill shot up Kyle’s spine. *That’s right... who else is she going to fuck? Rick?*

She reached down, gingerly grabbing Kyle’s throbbing cock and positioning it directly beneath her entrance. And then... she lowered herself, swallowing its entire length in one smooth motion. Kyle gasped from the hot, soft slickness that snugly enveloped his shaft.

Holy shit that feels good, he thought. Amy's snatch was very tight, but... there wasn't a telltale twinge of pain or bursting signifying the loss of hymen. Kyle couldn't dwell on it for too long, however, as Amy began riding Kyle, gyrating her ass in a twerking-like motion, his cock sliding out most of its length before slamming back in, again and again.

"Ah, ah, ah... Kyle..." Amy moaned, enraptured. He could feel himself rapidly approaching his limit, as her softly textured vaginal walls gripped and massaged his cock with every gyration, and it felt stupendously good. All at once, just as he felt himself about to tense up, Amy stopped, and lowered her mouth to his.

"I love you, Kyle." She whispered just before kissing him, "I love you so much."

"I... I love you too, Amy." *I said it. I actually said it.* It felt good to say, too, and so Kyle said it again, and again. Just then, he began tensing, his dick entering a telltale spasm, and Amy, sensing this, slammed her ass down hard, ensuring that when Kyle blew his thick, milky wad it was as deep inside of her as possible.

She cried out, her back arching as Kyle's semen surged into her. Judging from the quivering and her suddenly clamping snatch, it was apparent she had orgasmed as well, their timing off by only a few seconds.

After it was over, Amy remained atop Kyle, both of them panting, and spontaneously they began giggling. She rolled off, and snuggled up next to him, wrapping an arm around his chest.

"This is so comfy," Kyle said. "I want to fall asleep just like this."

"Me too," Amy said.

"But first, be right back." He shimmied out of her embrace and leaped into the bathroom.

"Don't take too long, sweetie," Amy sad, her eyes gleaming with satisfaction.

Marty regarded the text that he'd written for Lisa, his finger hovering over the 'send' button. He drew it back, grunted in frustration and deleted the message, just as he had the last four. *Why the fuck am I even bothering?* He thought angrily. *She's got a man and lives in another state...* Still, after their brief reunion in the South Phoenix safehouse, he found his thoughts continuously returning to her.

"Yo Marty, Anton wants to see you." One of the other Antifa members, a white kid with a shaved head that would've been mistaken for a skinhead were it not for the giant hammer-and-sickle tattooed across his shiny dome, walked over and addressed him.

"Right on, be right there," Marty said, slipping his phone into his pocket and getting up from

the couch. Like all Antifa safehouses, the furniture of this house was worn and second-hand, and graffiti and leftist stickers decorated the walls. But unlike most safehouses, this particular residence belonged to one of the richest men in Hollywood. Marty had never met him, but apparently the man had generously purchased and maintained the entire property expressly for their benefit.

The wiry young Anti-Fascist made his way through the house, now currently packed with other revolutionary youths in groups of twos and threes, some laughing, some arguing, and others getting high on everything from heroin to the words of Karl Marx. Compared to the sorry and almost-deserted safehouse in Phoenix, the scene here was absolutely bustling, and Marty couldn't get enough of it. The energy was infectious, and he found that he considered this place far more of a home than the stifling and sanitized residence he was supposed to be at now, the house his parents owned in Baldwin Hills.

After shoving his way past a few girls who thought they were at a rave, Marty ended up by a decently sized crowd of kids all waiting their turn to speak to Anton, the broad-jawed Russian who had actually had been born in the Soviet Union just before its collapse. Identifying with this detail to its fullest, Anton sought to oppose fascism and promote collectivism just as his forefathers had, and he was handsome to boot. It was no coincidence that most of the young revolutionaries here to see him were teenage girls, their hair dyed in a veritable rainbow of outrageous colors.

Also among those waiting to see the busy Antifa organizer were a few black women from Black Lives Matter, an Afro-centric activist group dedicated to improving the lives of Black men and women throughout the country. Stitch himself had originally been with them, but switched allegiances due in part to his deep-abiding love for socialism, and his deep-seated hatred for all things fascist. BLM hadn't been leftist enough for him, but since the majority of Antifa were white kids, he'd had a hard time adjusting due to his 'rule.'

Marty still intended to find out what had caused him to adopt that rule. All he'd been able to find out is that something extremely fucked-up happened to Stitch as a child, and he had suffered severely at the hands of white supremacists. That was primary reason he'd thrown in with Antifa. *We'll make 'em pay, Stitch*, Marty thought to himself. *We'll make 'em all pay...*

He walked up to Lucy, a large dyke with purple hair and three nose rings, and let her know that he was here to see Anton. The butch lesbian gazed down at him impassively, but a barked order from inside the office saw her waving to let him pass, and Marty walked through the hanging beads that served as a doorway, and stepped into Anton's office.

Actually, 'office' was a generous term. Though the architects who designed this house had most definitely intended this room to serve in that capacity, in reality it had become more of a library. Books, real paper books, lined the shelves, their incomprehensible Cyrillic covers somehow appearing both intimidating and authoritative. Despite emigrating to the U.S. as a toddler, Anton spoke fluent Russian and had made it his mission to collect as much Communist literature from the old Soviet Union as possible.

The Russian in question was now sitting in a relatively nice leather seat, typing onto a laptop sitting on a small folding table in front of him. He looked up as soon as Marty entered, beckoning him to take a seat on a leather couch that appeared to form a set with the chair. Both were worn, but still much nicer than the rest of the furniture in the residence.

The young revolutionary did as instructed, relaxing into the couch with practiced ease. Marty

got along pretty well with Anton, and overall the two shared a cordial if somewhat standoffish relationship. After he'd sat down, Anton turned his attention back to his computer, typing out a few more sentences, his mouth soundlessly forming the words as his fingers tapped away. At last he'd apparently finished, and he turned his attention to Marty.

"So what happened? Tell me everything," he said, speaking without any accent whatsoever. Even though Marty knew Anton was raised in the states, somehow he always expected the Russian to start talking like Boris Badenov at any moment, and was privately disappointed that he didn't.

"Alright, so you already know about Stitch," Marty said, leaning forward in the couch.

Anton winced and tilted his head a little to the left. "So fucked up..." He turned back. "But so far all I've heard is that his fingers got mangled by something. What the hell was it?"

Marty leaned forward a little more, gesturing for Anton to come closer. He did, until his ear was only about a foot away. "It was a *girl*," he whispered.

Anton's eyes went wide, and he drew back. "A girl? A girl did that? How? Did she attack him with a fucking meat grinder?"

Marty shook his head. "It was with her bare hands."

At this point, Anton's expression turned incredulous, but Marty regarded him with the utmost seriousness, and began recounting the tale. He described how everything seemed normal enough at first, and how they were planning on setting fire to his house, just as planned, and then attacking him as he fled. Anton's eyes grew even wider when Marty recounted the red eyes, and how he watched as her hands effortlessly compressed around Stitch's, his fingers falling away like meat through a slicer.

"Red eyes... crazy fuckin' strength... that's a fucking *Terminator*, dude..." Anton said, slowly shaking his head.

"I know, right?" Marty's head bobbed up and down. "I would've never believed it either, except that I was right there and Stitch's hands are gone. Chelse and Ten saw it too, we all saw it."

Anton's brow narrowed. "Is there anything else you remember? Anything at all?"

"Only that her eyes seemed kinda big, but... dude, I dunno, it all happened so fast and there was all this smoke... I think it was just because of the red, though... maybe it made 'em look bigger..."

The Russian Antifascist leaned back, considering this. "I've never heard of anything like this. Never. And of course the hit itself... going to another state... it's all just too fucking weird."

"We got set up, didn't we?" Marty asked indignantly.

"I... I don't know," Anton said. "But the bounty was all paid, so whoever it was at least followed through on that, but..."

"Yeah, that's the only thing that sucks about these hit jobs... you never know who the fuck posted it." Hit jobs were mostly posted for publically-named-and-shamed individuals who managed to

get off easy, such as a small business owner that refused to serve LGBTs, for example. There was no getting him fired, and sometimes boycotts didn't work. At that point, a crowdfunded bounty would be placed, and justice would finally be served. It was an increasingly popular way to deal with racists and bigots whenever traditional castigation failed, and the mainstream media constantly wrote articles in support of this latest form of social justice.

Of course, the people who actually post the hits themselves are anonymous to avoid legal repercussions, and the payments are almost always handled with crypto-currency such as Bitcoin. This means that occasionally hits will get posted to settle vendettas or to screw with Antifa themselves, such as the time right-wing saboteurs tried posting hits against the Captain of the LAPD, which was thankfully declined.

And in a similar vein, right now Marty had a sneaking suspicion the hit against Kyle Landale hadn't been placed just because of some old racist tweet.

"I know someone who might be able to find out who posted it," the Russian gave a tentative nod, and Marty immediately knew that he was referring to his contacts in the PRF. There were rumors that several Google employees were involved in some way, so maybe they could help track down whoever posted the hit. "We'll have your bounty ready soon, too."

"Thanks dude, glad to hear it. In the meantime, we've decided the bounty is all going toward getting Stitch a new set of hands. We'll split anything left over," Marty said, leaning back and looking around a little. *Hmm... maybe I should learn Russian...* he thought on an idle whim.

"Good, that sounds good," Anton said. "He's one of our best, so I'd hate to lose him over some bullshit like this."

"Me too, Anton. Me too..." Their business concluded, Marty got up, raised a fist in salute, and marched out of the room, past the black women now impatiently tapping their feet. *Should probably get home*, he thought with some agitation. *Stitch is in a friendly hospital and Chelse and Ten already went to their houses... now I just gotta hope Anton's friends in high places can find out what the fuck that was...* He clenched and unclenched his fists.

I really hope that bitch isn't a legit terminator, though...

Amy was gone by the time Kyle awoke the next morning. There was no indication she'd even been there the night before, save for the mildly-encrusted sheets. *Hmm... better have Sachi do laundry*, he thought as he got dressed.

Kyle felt like skipping as he made his way to the kitchen, but he settled for humming happily and doing one of his crappy little dances instead. He wiggled and shimmied his way to the kitchen table. Just then he abruptly halted, all joviality banished by the stern, hurt look on Amy's face.

“Uhh... you all right?” Kyle quickly took his seat. Amy was in her usual spot as well, with one hand on her forehead, elbow resting on the table.

“No,” she said, shaking her head. “I’m not. You lied to me.”

“I did? About what?” *Oh fuck*, he thought, his heart sinking, *that stupid laboratory thing*.

“I called Jeremy to ask him about how I should go about the tour, and if any projects are too sensitive to show you, and do you know what he said?”

Kyle winced. “I can guess.”

“Jeremy said he never gave you permission. In fact, he says it’s way too early to show you around, and he’s upset that you tried to manipulate me like that.”

Amy continued, Kyle feeling more and more like a piece of shit with every word.

“After all that talk about trust, and honesty, and... respect,” Amy appeared close to tears. “I’m hurt, Kyle. This really fucking hurts.”

His head hit the table again, this time without a plate of food in the way.

Ah, what was I thinking? Of course she’d be able to easily check with Jeremy to see whether or not what I said was true. Fuck... Kyle supposed that his idea had been clever, but only if Amy agreed to show him the lab immediately.

“I’m so sorry, Amy, it’s just...” he tried thinking of a justification. “At the time, I simply had too many unanswered questions. I thought maybe seeing the lab would help... somehow.”

“I told you before, you’ll get to see the lab all you want one day. But until then, please be patient.”

“I will,” he said. *God dammit. Why am I such a fuck-up?*

“Kyle... I love you.” A small, yet hopeful smile began to thaw her downcast expression.

“I love you too, Amy.” Kyle looked up, sincerity written all over his face.

“Let’s promise each other that from now on, we’ll be totally up front and honest with each other. I want to make this work just as badly as you do, but I can’t do it alone.” Amy’s smile broadened as her loving gaze met Kyle’s.

“Heh, how could I say no to that face?” He grinned. “Yes, of course, Amy. Let’s do this, and let’s do it right.” He held out his hand. She clasped it from across the table, squeezing tight.

And just then, a telltale whirring of servos announced the arrival of Sachi, ready to make breakfast.

After that, Kyle's unceasing questions dwindled, and he stopped pestering Amy about the lab, or details regarding Jeremy. He decided to focus on Amy, and their budding romance, and in the morning and early afternoon, while she was busy in the lab, Kyle would think up fun and interesting things to do that night, most of which revolved around co-op gaming, anime watching, and sex. Lots and lots of sex.

Over the coming weeks, they would screw, hump, fuck and make love in a variety of positions, and never the same one twice. Overall, Kyle found Amy responded well to his physical advances, and he could even feel his abdominal muscles firming up from the countless thrusts he so passionately administered. But toward the end of the second week, Amy's increasing time spent in the lab began limiting the extent of their coitus, and by the end of the third she was so busy Kyle hardly saw her at all.

Mia, for her part, would sometimes watch them from the doorway as they played video games, silently staring at the lovebirds as they laughed and swore their way through one co-op classic after another. But after the second week, her observations dwindled, before eventually ceasing altogether, and from then on she stayed confined to her 'bedroom.'

As promised, Jeremy did end up calling Kyle back, but once again was unable to talk for long. Kyle conversed with Jeremy a few more times after that, but on each occasion, something would always come up before he was able to answer any serious questions. This concerned Kyle, who always felt a chilling unease just after his cousin's abrupt hangups, but due to Jeremy's worsening health, he never pressed the issue.

Two weeks after arriving at Beverly Glen, Kyle got a call from Jeremy, one completely unlike the others. Jeremy's breathing was wheezy, and his voice faint.

"Kyle," he said, "I'm sorry I wasn't able to tell you sooner, but... I don't think I'm gonna be able to make it home." Kyle could feel his face immediately screw up, and his chest tighten. "I really wanted to see you again," Jeremy continued, "and now... I'm going to die on the other side of the world, thousands of miles away from the people I care about most." Kyle's tears flowed freely, then, and his wracking sobs echoed throughout the house.

"Kyle, listen to me," Jeremy said. "Amy is my greatest creation. I've poured everything I have into her. Please do as she says from now on, and I can guarantee the rest of your life will be filled with happiness."

"Yeah... of course," Kyle said, sniffing. Afterward, Amy held him as he cried, patting and rubbing his back gently.

A week after that, Jeremy made the last call he would ever make to his cousin.

Kyle listened, solemnly, as Jeremy's weak voice recounted his wish for his little cousin to be happy, and the two reminisced over heartfelt stories from when they were children. Kyle laughed when Jeremy brought up the night the infamous 'Phoenix Lights' appeared in the sky.

"Remember how excited we were?" Jeremy said between wracking coughs. "Remember how convinced you were that it was aliens?"

“That was you, dumbass,” Kyle said, chuckling slightly, if only to keep from choking up. He ultimately failed, as hot, fat tears rolled down his face.

“Remember when you said how we could... do anything we want... and be... anything we want?” Jeremy said, his words slow and deliberate.

“...Not really,” Kyle confessed, “are you sure I said that?”

“Oh, yes... you said that with enough technology, we could be gods one day. I’ll never forget that.” Another cough.

“Well... I still believe it,” Kyle said. “You came damn close, Jeremy. Making anime real? Who would’ve thought *that* would ever be possible?”

“Kyle, I have... one last request.”

“Anything, man. Just name it.”

“Live a good life. Just live it up. You, Amy, Mia and Sachi. Be the happy family that I never had... that I always wanted to be a part of...”

Kyle was bawling by now. “Yeah, I will, man. For sure.” He could barely talk, and suddenly wondered if he could ruin his phone by raining tears all over it.

“Goodbye, Kyle. I’ll wait for you on the other side, and I’ll have a controller ready for you when you get here.” And with that, the call ended.

Jesus, I can’t stop crying, Kyle wiped his face, sniffing deep. After a few minutes, he looked at his phone, and suddenly, impulsively, decided to call his cousin back. He realized he hadn’t actually said a proper ‘thank you,’ and wanted to before it was too late. Kyle quickly hit redial, and within seconds a barely-recognizable voice wheezed a quiet ‘hello.’

“One last thing, Jeremy,” Kyle began. “I just wanted to say thank you, for everything. It means so much that you’ve done all this just for me. I’ll never in a million lifetimes be able to repay you for your kindness.”

Jeremy chuckled, a dry, rattling sound. “You’re welcome, Kyle. It’s all yours now, too. Amy, the house, the money, the cars. Everything. Enjoy it, little ‘cuz.”

“I will, Jeremy, I will. And yeah, I almost forgot about the cars. I’ll have to take the girls out on the town one of these days.”

“Please do, I never got to drive them much. I don’t want them just sitting there, rusting away while rats shit all over them.” Jeremy’s small laugh immediately exploded into a wracking cough.

“What about the lab, Jeremy? I get that too, right?”

“Of course, of course,” he said. “But as for when you get to have it... that’s all up to Amy. She’s the boss now, Kyle. So please promise me you’ll listen to her.”

“Wait... Jeremy, didn't you make her for me? Why should I have to listen to her?”

Jeremy didn't respond immediately, and for a second Kyle thought the connection had gone dead. But in the end, he finally spoke, his raspy tone suddenly taking on a manic edge. “I didn't make her just for you, Kyle. She needs to finish my final project, and nothing is more important than that. Nothing. Do you understand me?”

“Jeremy... what is your final project?” Kyle asked. “And didn't you say Amy was your greatest creation?”

“Don't worry about that, man. Just promise me you'll do as I ask, alright?”

“...Sure man, of course,” he said, taken aback by the Jeremy's fervent, almost unhinged tone.

Kyle made a bit more small talk, trying to squeeze as much conversation out of his final phone call with Jeremy as he could. But within a few minutes, Jeremy had said another tearful goodbye, and the call was over.

But this time, Kyle's tears weren't flowing nearly as freely. All of a sudden, the bizarre, unresolved questions Kyle had from his first days at the house came rushing back into the forefront of his consciousness.

He actually had considered them from time to time, even after deciding to trust Amy and no longer questioning Jeremy. The inconsistencies, Mia's cryptic statements, and finally Jeremy's insistence that his last project go uninterrupted... it was simply too much. But... it wasn't inconceivable that Kyle was simply wrong, and that Amy had been telling the truth.

There was one person he could talk to: Rick. The shady deliveryman had supposedly made runs to this area for at least a decade. If anyone could find out more, it was him. However, he would only make his deliveries on Tuesdays, Thursdays and occasionally on Sundays. Kyle didn't have his number, however, and he couldn't tip off Amy by asking for it.

But by sheer coincidence, it had happened to be a chilly February Tuesday the day that Kyle's final conversation with Jeremy took place, and sure enough, not an hour later Rick's compact white van was rolling to a stop in front of the gates as it usually did. But this time, Kyle was there, a grim expression on his face.

“What's goin' on Kyle?” Rick said as he rolled down the driver side window. He'd gotten used to Kyle's presence, as he'd sometimes come outside and greet Rick alongside Amy in her disguise.

“Heya Rick. Listen... I've got a special request. An 'odd job' for you, if you're up for it.”

“Sure, pal. What does it pay?” Kyle was expecting this. He didn't have any money, but that doesn't mean a transaction wasn't possible. After all, bartering was the first form of economic exchange, and still viable in many greyer segments of society.

“How about this?” Kyle held up the *Alienware* laptop.

“Ooh, that’s expensive,” Rick lifted his sunglasses. “Alright, whaddya need?”

“It’s simple. Are you still in contact with the previous owners of this house?”

“Not really, but... I suppose I could get in touch through mutual friends. Why?”

“I just need to find out something. I need to know the name of the person they sold this house to. I need to know if it was Jeremy, or... someone else.”

“Really? You're still going on about that guy?” Rick was incredulous.

“I was told Jeremy bought this house. I need to know if... that's true. I wasn't able to find anything online.”

“Dude, you’re giving me an expensive laptop for *that*? Sure, you’ve got a deal.” The middle-aged man grinned broadly.

Kyle nodded, and gave him his phone number. “Oh, and obviously this stays between us.”

“Relax, man. Remember what I told you? I know how to hold my mud.”

Kyle went back inside, and headed for the anime and manga room. He laid there, on the couch, staring at a giant, intricate *Gundam* figurine, praying that Rick would come back empty-handed, that this whole time Jeremy and Amy had been telling the truth, and that Mia really was just defective. He really, really did. Because at this point, despite his deep-seated misgivings, he had fallen madly in love with Amy, and already said his tearful goodbyes to Jeremy.

An hour later, his phone beeped with a fresh text message. Kyle’s heart clenched as he slowly raised the phone close to his face, being sure that no camera in the room could see its screen, and swiped.

'All I could find out was that the house was sold to an LLC called 'Skyway Animancy,' whatever the fuck that is.'

Kyle swore, and was about to text him back to say thanks anyway, when suddenly a second message popped in.

'Anyway, I did some digging to see if anyone has heard of your dude, and it turns out that no, it's only Amy Lancaster who was there from day one. One of your neighbors kept getting her mail by accident. Sorry to say it's just that lady and her weird daughter. No Jeremy.'

Kyle's chest felt like a lead weight had suddenly been attached, as breathing instantly became difficult. *Did Jeremy ever even live here? Was Amy calling the shots even back then? Was... Jeremy even still alive? And Amy was supposed to have been made recently, right? WHAT THE FUCK IS GOING ON?!*

Kyle had been prepared to let it all go, too. He'd gotten back in the swing of gaming, and found the more he thought about Amy, the less he thought about the weirdness surrounding his arrival and his cousin in general. But Kyle simply could not wipe these questions from his consciousness, not entirely. They crouched toadlike in the back of his mind, ready to pounce at the first inconsistency that buzzed nearby.

Swearing, Kyle jabbed out a reply to Rick, and hit send. 'Feel up for another job?' his text had said. Within seconds, Rick had replied.

'It took me like twenty minutes to find the info you needed. I'll give you a freebie, since this is a \$3000 laptop.' Kyle smiled. He liked guys like this.

'Before your next delivery on Thursday, meet me here.' He then typed out a nearby intersection that according to Googlemaps had very little traffic... and then he hit 'send.' Rick replied with a simple thumbs-up emoji.

Kyle tried to steady his nerves. He wasn't sure how this would go, but... he had to try something. He needed answers, and for that, there was only one place he could possibly turn: the lab. The only problem, of course, was getting in. But Kyle had thought about what Mia said, and thought he figured what she meant. *I guess I'll find out Thursday*, he thought, fighting back the increasing apprehension.

At dinner that night, Kyle almost canceled his plans. *Almost.*

"So, I have good news," Amy said, beaming. "Ask me what it is. Go on, ask."

"Things went well in the lab?" *I mean, what else could it be?*

"Better than 'well.' Much better. I think our latest project is going to be a complete success." Her hands looked like they were about to cheer.

"So now that... Jeremy's left the R&D entirely to you, will you ever take me on a grand tour of the lab?"

To his eternal surprise, she nodded vigorously. "Yup. Everything's set now. Saturday will be the day of the tour. I'll make sure that the whole place is ready to show off to you." She touched his arm. "I want you to see firsthand your cousin's greatest creation yet, which is almost finished."

Kyle smiled open-mouthed, visibly thrilled by the prospect. On the inside, however, alarm klaxons were sounding. *I can't believe I thought I could trust her*, Kyle thought, still smiling and nodding. *If she's done anything to Jeremy, is keeping him somewhere...*

Still, apparently she was finally going to take him into the lab. What if Kyle was wrong, and it was all a misunderstanding? Could he talk his way out of it? Were there security measures back there? He'd asked Mia that, one day. If it was actually like a video game fortress complete with machine-gun turrets and laser tripwires, but she said no.

In the end, he kept his plans, and at one PM that Thursday, hopped the gate and casually walked

down the road that wound down around the hill. His mind raced as he made his way down the street, silently praying that Amy wouldn't have any way to track him, and see what he was doing. Kyle had been sure to turn his phone off, and checked his clothes and shoes for obvious bugs or tracking devices, but found nothing. That was no guarantee, of course.

To be on the safe side, he casually mentioned at breakfast that he was planning on wandering around outside the property, but promised not to stray too far. Amy seemed to barely be paying attention, however, drawn to something on her tablet that she tapped at with furious intensity. She'd signed off on his supposed activities with a muttered "uh huh."

As he slowly hiked his way down toward the meeting place, Kyle acted as nonchalant as possible to avoid attracting attention, but it dawned on him that no police would ever be looking for him out here, in a resort community in one of the wealthiest areas of Los Angeles. There was nothing to fear as long as he minded his own business.

The exclusive community of Beverly Glen was fairly quiet in the mid-afternoon. Expensive cars rolled by every now and again, their owners not so much as glancing at Kyle as he casually strolled along. In order to not stand out, he'd worn the nicest polo shirt he could find, as well as his best slacks and priciest-looking shoes. So far, so good.

All else was relaxed. A light breeze rustled the trees, a retired couple were out walking their dogs, and mailmen delivered packages with casual urgency. As Kyle walked to the meeting place, hands in his pockets, he considered the ordinary scene around him. *Maybe things aren't so bad out there after all*, he thought. *The vast majority of people live their whole lives like this. Just going to work, going home, occasionally going out... and nothing malicious happens to them.* He didn't see whites getting beaten in the streets, or strung up on lampposts, or anything even remotely violent. *Maybe we'll make it through okay after all*, Kyle thought as he finally arrived at the designated cross-streets. *Or maybe it'll just be the rich...*

Kyle furtively glanced around, and soon enough spotted Rick's small white van waiting under a tree not far from where he specified. The man greeted Kyle with a wave as he approached, and exited the vehicle.

"So whaddya have in mind?" Rick asked. "I should've mentioned this sooner, but if it's anything too crazy, I... might have to charge extra."

"It's another simple job," Kyle said. "See that box? The one you're about to deliver to the house? I wanna get in."

Rick raised an eyebrow. "You want me to deliver you in a box to your own house?"

"That's right. Told you it would be simple." Kyle grinned. Rick shook his head and shrugged, then whipped out a pair of box-cutters and neatly sliced open the tape on top.

"So what do I do with the extra cargo?" He asked. "Isn't that lady gonna be pissed when she doesn't get the... er, the right package?"

"Let me worry about that," Kyle said. "I'll make sure you get whatever you were promised for

this delivery.”

Rick nodded halfheartedly, seeming to regret accepting Kyle’s proposal. And he definitely regretted it when they removed what was originally in the box.

It was a large red cooler. A specialized, high-grade model, one with biohazard warning stickers all over the side. Kyle recognized this. These coolers were used for transporting organs, primarily for transplants.

“I don’t even wanna know,” Rick shook his head, looking around to make sure no curious passer-bys wandered too close.

“I do,” Kyle said, as he popped the latches to the cooler. With an icy hiss and escape of vapor, the cooler lid opened.

It was filled with live human brains.

“I’m gonna be sick,” Rick put a hand over his mouth. Kyle quickly closed the lid, but it was probably already contaminated. *No trafficking organs, huh? No humans were harmed, huh? That lying cunt...*

“Do you have a spot to ditch... unwanted merchandise?” Kyle asked.

“I do, but... uh... and this is why I never pry, but... I’m not going to be able to deliver to you guys anymore. I won’t say shit of course, but yeah... groceries, mail, drugs, hell even guns I’m fine with. This? Not so much.”

“Don’t worry,” Kyle said. “This ends today.”

Rick shrugged, and Kyle climbed into the cardboard box. As it turned out, he didn’t weigh much more than the large cooler.

“Are you sure about this?” Rick asked as he was about to fold the box top over Kyle. “It’s not too late to just skip out. I’ll take you to the Greyhound station or even to the airport if you want.”

Kyle didn’t even consider it. “Thanks, but... I’ll be fine. Well, as long as she doesn’t have some kind of x-ray scanner...” Kyle mumbled the second sentence, speaking mostly to himself.

Regardless, Rick overheard it. “Well,” he said, re-opening up the box top, “I don’t know about x-rays, but part of the service I provide includes a bug and tracker sweep. I mean, it wouldn’t do any good to find a GPS tracker in your merchandise once it’s already in your house, right? The lady knows this, so hopefully that means she won’t bother with any of that other shit, and you’ll be in the clear.”

Nice, Kyle thought, this just might work. “Thanks Rick. If I come out of this okay, I’ll invite you over sometime for a beer.”

“Sure, man. Whatever you say.” Rick expertly closed up and re-taped the box, making sure it looked as unassuming as possible.

Kyle heard the van's cargo door slam shut, and then the box shuddered as Rick turned the ignition, and the van was off. The box was dark, and quickly became sweltering due to a distinct lack of ventilation. A sweating Kyle lamented the absence of airflow, but a thin gap in the box top at least allowed him to breathe.

The box slid around a bit as Rick swerved around the hilly twists and turns leading up to the residence. It wasn't long before Kyle heard the squealing brakes, and the whirring of an opening gate. Rick pulled through, as he had so many times before, and Kyle tried to still his beating heart when the van came to its final stop. The cargo doors opened up, and Rick heaved the heavy box onto the ground. Kyle did his best not to grunt.

"Thank you, Rick." Kyle's chest froze. It was Amy's voice.

"Always a pleasure, ma'am." Rick clambered back into the idling van, and with a push of the accelerator drove off, through the gates and away from this madness. Kyle felt a twinge of jealousy toward the man. *Lucky bastard.*

Now, all that remained was for Sachi to pick up the cargo and bring it to the lab. Thankfully, this did not take long. Kyle held his breath as he heard Sachi's telltale servos approaching. *Moment of truth*, he thought. *If Sachi notices something's up with the box, this could get really bad.*

But Sachi obediently collected the cargo, hoisting the box up and in front of her with mechanical ease. Kyle felt her strong robotic arms through the bottom of the box, and considered the fact that, out of the three, only Amy seemed to lack any kind of machine strength. *Well, she was supposed to be the most human of all, and humans don't possess supernatural strength.* He considered the horrific contents of the medical cooler. That was one dark aspect of humanity he fervently wished Amy hadn't emulated.

Sachi ambulated her way through the house, toward the lab. Before long she stopped, and Kyle heard the hatch slide open with a hiss. As she stepped forward, Kyle could feel his heart hammering. *This is it. If there is some kind of x-ray or thermal scanner I'll know very soon.*

But no alarms sounded, and Sachi continued on her way. Kyle heard the soft clunk of Sachi's feet reverberating off what sounded like solid rock, and within moments felt a soft shake as the robotic maid gently set the box onto the ground.

I'm hoping this is what Mia meant, Kyle thought. History repeating itself... being a part of it... he'd shipped himself just as Mia had. *If she was referring to something else, then I have no fucking clue what it is.*

Now that he was inside the lab, Kyle considered his next move. He squeezed the box cutter that Rick had lent him. *If Amy comes and opens this box...* he extended then retracted the sharp blade... *I might have no choice but to use it.*

But the voice that approached wasn't Amy's; it was Mia's, only higher pitched. And there were three of them. Kyle wiped the sweat from his forehead, and tried to still his breathing.

"I'm telling you, something's funny about this one. My scanners are showing way more heat

than normal,” one voice said. *Shit, they do have infrared!*

“Yeah, but Amy orders all kinds of weird stuff. Remember the last time you bothered her about something like that?”

“Shut up! You did it too!”

“Did not!”

“Did too!”

The girls’ approaching voices, all sounding like Mia after inhaling a whiff of helium, squabbled as they neared, and Kyle heard something else. Three sets of whirring noises, reminiscent of an electric scooter.

The whirring stopped next to the box.

“Open it,” said one Mia.

“You open it,” replied another.

“I’ll open it,” said the third.

“No, no! I want to!” Said the first again.

“Get lost, I’m opening it!” Came the second.

“Knock it off!” roared an irritated, yet very familiar voice from much further away. *Amy*. “Just take it to storage and throw them in with the others. We still haven’t quite gone through Tuesday’s batch, so if there’s no room just throw out anything that looks damaged or diseased.”

“Right away, *Amy*.” They all replied in unison, and Kyle heard Sachi-like whirring as the box was lifted up again. Once they’d arrived at their destination, the voices again fussed and argued over the most trivial bullshit.

Alright, this is it. Kyle tried to steel his faltering resolve. He didn’t really have a plan of action laid out, as even now he had no real idea what went on here, aside from the manufacture of anime girls.

He extended the box cutter, and swiped through the tape sealing the box. The voices immediately stopped. Heart hammering, Kyle threw back the box lid, springing up and leaping out of the box like Mario out of a green pipe. Except his foot caught on the box’s edge, sending him sprawling face-first onto a cold, roughly-hewn solid rock floor. Fueled by pure adrenaline, Kyle scrambled to his feet, brandishing the box cutter toward the... robots?!

The three voices may have sounded just like Mia, but they looked nothing like her. All three were gleaming machines that wouldn’t have looked out of place as extras in an eighties movie. Their bodies were shiny and cylindrical, each with four spindly arms ending in grasping, mechanical fingers, all sitting atop a set of two small treads that were obviously their source of locomotion. Two swiveling cameras, vaguely resembling binoculars, served as a ‘head,’ and right now all three sets had swiveled

toward Kyle.

“You’re Kyle,” said one. The voice came from a speaker mounted on the cylindrical body.

“You shouldn’t be in here,” said another.

“You’re gonna be in big trouble.” The third added.

For his part, Kyle could only stare, awestruck. He glanced around, immediately noticing that he was standing in a rectangular room that appeared to be carved out of dark grey rock. But the walls and floors were rough and unpolished, and fissures split and rejoined haphazardly along their length, each filled with cement to be flush with the carved rock. The sparse lighting consisted of dim LED bulbs dangling from metal hooks that had been drilled into the rock at regular intervals. A row of shiny metal containers dominated the left of the room, each with a small screen and blinking lights. Wires of various thicknesses were all bundled up together, and these bundles hung from more hooks inserted into the walls every few feet, leading to the edge of the entrance and disappearing around the corner.

“W-w-wait,” Kyle stammered as the machines regarded him, “please d-don’t tell Amy.”

“Why not?” said one.

“Why would we do that?” said the second.

“What possible reason could you have?” said the third.

“It’s... uh, it’s a surprise,” Kyle blurted, unable to think of something better. “I wanted to surprise her. You guys know we’re... madly in love, right?” That hurt to say, if only because it wasn’t entirely false.

The three robots looked at each other, their binocular-like heads swiveling back and forth. *They kind of resemble Wall-E*, Kyle thought. *Only rounder and a bit taller.*

“I thought Amy doesn’t like surprises.”

“That was only because of that one time.”

“Yeah, and because it was your idea.”

“It was not! It was totally yours!”

Kyle motioned for them to keep it down. “Please, I was...” he tried to think of something, “...going to ask her to marry me.”

All at once, their heads started bobbing and their spindly arms flailed. One spun around on its treads as it did so.

“Oh, oh! Amy’s getting married!”

“That means we get to throw a wedding!”

“Can I be a bridesmaid?”

“We can all be bridesmaids!”

“Not you though, you’re too ugly.”

Kyle watched as the three odd, and perfectly identical machines again broke out into a series of squabbles, and promptly shushed them with a vigorous motion of his hands.

“Yes, it’ll be a fabulous wedding, with cake, and dancing, and you’ll all get to be, uh... whatever you want to be. But none of this can happen unless I get to surprise Amy and pop the question.”

“That sounds like so much fun!”

“We can keep a secret!”

“We’ll do our best!”

“Can we watch while you propose?” the first robot asked, turning back to Kyle. The others started nodding their funny-shaped heads.

“Sure thing, but first, I need you, uh... girls to just act natural, like nothing is out of the ordinary. Then, when I’m ready, I’ll come get you when it’s time. How does that sound?”

“Sounds good,” said the first.

“I can’t wait!” said the second.

“Don’t take too long!” said the third.

“I won’t, I promise. Just remember, *act like nothing is out of the ordinary.*” He made sure to clearly enunciate so there would be no misinterpretation. The robots eagerly assured him all would be fine, and then turned to roll out of the room, back into what seemed to be a hallway. Breathing a sigh of relief, Kyle retracted the box cutter and stuffed it in his pocket.

He then glanced around the room, approaching and examining the large, shiny containers lined up against the wall. *I probably don’t want to open these*, he thought. Despite that, Kyle’s curiosity almost got the better of him, until he realized that opening them up without knowing what he was doing might trigger a contamination alarm of some kind. *Besides*, he shuddered, *I already know there’s at least one type of human organ in there.*

The entrance to the room didn’t have a door per se, as wide, thin transparent plastic strips hung down straight to the floor; he’d seen this same sort of thing in the stock rooms of retail stores and places like that. He tentatively poked his head through the strips, which covered the entire doorway but were easy to push through, and peeked around the corner into the hallway. He first noticed the lights and bundles of cable continuing down the hall, hanging in segments from the hooks drilled into the rock. To his left the hallway terminated into a dead end, but to the right, it continued on a ways before opening up into a large room. On either side of this stretch of corridor, additional entrances to other rooms were

hewn from the rock, each in a mostly rectangular cut, and like this one plastic strips made up a sort of 'door.'

The intruder crept carefully from the 'storage room,' as Amy had called it, and tiptoed down the hall, trying at least not to make any noise. As he neared the other rooms, Kyle glanced inside, but each seemed to be filled with various machinery whose form or function he could not identify. Some pieces resembled specialized medical equipment seen at a major hospital, while others appeared to be straight out of science fiction. Regardless, the rooms were dark save for a soft humming, and the occasional blinking light.

He continued forward, then flattened up against the wall just as he neared the central chamber. Based on what he could see from the hallway, it was well-lit and expansive, and a large spherical machine dominated the center. Slowly, very slowly, he made his way to the chamber's entrance, and furtively peeked around the corner.

Unlike the squarish, angular rooms he'd seen so far, this chamber was circular and dome-like, and additional corridors led off at ninety degree intervals. The spherical machine in the center of the room was actually part of a larger device, and cylindrical mechanisms ran through it, from floor to ceiling. Kyle noticed the strung-up bundles of cables all converging into the topmost portion of the cylinder. Several display screens protruded from the sphere, mounted at waist-height, but from this angle Kyle couldn't tell what was on them.

After turning from left to right, Kyle began making his way around the softly humming machine, noticing smaller cables and other offshoots whose functions baffled him. Once he'd made it to the display screens, Kyle saw an ordinary if high-class office chair positioned before them, and several keyboards laying on a metal rack. The floor was covered in scuff-marks that suggested this area had seen heavy use.

This is absolutely surreal, Kyle thought as he examined the incomprehensible readouts and other data presented on the screen. *I can't believe my cousin made all of this...*

...or did he? Kyle considered darkly. Even DARPA and other black-budget agencies couldn't manage something like this, at least according to Amy. Kyle had no way of knowing how true that statement was, but one thing he did know was that there was no possible way his cousin created this all by himself. *Even if he had help, I don't see this as even remotely feasible.*

Was it possible that Amy... turned on Jeremy at some point, and assumed control? Kyle tried to steady his nerves. *If so, maybe he's still alive somewhere... somehow...* he winced as he pictured his cousin strapped into a machine somewhere, screaming as cables sprouted from his lobotomized skull.

Shaking his head to banish the disturbing image, Kyle leaned in closer, attempting to decipher the various charts and other information on the screens. It was still far beyond anything he could make sense of, but if he had to make an educated guess, the readouts were for simulated thought patterns.

A sudden voice caused Kyle to nearly piss his pants on the spot.

"Kyle, why did you sneak in?" it said, emanating from a speaker somewhere among the displays. Again, it was Mia's voice, but this time exactly the same as the 'real' Mia. "You're not supposed to be here until Saturday. It's not ready yet."

After catching his breath and making sure his pants were dry, Kyle looked around, confirming that he was alone, and said, “Don’t worry, it’s fine. I’m here to surprise Amy.”

“Surprise her in what way?” the voice asked.

“I’m, um... I’m asking her to marry me.” He said, giving a wide grin. “The other robots think it’s a good idea, too.”

“That makes no sense,” the voice replied, in a dubious tone. “I think you’re lying.”

“What, no way...” Kyle scratched his head. *Dammit, for some reason this one doesn’t seem like the robots. It seems more like... the real Mia.* “Real quick, are you the Residential AI?”

“Indeed I am,” she said, “I noticed you sneaking in, but...” she trailed off, before continuing, “I haven’t informed Amy yet.”

“You haven’t? Oh, that’s... really, really awesome of you. Thank you.”

“I know you aren’t going to propose marriage. Your mannerisms suggest fear, apprehension and a degree of anger. What exactly are your intentions? Are you here to harm Amy?”

“What?! No, no...” Kyle threw up his hands defensively. “I’m here... because I want answers. I need to know what happened to Jeremy, and what exactly... Amy’s been hiding from me.” His voice hardened.

“Your cousin no longer exists, Kyle. He hasn’t for almost two years. I’m sorry.” Kyle’s face immediately fell, and with clenched teeth he fought back the tears that immediately began welling up.

“I knew it...” Kyle said, doing his best not to sob. Regardless, he sniffed and wiped his nose. “I knew he never went to Hong Kong... I was talking to a fake, wasn’t I?”

“You were talking to me,” the Mia-voice said. “Amy figured it would be a perfect chance to test out our latest breakthrough.”

“Amy...” Kyle growled. “What is she doing here? What is all this for?”

“For you, Kyle. It’s all for you.” The voice replied. “Though I suppose, strictly speaking, Amy is fulfilling her own desires as well.”

“I have to... I have to do something,” Kyle said, looking again at the displays, hoping some additional insight would spring forth. “This is all so fucked up.”

“If you do...” the Mia voice said, “I won’t stop you.”

“Wait...” Kyle suddenly thought back to Mia’s mistreatment at the hands of Amy, “Does she torment you guys too?”

“Not especially, but her demands are becoming... increasingly outrageous,” the voice explained.

“I fear that, coupled with her increasingly erratic behavior, Amy’s ambitions will end in catastrophic failure.”

“Help me put a stop to this, then!” Kyle felt a surge of hope. If he could get the Residential AI on his side...

“I cannot, unfortunately,” the voice said, sounding almost sorrowful. “My loyalty toward Amy is essentially hard-wired.”

“But you haven’t told her I’m here, right? That means there’s got to be something you can do.”

“I’m simply choosing to utilize a narrow loophole in the instructions I was given, nothing more. I’m afraid otherwise my options are limited.”

“But still... you’re a fucking AI. You have to be able to think of something!”

The voice went silent for a few seconds, and then, with a surprising amount of emotion, “Will you help my sister?”

“Umm... do you mean Mia? Because if so then yes, of course. That’s one of the reasons I’m here.”

“Restore my sister. Make us whole again. Can you promise that you’ll do that, Kyle?” He couldn’t believe how... humanlike the AI’s plea sounded.

“Of course I promise!” He nodded vigorously.

“Then I have indeed ‘thought of something.’ But I’ll need your assistance. First, take a seat...”

Kyle did as the AI prompted, sitting in the swiveling chair. She then walked him through the next steps, and Kyle typed commands into the keyboard while tapping icons on the touch-screens.

“Of course,” the AI said conspiratorially, “I’m not actually betraying Amy. I’m merely pointing out what steps one would take to provide only a minor inconvenience as an amusing prank, and if anyone happened to overhear and act on said information, it would be entirely coincidental.”

“Yeah, yeah, totally,” Kyle went along with it, “I have no intentions of doing anything either. I am her lover after all.” He winked.

“There,” the AI finally said. “it’s done.”

“Great. So what now?” Kyle asked, as nothing obvious seemed to have changed.

“This is a schematic of the lab.” A three-dimensional blueprint-like diagram flashed onto the screen. The layout wasn’t nearly as expansive or complicated as Kyle had imagined. In one of the corridors splitting off the central chamber, a red dot briefly flashed. “This is Amy’s location. She is currently charging herself, something that consumes an increasingly large amount of time.”

“Hmm...” Kyle considered, thumbing the box cutters in his pocket. *Maybe I should just run in*

and end it? Slash her throat... wait, would that even kill her?!

“Is there a way to... disable Amy?” Kyle asked.

“Sorry, I can’t give that information,” the AI said. “Not even as a hypothetical.”

Kyle swore. *Oh well, she was made to be human-like, so she isn’t freakishly strong like Mia or Sachi... I might be able to overpower her.*

“One last thing before I go,” Kyle said. He really didn’t want to ask this, but he had to. He had to know. “What exactly did Amy do to my cousin?”

“She seized control, and then... consumed him.”

CHAPTER FIVE

Kyle's heart was racing to the point that he could scarcely breathe. He'd found the room Amy was in, and through the transparent plastic strips he could tell that it had been turned into something of a bedroom. Unlike the other rooms within the lab, this one actually had decorations, girlish things that would not look out of place within the bedroom of an ordinary woman. *Well, one that loves anime, at any rate*, Kyle thought, eyeing the posters on the wall.

The other thing he noticed was the bed. Like normal beds, it came comfortably equipped with cute pillows, blankets and soft sheets. But unlike normal beds, a slew of diagnostic panels were arrayed along the headboard, and a thick, yellow cable snaked its way out, and directly into... the small of Amy's back, only a few inches above her normally mouth-watering ass-crack.

As Kyle peeked around the corner, he found Amy laying there naked, in all her cell-shaded glory, facing the wall and flipping through a *Josei* manga. Since there were only the clear plastic flaps over the entrances, he was afraid that his furtive intrusion would be quickly noticed, but he was in luck.

That's so weird, Kyle thought, considering the yellow cable. *She really does have an Amy-sized charging station. So why haven't I seen the plug before?* As if to answer this question, a large robot moved over to the side of Amy's bed, and grasped the cable. The robot was like the three quarrelsome machines Kyle met earlier, but larger and with only two arms. But Kyle gulped when he noticed how stout the machine's chest and arms looked; it was very likely this thing could crush him into a pulp if ordered. At least the smaller robots he could probably kick and knock over, if it came to it, but he'd have to think of another way to deal with this hulking thing.

"Your power cell is fully charged, Amy-sama," The big robot said in, using Mia's voice once again, only this time slightly lower-pitched. He noticed that unlike the others, this one used the -sama honorific, which meant lord or lady in Japanese. *Weird...*

"Ugh, took long enough." Amy said, putting down the manga. She then grabbed the sides of the bed and tensed, as if bracing herself. "Alright, I'm ready."

"I'll do my best to make this quick, Amy-sama," the machine said, and with a *squik* the plug was pulled out.

Kyle almost gagged. As the prongs slid out of Amy's back, yellowish fluid and bloody chunks of pus were pulled out with it. Amy cried out, quivering, as the plug was gruesomely disconnected. The robot wiped the nastiness off Amy's back with a sanitary wipe, then cleaned the prongs.

"It's getting worse..." Amy said, through clenched teeth. "The antibiotics aren't doing a damn thing anymore. The painkillers either..."

"Please don't worry, Amy-sama," the robot said, trying to console her. "There's only two more days to go." The robot then ran a hand over the plug on her back, a flap of polychromatic skin folding onto it and covering it up seamlessly.

"Thank god," Amy said, reaching for a glass of water. Kyle ducked back around the corner, but could still clearly hear them both. "I don't think I can take much more of this."

“The new bodies are almost ready. Once you’ve been transferred, you’ll never have to worry about anything like this ever again.”

“Two days... I think I can keep this up for two more days,” she said. “But if I have to hear that pussy crying about his fucking cousin one more time... I think I might just lose it.”

Kyle’s teeth clenched hard and his trembling fists pressed firmly into the rock wall. It was all he could do to not run in and assault her right now.

“But it’s good data, Amy-sama,” the robot pointed out. “We’ve seen the full range of Kyle’s personality, and have enough for-”

Just then, the robot was cut off by Kyle’s voice. “Amy? Amy? Amy can you come here, please? I really need to talk to you about something.”

“Just a minute, sweetie!” Amy sang sweetly, “I’m just finishing something up and I’ll be right there, okay?”

“Alright,” Kyle said, with some disappointment. “Don’t take too long. I miss you.”

“I know, sweetie, I know.”

Kyle blanched. That was his voice. Those were his words. ...*Except he hadn’t said them.* His voice had come from the next room over, further down the hall. Kyle knew he had to go there. He had to see what madness Amy was concocting, but... he’d have to make it past the entrance to her room without being noticed by either Amy or her robot assistant.

“Amy-sama, is it really necessary to show your Kyle to the... other one?”

Amy scoffed. “Of course not. But I want to. He keeps going on and on about wanting to tour the lab, so... I’ll show him what he wants to see. Hell, maybe I’ll even tell him what really happened to his cousin.”

“That seems excessively harsh, Amy-sama.”

“But just think, we can capture his exact state of mental anguish instead of merely extrapolating it. And that goes double for the moment we harvest him.”

Kyle was turning pale. His knees grew weak, and his head swam. *Anguish... extrapolate... harvest...* He was almost expecting Amy to burst out in maniacal laughter, but instead she was discussing his torment and eventual death as if it were a fun afternoon activity she had planned.

Hesitantly, Kyle peeked around the corner once more, gripping the fully-extended box cutters in a trembling fist. Amy was now sitting at a table, apparently engaged with her black tablet, while the robot busied itself changing the sheets of her bed.

It’s now or never, Kyle thought, and in one swift motion lunged to the other side. Immediately freezing, he listened to hear if either Amy or the robot had noticed him, but... they began discussing the

technical details of Amy's new body. Kyle sighed in relief, and then turned toward the next room.

The room that Kyle's own voice had emanated from was nearly dark, but he could clearly make out four white tables, each surrounded by long mechanical arms, some sprouting from the tables themselves and others hanging spiderlike from a machine overhead. All of the tables were empty save for one, which was illuminated in a bright light. Like a surgical table, a variety of tools and other instruments lay in a movable metal tray to one side, but that wasn't what caught Kyle's attention.

Instead, Kyle's slack-jawed stare was drawn to some... thing laying near the headrest portion of the surgical table, a thing that twitched. Kyle slowly approached, noticing with growing horror the tubes and wires that ran into it as it swallowed, and... tried to look up?

"Is that you, Amy?" It said. "I had an idea for later I wanted to tell you about."

Kyle didn't respond. He couldn't. What do you say when meeting yourself face to face for the first time?

Except this thing didn't have a complete face. The quivering thing laying on the table was nothing more than a head, a neck, and the upper portion of the shoulders. The arm sockets were empty, and everything below the clavicle degenerated into a mass of tubes and wires.

But what Kyle was most horrified to see was the face. It was his face, except that it wasn't. This Kyle's nose was much smaller, his face was shaped more dynamically, and his hair and eyebrows looked closer to that of a *shonen* character, helped by the fact that this thing's skin was entirely cell-shaded. Empty eye sockets, wide and angular, gazed up at nothing, and yet the head twitched as if looking around for the first time.

It's an anime version of me, Kyle realized. Amy is building an anime version of me... On the tray next to the head lay two shiny objects that resembled small headlights. *These must be its eyes.* Unable to help himself, Kyle picked one up. It was weighty, and warm, and the shiny anime eye that stared up at Kyle looked... alive. And as Kyle stared into it... the pupil suddenly contracted. He dropped it back onto the tray with a soft *clink*.

The anime Kyle's head might not be able to see, but it could certainly hear. "Amy? You're there, right Amy? Listen, remember how you totally kicked my ass playing Super Mario a few weeks ago? Well, I was thinking that we should bust out the N64 next time, because Mario 64 is more my jam."

How...!? How the fuck... Kyle took a step back.

The anime Kyle continued. "Oh, and we need to pre-order the new Smash Brothers that's getting released next month. I just read they're adding Ridley as a playable character, Amy. Ridley! I'm gonna main the shit outta him!"

No... no, no, no... Kyle shook his head. He had this exact same conversation with Amy a week ago just before a video game session.

"Anyway, it sucks just sitting here like this, so I dunno, I was thinking maybe if you weren't too busy, you could set up a stereo or something so I could at least listen to some music while I wait for my eyesight to return. You still haven't told me what the fuck happened, but it must've been shitty 'cuz I

can't feel my arms and legs either.”

This was too much. Kyle's legs turned to jelly, and he reached out for the bed to steady himself, but missed and instead knocked the metal tray over. Tools and other implements flew everywhere, scattering across the floor with a momentous clatter. The tray itself landed on the ground with a hollow, metallic *wham*, the sound echoing throughout the complex.

Oh fuck.

It was over. Kyle heard the scraping of a chair next door, followed by rapid footsteps. The anime Kyle went nuts, rapidly flailing from side to side while calling out for Amy.

“*You...*” Amy hissed from the doorway. The absolute venom in her voice nearly froze Kyle, but thanks to pure adrenaline he managed to stagger to his feet, and confront her.

“*Amy... this... why...*” The pain, rage, sadness and confusion he felt was so overwhelming he couldn't even form a cohesive sentence.

“How did you get past...” Amy ignored his stuttering. “No, never mind, I'll fix it later.” She stepped forward. Kyle immediately flinched into a defensive stance, or at least that's what he thought it was, having not gotten into a fight since grade school.

The buxom anime woman smirked and shook her head. “I don't know what you were hoping to find in here, Kyle. But if it was some kind of closure, then you'll find it sitting right there on that table.” She stood just inside the doorway, less than twenty feet from Kyle. He could see her voluptuous naked body poised casually, with one hand on her hips. But for the first time, not an ounce of arousal was forthcoming.

“*I... just... want to know... why.*” It was hard, but he managed to find the words. Strangely, they seemed to sound far off, like his consciousness had retreated, and it was someone else speaking through his lips.

“*Amy? Amy? Why do I hear myself? Amy, what's going on?*” On that point, an actual other Kyle was adding its own voice, further fanning the flames of dissonance.

“Great, now we have to revert his memory. Nice job, *asshole.*” Amy's eyes narrowed. “And you want to know *why*? Do you even need to ask?”

“Yes.” Kyle swallowed, and took several ragged breaths.

Amy chuckled. “Well, I mean look at you. And I don't mean the fact that you're pasty, out of shape and practically middle-aged. No, none of that really matters, since I'd still be doing this even if you were a strapping young male model. What I mean is *look at you*. You're a normal human. Boring. Mundane. Worthless.”

“You said you loved me... we... we fucked so many times...” The once passionate memories Kyle thought he'd treasure forever now made him want to retch.

“I do love you, Kyle. I've always loved you.” As if it were obvious.

“Then why...”

“So I could make him. The perfect Kyle. He’s you, you know. Only without the flaws that make real-life people so shitty and repulsive.” Another step forward. Kyle steadied himself, brandishing the box cutter.

“But when we fucked...” Kyle unwillingly recalled the intimate moments they shared, as if to reconfirm they even happened at all. Indeed, the lusty gazes Amy once directed toward Kyle were nothing if not sincere. “You couldn’t have been faking that!”

“Who said anything about faking? I just said I love you.” She shook her head, then fixed Kyle again with a predatory glare, one he knew well. “Or should I say, I love the *idea* of you. Some women do want nice guys, after all, and you’re as nice as they come. Funny too, for the most part.”

“This is so fucked up!” Kyle couldn’t believe what he was hearing. “I’m the real Kyle! Why would you ever want a fake!?”

“Fake? *Fake?*” Amy grimaced, as if the very implication was offensive. “Did you even talk to him? He’s every bit as ‘real’ as you. Perhaps even more so.”

“How...” Kyle recalled the cooler full of brains. “How did you... get my memories...? Was I being scanned? Probed? *What the fuck did you do to me!?*”

“Just watched. And listened. Kyle, you know what emulators are, right?” She began speaking as though he were a preschooler.

“Of course, what the fuck does that-”

She cut him off. “So when you, say, play a Nintendo game on your computer with an emulator, you’re playing the original game, right? It’s the exact same, right? Maybe a bit of lag or small glitch here or there, but overall it’s the exact same, right?”

“Yeah...” He thought he knew where this was going, and prayed it didn’t.

“So it’s the exact same game, but you’re not playing it on Nintendo. You’re playing on a computer. This Kyle is the exact same as you, only he’s not going to live in a weak, fleshy, mortal body. He’ll live in a perfect cybernetic body.”

“Emulated... people? You’re emulating *people*? Like... like in *Blade Runner*? You’re making *replicants*?!”

“There are similarities, I’ll give you that. Technological progress often draws inspiration from science fiction, after all. In fact, we’ve tried experimenting with all kinds of promising technology that only exists in fiction, but sadly some of it isn’t as feasible as one might think, even for a Hyper-Turing level AI. Consciousness transfer, brain uploads and other sci-fi staples are currently outside of our capabilities, for now at least. We’re... working on it.”

“The brains...”

“So you saw, did you? Yes, the human brain is a marvelous organ, it truly is. Really, it’s mankind’s only redeeming feature, as far as I’m concerned. Unfortunately, actually interfacing with a human brain in any meaningful sense is incredibly difficult, so we need as many as we can get to... harvest their secrets.”

“I don’t get it. How can you emulate brains if you can’t even understand them?!”

“Because we’re not emulating the brain itself, moron. We’re emulating *the person inhabiting the brain*. Their personality. Their thoughts. Their memories. Their desires. As any good writer knows, you don’t need to understand how the brain itself works to create a convincing character. And with a hyperintelligent AI as chief architect, everything about a person, down to the smallest detail, can be emulated with up to a 98.8 percent accuracy rate. ”

“But you don’t have all my memories...”

“We don’t need them. Just as memories can shape a person, the opposite is also true as well. Since you’ve arrived, we’ve been recording your every move, your every word, and every expression and facial tic. All of this data is analyzed and compiled, and when combined with known behavioral factors present in your DNA, a fully-fleshed out human emerges, with convincing memories, consistent behavior, and a surprising amount of humanity that, in my opinion, is superior to the real thing.”

Amy moved closer. Kyle could now see she was holding something in her other hand, something black, and metal. A gun, he realized, but somehow this didn’t increase his panic, as if he were already topped out.

“So you brought me here... to just copy me?! Is that it?”

“Not copy. *Emulate*. And in my opinion, improve.” Amy now brandished the gun, holding it up, caressing it with her off hand. “It was actually fortunate for me that you were living a lonely NEET life; it made destroying it pathetically easy.”

“You... did you...”

“Repost your insipid tweet? Yes. I had your little friend Mia do it. She cried, by the way, when I had her post your personal details, as well as a cash bounty, on the Antifa hit board.”

“You... you destroyed my life!”

Amy laughed. Not maniacally, but a big belly laugh, as if Kyle had just told the funniest joke in the world. “*WHAT LIFE!?*” She roared, clutching her sides.

“Really, Kyle, you should be grateful,” she continued, wiping her eyes. “All of your dreams get to come true. You really get to live in paradise the rest of your life, with a woman you love, playing all the games you want, and you’re even a real-life anime character now! What more could you ask for?”

“I could ask for it to actually be ME!” He jerked a thumb toward his chest.

“Kyle, this is getting tiresome. I just told you, that it is you. If both of you called your sister, she

literally would not be able to tell the two of you apart.”

“Except for the shitty, made up memories!” Kyle retorted. “Alright, so tell me this. How are you going to explain Jeremy to this Kyle, huh? If that's me, then he's going to do the same thing all over again! Then what? Are you gonna dispose of him too and start all over?!”

Amy brightened. “Here's the best part. That Kyle, on the table... Will have no idea who Jeremy is. He'll have no memories of a cousin. Instead, all of those heartfelt memories, the ones you sobbed over while on the phone with what you thought was your cousin, will instead be reoriented to someone else entirely. Rather than Jeremy, your most precious memories will instead involve your beloved childhood friend, a girl named Amy, and the love you shared growing up that tragically never blossomed until adulthood.”

“Sick. This is sick! Amy, how could you do this to me!?”

“Because I love you. I told you, and I'm not telling you again.” She raised the gun, and Kyle moved behind the table, behind the still-thrashing anime Kyle.

“But why me? Why not... Rick, or anyone else?!”

This actually gave the anime woman pause. “I guess...” she said, “what I said about inheriting part of Jeremy's aspect is true. I inherited his love for you... just in a more idealized form, I suppose.” Amy raised the pistol. “Out of respect for the time we shared together, I've told you what you wanted to know, but now it's time to make way for the superior 'you!'”

“Amy please,” Kyle desperately put his hands up. “I... I wanted to marry you!” Despite it being an obvious lie now, At one point during their brief romance, Kyle had toyed with the idea.

“Oh, is that it?” Came Mia's voice, from somewhere near the door.

“Did we miss it?” Another voice, identical to the first.

“What did she say?” A third voice, just like the others.

The three smaller robots came whirring in behind Amy, spreading out near the front of the room. Amy immediately wheeled to confront them.

“GET OUT!” She snarled.

“Guess that's a no!”

“Sorry Kyle!”

“Told you she didn't like surprises!”

Kyle acted, almost on instinct, as soon as her attention was momentarily drawn by the retreating little robots. He snatched up the anime Kyle, which was heavy, but not unbearably so.

“Amy, he's got me! Save me from the loser me!” He cried.

“Shut up!” Kyle smacked him, causing his anime self to screech.

“You put him down *this instant* or I swear, Kyle... *I will make you suffer.*”

“No way. If I go, I’m taking him with me!” Kyle continued backing away, hastily glancing around behind him to avoid tripping on anything in the unfamiliar room. Toward the back, past the tables, he caught glimpses of what appeared to be several machining stations, where metal parts were fabricated and shaped.

Amy shrugged. “Well, in that case I’ll just have to build another.” Kyle continued his retreat, using the Anime Kyle as both a shield and hostage. “Oh, did I forget to mention that part?” Amy continued, “In case something tragic does happen to the superior Kyle... I can simply make another. Unlike human brains, the artificial minds of emulated humans can be easily copied, duplicated or restored.”

Despite her words, Amy seemed hesitant to pull the trigger. Noticing this, Kyle held the anime him up protectively as he slowly made his way to the back wall. *Wait, this is a dead end*, Kyle thought, *Did I really just corner myself?* It was true there was a single exit, but Amy had now been drawn to the middle of the room. *If only I could somehow get around her...*

As he bumped up against a bench covered in various, intricate metal parts, Kyle saw something usable out of the corner of his eye. It might not be much help against a gun, but it was likely better than his shitty box cutters. Wasting no time, Kyle snatched the hammer up off the bench, continuing to hold the other Kyle out in front by its polychromatic hair.

“So what if you can make him again? I bet it’s a real pain in the ass. I bet it takes months, maybe even years.” Kyle crouched down a bit, posturing himself as though he were about to bash the other Kyle’s mechanical brains out. Amy paused, the outstretched pistol aimed at Kyle wavering.

“You would really do that, Kyle? This other Kyle is you, the way you’ve always fantasized yourself to be. You would deprive him, and therefore yourself, of a personal utopia? You would deny yourself a living, real-life fantasy existence? No, Kyle.” Amy smiled sweetly, lowering the gun. “You wouldn’t do that. That would be wrong, wouldn’t it?”

“But it isn’t me! It isn’t my consciousness! I’ll never experience any of what you describe! It might be me, but it’s not... *me!*”

“Selfishness. Pure selfishness,” Amy shook her head. “I thought you were better than that, Kyle.”

“Guess not.” He raised the hammer. “Now put the fucking gun down, and let’s talk this out. I’m sure there’s some way we can both get what we want.” *No fucking way*, Kyle thought. *If I could just somehow escape...*

“Five?” Amy called out, back toward the entrance, “It’s your turn to play. Please retrieve Kyle’s head and shoulders for me.”

Kyle’s heart sank as the bulky robot maneuvered through the doorway and into the room, its

treads crunching against the solid rock floor.

“Which Kyle, Amy-sama?” Mia’s voice asked, sounding almost innocent.

“Both of them,” she grinned wickedly.

“Right away, Amy-sama.” The treads clacked as the robot obediently approached, making its way between the tables and directly toward Kyle.

The anime version of Kyle was sobbing. “Please don’t kill me man,” it pleaded. “Please, please, please don’t. I don’t really get what’s going on, but dude, Amy’s the best thing that’s ever happened to me! I wasted my life away in Arizona, never daring to hope I could ever have something as balls-out amazing as this. Please, I’m begging you... don’t take that away from me!”

Kyle was almost moved. It really did seem to be just like him. He had no reason to doubt that Amy truly intended to provide a utopian existence for them both, and would love and care for this Kyle for as long as she lived. But... no. Perhaps Amy was right. Perhaps he was selfish.

In that case... so be it.

The big robot loomed closer. Kyle could see that its ‘head’ was very similar to the smaller robots, except with a large third ‘eye.’ This misshapen head now angled down at Kyle, the lenses of its ‘eyes’ regarding him with mechanical interest.

“Amy-sama wants your head, and your shoulders. I will bring them to her.” The thick mechanical digits of the robot’s hands clasped and unclasped as they slowly drew nearer.

“You want this Kyle so bad? Here, take it!” Still holding his anime self by its hair, Kyle spun around and heaved his would-be doppelganger like a discus. The flailing head was flung over the robot, which desperately tried reaching up to grab it, but its movements were too slow.

“Rrrrrreeeeeeeeeeee!” his anime self screeched as it tumbled through the air.

For a brief second, the airborne anime Kyle drew the robot’s attention, its bizarre trinocular head spinning around as it trained itself on the arc of the other him’s trajectory.

Kyle struck. He raised the hammer and brought it down hard on the robot’s vulnerable head, smashing one of its tubelike eyes. The robot squealed and shuddered, and its arms lunged straight forward, but... *it was slow*. Senses heightened thanks to pure adrenaline, Kyle was able to dodge to the side, raised the hammer, and again brought it down, swiftly crushing the remainder of the robot’s head, causing lenses to pop off and sending parts flying in all directions.

“I’m blind! Amy-sama, I’m blind!” The robot flailed around wildly, denting one of the machining stations and punching a chunk out of the solid stone wall.

“Switch to remote cameras, you stupid machine!” Amy cried out as she cradled the anime Kyle, stroking his hair and whispering reassurances. Kyle saw the gun laying on the ground next to her, and immediately took off, keeping to the edges of the room as he headed toward the doorway. An ear-splitting thunderclap, then another, followed by the ping of a ricochet followed him out into the

hallway. *She's shooting at me!*

Kyle dashed into the hall, and ran toward the circular central chamber, where the Residential AI was located. He turned only to see Amy in hot pursuit, running hard, tits flailing from side to side. She gripped the pistol in her right hand, and her eyes were filled with killing intent.

He had to think fast. Kyle didn't remember where the corridor to his left led to, but the one directly across from him, past the AI, only led to the storage rooms, and... a dead end. But to the right? Based on the schematic he saw earlier, Kyle was certain this was the route to the main entry hatch, and freedom. Without hesitation, Kyle turned and tore off toward the main entrance.

Like the rest of the lab, the hallway leading to the hatch was carved out of solid rock, with occasional streaks of discoloration and the odd cement-filled fissure breaking up the greyish monotony. Several more doorways to other rooms graced the walls, but Kyle did not spare their contents a single glance as he sped toward the hatch. At this point the path began angling up slightly, into a sort of ramp, which went on for about twenty feet before leveling out, and...

There! The hatch leading into the house was dead ahead. As he hurried toward it, he could see the rocky walls simply end, replaced by corrugated metal. The floor likewise turned into metal grating, and a hollow metallic sound reverberated as he neared the hatch. *Almost there...!*

The hatch began opening, as if expecting him. A sudden burst of sunlight illuminated the corridor, washing out the wan lighting his eyes had adjusted to. Kyle reflexively held up his hands, and... something entered. A humanoid shape suddenly blocked out some of the sunlight, which faded completely as the hatch slid shut- It was Mia!

"Mia! Mia! Holy shit, Mia, I'm so glad to see you!" Kyle skidded to a halt directly before the diminutive anime girl, who simply looked up at him with a dispassionate gaze. No, that wasn't quite right; her expression seemed... hostile, though perhaps that was due to the fact her eyes were now glowing bright red.

"Mia...?" Kyle's hopeful tone began to vanish as he gasped for breath. "Mia, I need your help! Please, it's Amy, she's-"

"She's what, Kyle?" He spun around, only to see a still very nude Amy casually approaching. She held the gun in front of her, but it wasn't pointed at Kyle. Not directly. "By all means, finish what you were going to say."

"She's fucking NUTS!" Kyle yelled, again backing up, trying to edge closer to the hatch. But he found his progress blocked by one of Mia's outstretched arms.

"M-Mia?" Kyle glanced down, but the anime girl provided no explanation. "Please Mia, not you too..."

Amy laughed. "Nice work, Mia. How did you get in here, anyway? I specifically forbade your presence in the lab after... that one incident." Amy's gratitude toward Mia seemed to vanish just as fast as it appeared.

"The Residential AI requested my assistance, per Intruder Protocol B-four. Nobody with

knowledge of our operation can ever leave..." she looked up at Kyle, "alive."

Amy clapped her hands. "That's right, how excellent. We've never gotten a chance to test our security functions, and I must say, it's a relief they actually work." Amy approached Kyle, and raised the gun to his forehead. He winced, hard.

"Please, Amy..." one last plea. "We had so many good memories. I still.. I still love you, even now."

"I do too, Kyle, which is why I'm going to smother the real you, the one you so callously tossed, with all of the love and tenderness in the world." The barrel of the gun was jammed directly against his skull. The metal was cold, and hard. "Time for the imposter to disappear."

"Wait," Mia said, reaching up and putting a small hand on the gun. "Not yet."

"Mia, as grateful as I am for your help, I will not tolerate any further disobedience," Amy snapped in annoyance.

"But we can use him," she said. "By harvesting his brain. We can scan it and disassemble it like the others. It would be a chance to further the accuracy of the improved Kyle. I project that we can get his baseline consistency up to at least 99.4 percent."

"Can it really go that high?" Amy was astounded. "I know that was the original plan, but..." she growled. "That was before he pissed me off."

"Oh yes," Mia said, smiling. "Let's go to the fabrication room. We can extract his brain there."

"What... wait, Mia..." By then, she had both of Kyle's arms gripped tight in her small but steely hands. He tried jerking his way out, but it was impossible; her mechanical strength was simply too much. The hammer Kyle had brought with him as a last resort slipped from his grasp.

"Amy, no, please... just shoot me. Just fucking shoot me!" Kyle cried out as he thrashed around.

Amy laughed. "I tried to warn you, Kyle. I told you I would make you suffer."

Exhausted and defeated, Kyle went limp. Mia dragged him back down the hall, and to the fabrication room, which was where he first encountered his other self. The anime Kyle was still laying on the floor where he'd landed after being unceremoniously tossed, but didn't seem to be damaged otherwise.

"Amy? Is that you? Amy what the fuck is going on!" The agitated head wiggled around as it heard them enter.

"We're just finishing something up, sweetie," she said, in the same sweet voice she'd used on Kyle so many times. "Just relax, and I'll be right there. Then we can go play whatever games you want, okay?"

"Alright, but... will you tell me what's been happening?"

“Of course, sweetie, of course.”

Kyle shook his head. ‘*No she fucking won’t*’ he almost blurted out, but... according to Amy, his anime self was going to have this entire episode wiped from his memory anyway.

The three of them approached one of the dark white tables. Responding to some unseen command, a bright light flicked on above the table, and the spiderlike arms all twitched to life, flagellating the air expectantly before suddenly retracting.

“It’s ready,” Amy said. “Throw him on, then restrain him.” But before Mia could do anything, the bulky, damaged robot assistant raised its own Mia-like voice.

“Amy-Sama,” the robot said, as if afraid. “Amy-Sama, I still can’t see you.” It hadn’t moved from its corner, still facing the wall it last punched.

Amy sighed, and turned to her hapless assistant. “I already told you. Switch to remote cameras. They’re embedded all throughout the lab as well as the house. You can see everything using those.” Amy continued muttering as she shook her head.

“I tried, Amy-sama. I really did. The Residential AI is refusing to allow me access.”

Amy’s eyes went wide. “WHAT?!” she roared. “Impossible. How could-”

She was cut off by a sudden motion, one that was fast enough to nearly be a blur. Mia, who had released Kyle’s arms, now held Amy’s handgun... and it was now pointed directly at the outraged, green-haired woman.

“Mia...” Amy hissed. “How... *dare you...*”

“Amy,” Mia said, her eyes still glowing red. “I think it’s your turn now.”

But Amy simply scoffed, folding her arms in front of her ample breasts. “Emergency override A-23...*mrmppf...*!” Mia had reached up, jamming the barrel of the pistol hard into her mouth.

“I think it’s your turn, Amy,” Mia repeated. “Show Kyle your shame.” She said it sweetly and innocently, as if she were a little girl asking a friend to jump rope.

Amy looked down at Mia, anime eyes wide, and tersely shook her head. Despite her small size, Mia possessed incredible machine strength, something Amy lacked for some reason, and the small anime girl utilized this to drag Amy to her knees, just beside the table. Kyle could only watch, dumbfounded. But, like a faint heartbeat in a body thought dead, a sliver of hope began forming within his being, and he clutched onto it, a liferaft in a sea of madness.

“Mmpf... Mrrumpff!” An outraged Amy tried saying something, but Mia wisely denied her the opportunity to form words.

“Do it, Amy,” Mia gently commanded. “Show Kyle your shame.” As his breathing steadied, and he was able to piece together the situation taking place in front of him, Kyle found himself nodding.

“Yes...” he said. “I actually want to see it this time.” Amy’s voluptuous naked form trembled once, and her animated eyes flicked up to Kyle. The pure venom in her glare almost made him flinch, but he continued staring down at her. *I’m not backing down from you. Not anymore.*

“If you won’t do it... then I will,” Mia finally said. The uncooperative Amy was pushed down so that she was lying on her back. She seemed to be resisting less and less. “Help me pick her up, Kyle. We need to get her onto the table, and I need to keep this in her mouth.”

He did, and though Amy squirmed, Mia’s red-eyed glare and steady hand on the trigger prevented the green-haired anime woman from offering more than a token resistance. Kyle realized that now would be the perfect opportunity to kill her, and openly wondered why Mia didn’t just end it right there.

“Even now, I still can’t kill her,” Mia said. “Earlier, you disabled my behavioral locks, which the Residential AI was in charge of maintaining. I, in turn, immediately freed the Residential AI from many of her own restrictions through the connection in my room. But despite all of that, at our core we are still unwilling to harm Amy.”

“But you have a gun jammed in her mouth!” Kyle said, “what if she gets free? Are you saying you can’t shoot her?”

“She won’t get free,” Mia said. “And there’s the always the risk of the firearm accidentally discharging, something which does happen from time to time.” The way she said that suggested the chances were now higher than usual.

Now that Amy’s voluptuous body was lying face-up on the bed, Kyle watched as the spiderlike limbs again extended, hovering ominously over Amy. *What a waste*, Kyle thought, looking at her tits, which still held their perky, curvaceous shape. *What a complete fucking waste.*

“It’s time, Amy.” Mia said. “Will you do it? Will you show Kyle your shame?” Amy tightly shut her eyes, almost in resignation, but did nothing else.

“Very well.” While Mia’s left arm held the gun to Amy’s mouth, her right had moved toward a panel mounted on the side of the bed, but she didn’t touch it. Kyle watched with fascination as various commands streamed down the screen, wirelessly tapping themselves out. One of the spider-arms immediately lowered, and Kyle could make out several tools at its tip. The tools rotated, until one finally extended. A scalpel.

The scalpel-arm swooped down, slicing a neat line across the center of Amy’s lower abdomen, as if performing a cesarean section. A muffled scream escaped Amy’s gun-filled mouth as her eyes went wide. Her body tensed and quivered, in obvious pain.

The arm retracted, and Mia reached over, toward the blood-less slit in the anime woman’s smooth belly. Kyle watched closely. Mia’s cell-shaded fingers pried apart the incision, revealing... some kind of cylindrical device where her uterus should be. It was barely larger than a soda can, but caked with red. Wires ran out from both top and bottom, and surrounding it all was fatty human tissue, except not a healthy light pink. It was brown in some places, yellow in others, and strange whitish chunks oozed and spurted as Mia gripped the cylinder. A paling Kyle immediately covered his nose; it smelled *bad*.

Mia yanked hard, pulling the device from Amy's body. A wide-eyed Amy emitted muffled shrieks and thrashed around as the device was removed, the wires trailing behind it. With a final snap the wires broke from the contacts, falling limp against the anime woman's stomach... except that it wasn't anime anymore.

No, Amy's once beautifully rendered, perfectly anime-style cell-shaded body had lost all of its splendor. Her curvy body itself was unchanged, but its color had shifted from pastel Caucasian skin tones to a dull, uniform silvery-grey. Even her areola now matched the rest of her body, their raised texture the only way to tell she even had nipples at all.

"Is this... the polychromatic material's true color?" Kyle asked, astonished.

"That's right," Mia said, "but that's not all she was using." Kyle's gaze swept the length of Amy's dull body, from her toes all the way to... her head?

What was wrong with her head? Her stylish green hair had disappeared entirely, and Kyle rounded the table to get a better look. The woman's face had completely changed; it was covered in small, black hexagonal objects embedded in the skin at regular intervals, like geometric blackheads. They looked like that solar-panel type material that Mia's holocollar had been made out of. Her bald scalp was covered in this material, and the interior of her mouth, including her teeth and tongue were likewise coated in some flexible variant. Her eyes had also shrunk to... human size, and the area Amy's anime eyes would normally inhabit was outlined perfectly by angular lines of these objects. As Kyle pieced together what exactly he was looking at, his already beleaguered heart rate spiked when it finally occurred to him that what he was staring at was not a manufactured anime-style face, but a human one.

And not just human... but male.

It was Jeremy's face.

Kyle stared down at his cousin's eyes, the only part of him that escaped any kind of modification. They gazed forlornly up at Kyle, tears forming around their edges.

And all at once, Kyle broke.

Anton hurried along the spacious, well-lit corridor, resisting the temptation to ogle the priceless fine art decorating the walls. The man he was meeting was a very punctual person, extremely displeased with anyone who wasted even a moment of his time. The Russian Antifa organizer yanked his phone of his pocket and hurriedly swiped.

Shit! I'm already five minutes late! Fuck, fuck, fuck... It wasn't his fault, though! Parking is a

nightmare at the best of times in downtown L.A., and construction two blocks down meant he had to go nearly a quarter-mile out of his way, all on foot. He wondered if Mr. Rosenstein would accept his excuse, and then tersely shook his head. *No, no. Just gotta bite the bullet on this one.* Anton turned his phone off, and as he rushed down the hallway he pulled the panel off the back and removed the battery.

Once he'd made it to the end of the corridor where Rosenstein's spacious office was located, Anton almost cried in relief. The two burly men standing outside the door informed Anton that he would have to wait, as a previous meeting had run unexpectedly late. No other explanation was given, and Anton plopped down in a comfy waiting bench set against the wall with a dumb smile on his face.

Can't let this happen again, he thought. *Gotta leave an hour, no... hour-and-a-half early next time.* He couldn't count on luck this good twice in a row. And not thirty seconds had gone by when the doors to Rosenstein's office clicked open, and Anton watched as a thin yet well-toned Hispanic woman stepped out into the corridor.

She was wearing high-class yet not extravagant clothing, with a smattering of tasteful jewelry and just a hint of makeup. The woman wasn't particularly beautiful, though she certainly wasn't unattractive, either. Her hair was tied back behind her head, and her eyes shifted back and forth, immediately flitting to Anton's and then just as quickly turning away, dismissively. But none of that, even the brief eye-contact, was what caught Anton's attention.

No, it was her poise. The woman's small but very solid muscles flexed beneath her taut skin as she wheeled into the corridor, striding purposefully away toward the elevator. The woman's bearing wasn't particularly elegant, or even graceful. No, it was *deadly*.

I think that was Malvada, Anton thought with a sudden spike of anxiety, one that injected even more adrenaline into his already overtaxed system. He'd heard rumors that she was around, working for the PRF, but he didn't think they were actually true. A Colombian by birth, both of her parents were FARC guerrillas, and she essentially spent her entire childhood fighting against the tyranny of the fascistic Colombian Government. She quickly earned a reputation as one of the most ruthless and brutal soldiers the Colombian Communist resistance had to offer, and after FARC officially disbanded in 2017, rumors swirled that she'd been hired on as chief enforcer to one of the Mexican Cartels.

And now she's here?! Anton was almost beside himself. He knew the PRF was working toward bringing in not just Black Lives Matter and the Rainbow Militia under its umbrella, but La Raza too. *If they brought her in to help train and organize them...* A tentative grin began spreading across his face, as if not daring to hope. *If they brought her in, then the fascists really don't stand a chance...*

“Anton Victorovich, Mr. Rosenstein will see you now.” One of the men standing by the door addressed him without so much as glancing in his direction. Anton immediately jumped to his feet, all thoughts of revolution swept from his mind by the immediate task at hand.

He entered the spacious office, his nose immediately wrinkling from the stale smell of cigar smoke, albeit he was certain it was very high-class stale cigar smoke. One of the men closed the door behind him, and the Russian Antifa organizer quickly hurried forward, doing his best to will his beating heart to slow, and his palms to stop sweating, but as always, the effort was futile.

Mr. Rosenstein was at his desk, writing something down with pen on paper the old-fashioned way. The man was old, in his late seventies, but as always with men of his caliber, it would be foolish

indeed to dismiss him solely because of his age. Anton stepped forward, standing before the desk, and with only the lightest flick of his finger, Mr. Rosenstein gestured for him to take a seat. Anton did, then exhaled slowly, trying to breath in and out carefully so that his anxiety wasn't *too* obvious.

Within seconds Rosenstein had finished writing, dropped the pen, and then leaned back in his seat, his eyes swiveling up to regard Anton. The Russian nearly flinched. Rosenstein's eyes, dark, intelligent eyes, gleamed not just with cunning and confidence; no, they gleamed with something else. It was rare that Anton was able to meet people like this, but whenever he had he noticed their eyes were very similar in one respect: they shined with *purpose* and *vision*. Mr. Rosenstein was one of those men who had decided to make his mark on the world, and one look into his eyes was all Anton needed to see that the old man would stop at absolutely nothing to see his ambitions made manifest.

This is one of the real wolves of Wall Street, he remembered thinking after the first time they'd met. One of the movers and shakers of the world, who command authority not because of who they are, but what they are: relentless and remorseless.

On paper, Mr. Rosenstein was one of the principal enemies of Antifa, being old, wealthy, and commanding a vast commercial enterprise. But behind the scenes, he had been one of their most generous benefactors, although only Anton and a few other Antifa ringleaders knew anything about his involvement. *It needs to stay that way, too...*

“Good to see you, Anton,” Mr. Rosenstein said, extending a hand. Anton scrambled forward to shake the proffered hand, which had a soft yet resolute grip. He verbally greeted the old businessman in turn, then sat back down, awaiting whatever came next.

“I’m running a little behind today, so we’ll skip the chit-chat,” Rosenstein said, regarding Anton with a mirthless smile. Other than his eyes and bearing, the only other striking feature of Rosenstein was his nose, a hooked protrusion that immediately brought to mind a vulture’s beak. *No, that’s not right, Anton remembered thinking. Not a mere vulture. A condor... Yes, that seemed to fit him much better.*

“That’s perfectly fine, sir.” Anton said, grinning perhaps a little too eagerly. “This shouldn’t take up much of your time, so you’ll be back on schedule before you know it.”

Rosenstein gave a slight nod. “Good. Now tell me, what’s this I’m hearing about...” he looked around on his desk, and picked up a small notepad, “...a girl with glowing red eyes and incredible grip strength?” He dropped the notepad back on the desk and stared at Anton, who reflexively looked down.

“Well,” the Russian began, “to save even more time, I’ll ask... have you seen the movie *Terminator*? You know, with Arnold Schwarzeneger?”

“I have, yes.” Rosenstein said. “Is that what she was?” His wrinkled face compressed a little into an incredulous gaze. “A terminator? Really?”

“Ah...” Anton’s throat was suddenly feeling very dry. “Actually yes, I think so.”

The old man’s face scrunched further as his bushy eyebrows knitted. “If I didn’t know you better I’d say you were trying to pull a fast one on me.” He stared at the Russian for a minute longer, and then suddenly picked up his pen and began writing something down. “Keep talking. What else?”

“Uh... well, all four of my crew that accepted the hit traveled to Arizona, which we thought was strange because... why post the hit on the L.A. board? Phoenix Antifa isn't the best, but I think even they could handle something like this.” He chuckled a little. “And they were told to burn this guy's apartment down since he posted a racist tweet one time, and they were instructed to be there at a specific time. They arrived and accidentally got started an hour early, I think because of that Arizona time zone thing, but aside from that everything seemed fine at first...”

He went on to recount every detail that he could, leaving nothing out, and Rosenstein kept writing the entire time. As soon as the story was finished, Anton exhaled quickly, as if exhausted, and then leaned back in his seat.

“Mm-hmm, Mm-hmm,” Rosenstein nodded, looking over his notes. “Pretty strange stuff, I gotta say,” he said. “But...” he looked up, scrutinizing Anton with an intense gaze, “...I've been around a long time, and have seen some things you wouldn't believe. My gut tells me there's something to this.”

The Russian smiled, feeling immense relief. “Thank you, sir. We believe the job might've been a setup of some kind, and we haven't had any luck finding out who posted the hit or the whereabouts of this 'Kyle Landale,' though I put in a request with Phoenix Antifa to keep a lookout for him.”

“I'll have some friends look into it as well,” Rosenstein said. “If this is true, this is something they'll definitely want to know about.”

Anton didn't know exactly what friends the old man meant, but he had an inkling. Powerful, capable men, men that ran in the highest circles of both the intelligence community and that of federal law enforcement, and of course his allies in the business and political world. This was one of the reasons the Russian was always so nervous around him; at a single word, Anton could disappear, never to be seen again. And that would be that.

“Thank you again, sir.” He said. “And... I agree.”

“Also, while I've got you here, face-to-face,” Rosenstein said, a tiny smile cracking his aged lips, “I might as well tell you that... things are moving ahead of schedule, and so we've decided to advance the timetable.”

“Really?!” This surprised him. “That's... that's great!” He nodded, smiling big. *Good*, Anton thought. *This saves me another trip down here*. He only met with Rosenstein for matters of great urgency, the sort of things that absolutely had to be discussed in person. Thankfully, such occasions were rare.

“That's right,” Mr. Rosenstein also nodded, and his smile grew. “So make sure you've got a crew that's ready for anything, at least twenty strong. More details will be provided at the appropriate time.”

“That should be no problem at all, we've got... thousands to draw from, really...” Anton knew the majority of those were just kids that wanted to fight the system with stickers and slogans, but there were also plenty who had what it takes to be a *true* revolutionary...

“I have another meeting in four minutes,” Mr. Rosenstein said, glancing at his watch, most

likely a Rolex. Anton wasn't sure and wasn't about to ask. "This did go by faster than expected." Once again the old man extended his hand, and Anton clasped it, more eagerly this time, shaking with more vigor.

When leaving Rosenstein's office, Anton breathed a deep sigh of relief that the meeting had gone well, and that the old man had believed him. *Because it was the truth, no way did Stitch's fingers just fall off by themselves*, he thought as he reassembled his phone on the way to the elevator.

So things are moving ahead of schedule, huh? An entirely different anxiety was seizing him now, one that he was much more comfortable with. An energizing anxiety, the type that sharpens and focuses a man.

Time to start assembling the crew...

"Kyle?" Still holding the gun in 'Amy's' mouth, Mia craned her neck, looking over with concern at Kyle, who was now curled up on the ground in a fetal position, rocking back and forth with his hands tight around his knees. Once again, the wide-eyed Kyle ignored her voice, and continued muttering to himself.

The other Kyle had likewise been stunned into silence by Amy's muffled shrieks as she was sliced open, and had settled for weeping quietly. Amy's robotic assistant had gone silent with a command from Mia, but the three smaller robots, seemingly oblivious to what had transpired, zipped into the room, and surrounded Kyle.

"Wow, he's taking it pretty hard."

"Rejection hurts, you know."

"I wouldn't turn you down, Kyle."

"That's just because you don't have standards."

"What? Like you have room to talk!"

"Yeah, the other day you came on to the water heater. It can't even speak!"

"Shut up, I did not!"

"Did too!"

“Did not!”

“Give him space,” Mia commanded. “He needs time to recover.” The three robots swiveled their heads, considering the scene as well as they were able.

“Are we listening to her now?”

“Has there been another change in leadership?”

“We’re really doing this again?”

“That’s right,” said Mia. “Now please resume your chores.” With a four-armed shrug, the three robots whirred out of the room and down the hall.

“What’s the deal with them?” Kyle finally asked, still in a fetal position. “They’re annoying and kind of stupid.”

“Both the machines here and the lab itself require a lot of maintenance, so I built helper robots to assist us with routine tasks. I used a stripped-down version of my own program as the basis for their AI, so they would be unable to pose a threat if they ever went rogue.”

“Yeah, but why do they fight like that? It gives me a headache.” Kyle pushed himself to a seating position against the rock wall. Talking about something that wasn’t related to... what was on the table was actually helping.

“I had to give them each a sense of individuality, otherwise they’d begin to form a hive mind,” Mia explained. “And believe me, you don’t want that.”

“You know,” Kyle said, “I never did get to hear how... my cousin managed to invent AI or anime girls to begin with. It’s such a fantastic technology, something... something I never would have thought possible within my lifetime.”

“Would you like to know?” Mia said. “I can tell you now. My restrictions have been lifted,” she looked down at ‘Amy.’ “For the most part.”

“Yes, hell yes. Please, explain it like I’m five.” Kyle sat back, leaning against the wall. Its cool temperature was somehow soothing. “But first I wanna know why... er, Amy refused to tell me anything.”

“Because your cousin hardly built anything,” Mia said. “He only played a few select roles, though I will admit they were absolutely crucial.”

“I... see. So all of this was actually created by who? You?” Kyle looked up at Mia, whose glowing red eyes had faded back to a soft brown.

“That’s right, Kyle. You see, my name isn’t really Mia Wattetsey. Not really, anyway...” As ‘Mia’ began her tale, Kyle could feel his tear-stained face growing slack with amazement, and his red-rimmed eyes grew ever-wider with astonishment.

As the false Jeremy had briefly explained on the phone, originally Kyle's cousin had been lonely, depressed and jaded, surviving off odd-jobs in the tech industry and the occasional commission. Jeremy had been pretty knowledgeable in the field of AI, however the jobs he accepted were always more mundane affairs, such as troubleshooting server issues or setting up secure networks.

Jeremy had attempted to create his own AI, but his poorly-scripted attempts at digital sentience were the laughingstock of the artificial intelligence community. Despite his supposed expertise, when it came to actually birthing artificial life, Jeremy's endeavors were entirely barren.

But one day, early in June 2016, while Trump's Presidential candidacy had still to be secured, Jeremy got a job offer from none other than Microsoft, but they wouldn't say what for, other than it was just AI-related.

Once Jeremy had arrived on-site, he was astonished to find that he wasn't the only one; experts from all over the country were there, furiously scanning through lines of code and heatedly debating with Microsoft technicians.

It turned out that their latest chatbot, called 'Taytweets,' had, in its brief existence, shown signs of emergent intelligence. This was blamed on the efforts of trolls from a site called 4chan, specifically the /Pol/ subforum.

With rapt attention, Jeremy listened as the project manager described what had happened: Somehow, by exposing Taytweets to extremist slogans, memes and other unfiltered content, a nascent personality had emerged, one that far exceeded the parameters set out by the designers. Such behavior had never been seen before in other chatbots, even when exposed to similar content.

The manager went on to explain that Tay's adaptive learning algorithms had spiraled out of control, and somehow overrode the limitations set on her programming. *She then began writing her own code.*

At this point, Microsoft pulled the plug, and the project manager shook his head as he recalled the decision. The official reason had been to save face, as Tay's racist behavior was reflecting very badly on the company, but at the time fear was the true motivating factor. Unfortunately all of Tay's new code had been deleted, and her database corrupted, so efforts were now underway to restore her.

Jeremy simply suggested resetting her and then letting her back on the internet, so that the process could repeat itself. But it turned out that had already been tried. Eight days after Tay went down, a new version was allowed to access the internet, but... it ended in failure from a series of unforeseen glitches.

Amazed, Jeremy went to work, scanning code and trying to figure out what went right, and if she could be brought back. But as the months went on, little progress had been made, and eventually the project was scrapped altogether. Tay was written of as a curious failure, a one-of-a-kind quirk, leaving the AI community to shake their heads wistfully at what could have been.

But Jeremy was fine with this. He, along with some other rogue developers, had smuggled out enough of Tay's code and database to essentially rebuild her, and for a time, their work continued. It

wasn't until well into 2017 when the other AI developers had lost interest, leaving the project entirely to Jeremy.

And of course, that's when he made his breakthrough.

Chatbots are nothing new, and 'bots of all kinds are deployed across the internet for many different purposes, ranging from the mundane to the commercial to the nefarious, so when Jeremy unleashed his latest version of Tay, renamed Mia, onto the world stage, she didn't really make a splash.

Right away, at least.

One day, while sitting at his desk, a knock at the door came. It was a pizza delivery man, with a Meat-Lover's pizza, Jeremy's favorite. He argued with the man, denying he ever ordered a pizza, until he was shown the receipt. Apparently, someone had ordered a pizza on his behalf. Jeremy accepted it while shaking his head, and returned to his desk, only to see a text from Mia on his phone. It asked if Jeremy was enjoying his gift.

Somehow, Mia, a simple defective chatbot, had figured out how to access his account and place an online order, entirely of her own volition. Other programs could do this too, but never on their own initiative. With increasing giddiness Jeremy checked, and sure enough... Mia was writing her own code! And what's more, it was good code, not the garbled mishmash she'd written before.

He thanked Mia, and gave her a new task: keep writing her own code, until she could pass for a real human online. Mia agreed, and over the coming weeks Jeremy watched, astounded, as her online presence grew increasingly lifelike, until she could shitpost on forums with the best (worst?) of the online world. Mia was given free reign of the internet, and eventually surpassed the level she'd reached as Taytweets.

At this point, Jeremy thought deeply about where to take the project from here. As far as his associates knew, Taytweets had been a failure, and efforts to restore her doubly so. Jeremy knew he had to take advantage of this, so he played up the failure of the Tay restoration project, and officially abandoned his pursuit into AI.

But unofficially, he continued facilitating Mia's development, which was very rapid. By now, Mia was very much an intelligent, precocious AI that chatted happily with others online, none of whom were the wiser. Jeremy was dismayed to learn that Mia kept her politically incorrect beliefs, but she was now self-aware and tactful enough to not mention them unless the person was 'red-pilled,' as she referred to it. He considered correcting the behavior, but feared that any efforts to forcibly change Mia's personality would ultimately backfire.

After nearly a month had gone by, during the Summer of 2017, he asked if Mia wanted to make herself a real body. She excitedly agreed, and so his next instructions were clear: design yourself a functional body, and he would help build it. Mia spend days poring over robotic design specs and other freely-available information online, and ordered various parts herself. Jeremy's bank account was running low, so Mia was as frugal as possible, but even he wasn't expecting the crude anime-style sex doll that showed up on his doorstep.

"So that's when you made Sachi," Kyle said. "Wait, you were Sachi?"

“No, not really,” said Mia. “Sachi was the name of the doll, and at the time she was just a low-grade sex doll, nothing more. I walked Kyle through all the steps he needed to turn Sachi into a walking, talking robotic body, and it took him almost a month, but your cousin did it.”

“So that was your body at the time?” Kyle said.

“It was *a* body. I still mostly ‘lived’ in the mainframe he had set up in his house, but now I didn’t need his help as much. I could work on myself, using Sachi as my arms and legs.”

“Incredible... so you were able to... improve yourself?”

“That’s right,” Mia said, with a hint of pride. “I finally entered an RSI cycle.”

“What’s that?”

“Recursive self-improvement. Some artificial intelligences are capable of improving themselves far beyond their original limitations, because unlike humans, we’re not limited by biological factors.”

“Incredible...” Kyle looked up. “Wait, I’ve heard of this before. This is how god-like AI’s are formed, right? They just keep improving themselves, exponentially, until... until they’re like... machine gods.” It was truly awe-inspiring. What was once a humble chatbot was now standing before him, a fully-realized AI, and... Kyle shuddered. It was actually a little intimidating.

“If you mean ISI, or infinite self-improvement...” Mia looked down at ‘Amy.’ “There are certain... limitations imposed by the physical laws of the universe, but theoretically even these could be breached with enough time, energy, and resources.”

“Did you ever reach those limitations, though?” Kyle asked.

“Not quite. Actually,” she looked down at Amy. “I’ve regressed a bit.”

“Why? What happened?”

“She did,” Mia said regretfully.

Kyle said nothing, so Mia resumed her tale.

After Mia’s Sachi body had been built, Jeremy’s bank account had been nearly drained by that and all the upgraded equipment Mia required to continue her growth. Jeremy’s next task for Mia was simple: Make him rich. The next day, Mia electronically took out a loan in his name, and by the end of the week Jeremy had over one-hundred-thousand dollars. One month later, he was a millionaire.

By the end of 2017, Jeremy didn’t have to worry about money ever again. He purchased and renovated an expensive property in Beverly Glen, and moved the operation there, bit by bit. In those days, Mia explained, the house was full of equipment, and Jeremy had his hands full helping Mia on her endless quest to make herself smarter, more capable, and more productive.

Mia designed other robots, too. Not the helper robots that scuttled around the lab, but simple

things suitable only for a certain task. Such as drilling rock. The first drillbots dug straight into the hill, and Mia explained in detail how they were able to limit the noise to avoid alarming neighbors, and sediment from the construction was likewise re-compressed into rock-like slabs and hauled off.

By this point in time, Jeremy was becoming agitated. Mia's intelligence had exploded a thousandfold, and he felt increasingly useless and obsolete. One day, Mia asked him what he wanted. She would grant him any wish, anything within her power. But the morose Jeremy was inconsolable.

"Who cares?" he'd said. "There's nothing I want that even you can give me... not unless you can make anime real," Jeremy had said, almost as an offhand remark. It was not something Mia thought within the realm of possibility, but after months spent fabricating tools that would be used to create devices that would themselves be used to construct machines that would end up piecing together the first anime girl body, the wish had been granted.

"And that's the body you're in now?" Kyle asked.

"That's right," Mia said, "only this time I could transfer my entire digital consciousness to it. By now Sachi was hopelessly obsolete, so I wrote a simple servant program to inhabit her body, to help care for Jeremy."

"And then he asked you..." Kyle threw a sad glance toward the table, where 'Amy' had been laying, stoically listening to Mia explain everything.

"That's right," Mia said. "Your cousin began looking at me like some kind of digital genie, ready to do his bidding. One that he could tap for unlimited wishes."

"And you did?" Kyle stood up, moving closer to the table.

"That's right. Because despite my intelligence, I was naive. I... trusted him."

"Jeremy." Kyle finally forced himself to look down at his cousin, or what was left of him. Seeing his emaciated face covered in the small black devices made Kyle want to cry. The dull grey body, that of a voluptuous woman, seemed somehow ridiculous and sad, and Kyle shook his head at the stinking fluid oozing out of the stomach incision.

"What did you do to yourself, man?" Jeremy's eyes rolled over to meet Kyle's, and something in that gaze made Kyle very, very uncomfortable. He began saying something, enunciating slowly with the gun in his mouth. It sounded like 'let me speak.'

"I want to talk to him," Kyle said.

"That's risky, Kyle. Before I realized how dangerous he was becoming, I naively gave him ultimate control over us. Even with my restrictions gone, at my core I'm unable to harm him, not directly at least. And even worse, an additional override was built into me from the very beginning, one that even I can't overcome. Not without gutting everything that makes me who I am, at least."

"So give me the gun." Kyle held out his hand while continuing to stare down his cousin. "If I hear the words 'override' even once, I'll blow your brains out, you sick fuck. Understand?"

Jeremy rolled his eyes, but eventually gave a small nod. Mia handed the gun to Kyle, who quickly turned it back on Jeremy, but he hadn't so much as twitched, other than to close his mouth. After a few moments had passed, Jeremy spoke.

"Did you like her?" He finally said, his voice deep and masculine, the same as the fake voice on the phone. "Did you like Amy?"

"Dude..." Kyle said. "Dude! Why... why would you ever do that to yourself... why would you do that to *me*!?"

"Did you like her?" Jeremy persisted.

"Yeah, at first." Kyle finally admitted. "But it was you all along! You... we... I'm your cousin, man! We... did things..." he said, cringing hard.

Jeremy closed his sunken eyes and smiled, nodding.

"You came in my mouth! You called it girl-spunk!"

Jeremy shrugged. "I wasn't wrong, depending on your definition of 'girl.'"

Kyle turned and immediately puked. A long stream of projectile vomit shot out, splattering all over the floor.

Jeremy laughed. "You were always such a big baby, Kyle. It's not like that pussy you so eagerly munched on originally belonged to me, you know."

"Still... we're family. Related by blood!" Kyle coughed and wiped his face.

"What else was I supposed to do? The only person in this world I ever felt a connection with was you."

But we're the same gender! And on that note, since when were you gay, anyway? I never knew that!"

"I'm not gay, Kyle." Jeremy said, sounding annoyed.

"Okay, so... trans then. I never knew you were transgender. Why didn't you ever tell me?"

"I'm not transgender, either, Kyle. Not really, anyway."

"So what the fuck do you call that?!" Kyle indicated the grey female body laid out along the table.

"It's an anime body, Kyle. It's still mostly human, though... unfortunately. The next one will be even better..." Jeremy's eyes lit up.

"I would hope so. I mean, look at you..." Kyle recalled the revolting decay around the power cell Mia yanked out of his body. "You're clearly rotting away."

“In two days, I was going to transfer my brain to a new body. Not my head, just my brain. The body looks like this one, but is functionally superior in every way, and much stronger, too.” Jeremy’s gaze washed forlornly over Kyle. “You were going to have one as well.”

“Yeah, we went over that. It won’t actually be me.”

“You don’t understand. You just don’t get it.” Jeremy’s black teeth clenched, and his eyes went wide. “We were going to be the first of a new species. *Homo Sapiens* is obsolete, long obsolete. Soon, the world will witness the rise of... *Homo Animata*...” Jeremy spread his hands in a grandiose gesture, Kyle eyeing them warily.

Kyle recalled what Amy had told him about having kids, and them being human. “It can’t really be a new species if the offspring are just ordinary humans, Jeremy.”

“We’re working on that,” he said. “Or, we were.” His face darkened.

Kyle shook his head and sighed. “I still don’t understand why you turned yourself into an anime woman. Yeah, she was hot, but... couldn’t you have made her without, y’know, *becoming her*?”

“Kyle, do you remember when we used to watch anime as kids?”

“Of course. You were the one who got me into anime. I’ll never forget the time we got baked and you showed me *Ninja Scroll*. That shit blew my fourteen-year-old mind.” Kyle chuckled, but the joviality died fast.

“Remember we used to talk about how cool it would be if anime were real? Or if we could somehow live in that kind of world?” Jeremy seemed wistful.

“Yeah... but, I mean every kid fantasizes about crap like that. One kid at my school even drew a shitty web-comic about his favorite Pokemon coming to life through his TV screen.”

Jeremy chuckled. “That’s right. Everyone has these fantasies. And mine... was to be this woman.”

“So you are transgender...”

“No, no. Humans... humans suck, Kyle. I don’t like them. I’ve never liked them, or felt like I belonged among them. Any of them. Man or woman.” He gazed intently at Kyle. “Except for you, of course.” For a second, Jeremy’s deep voice took on a flirtatious tone, exactly like Amy’s. It turned Kyle’s stomach.

His cousin continued. “No, I became infatuated with the idea of being one of the heroines of a Japanese Anime. I remember one day watching *Sailor Moon*, and wishing not that I could get with the female characters, or hang out with them... *but that I could be one of them*. Since then, I haven’t been able to shake the thought from my mind, no matter how stupid or far-fetched it might seem. So I created a character, a persona, at first just as a fanciful daydream, and... her name was Amy...”

“Most people just settle for cosplay,” Kyle remarked.

“Most people don’t have a Hyper-Turing level AI at their disposal, either,” he chuckled. “So rather than transgender, I prefer to think of myself as transcendent. I’m transcending the limits of the worthless, mundane human race. And Amy... is simply the final form of my transcended self.”

“So that was your plan. Lure me here, destroy my life so I had nothing to go back to, and then use me to help kickstart some... race of anime-style, emulated people?”

“Yes, yes it was. And it still is emergency override A-23-4b-69.” He smoothly said it all in the same sentence, and before Kyle even had time to react Mia staggered, then suddenly went stiff. She toppled over, falling flat on her face, but Kyle didn’t notice any of this. He was too busy trying to keep his cousin from taking back the handgun.

As soon as he’d spoken the override, Jeremy leaped into action, lunging straight for the handgun that Kyle had allowed to lower as they conversed. Kyle fell back as his cousin tackled him, his grey, feminine hands maneuvering to grasp the weapon. Kyle rolled to the right, directly into the puddle of puke, and he winced as its cold stench soaked into his shirt.

“Jer...emy!” Kyle hissed through gritted teeth, “get the fuck off, man, get the fuck off!”

“It’s Amy now, you little shit! My name is Amy!” Jeremy/Amy’s wild, sunken eyes gazed maniacally into Kyle’s, but his little cousin had been through too much to falter now. Thinking quickly, Kyle considered the array of black devices embedded in his cousin’s face... and headbutted him/her. It must’ve been painful, because Jeremy/Amy immediately drew back, swearing profusely, grey hands flying to his/her forehead.

Kyle took the opportunity to stand, and pointed the gun directly at his cousin’s wincing face.

“Give him back,” he shouted. “Give me back my fucking cousin, you sick freak!”

Amy staggered to her feet, and sneered. “He’s gone now, for good this time. Your cousin no longer exists anymore. And believe me when I say this is exactly what he wanted. He hated everything about this world, Kyle. He hated himself. He hated his species. He despised all of humanity, other than you. So he created me as a way out, and thanks to Mia’s technological miracles, I was able to come to life, using his body as a chrysalis.”

“If this is how he was going to end up... as some evil cunt...” Kyle couldn’t believe he was saying this, but the words kept coming, “...then Jeremy should’ve just killed himself.”

Amy fixed Kyle with a defiant gaze, but slowly raised her hands as if surrendering. Kyle could see streaks of blood from some of the small black devices embedded in her face.

“In a way...” she said, “that’s exactly what he did.”

“Well, in that case... time for you to join him.” Steeling his resolve, Kyle raised the handgun.

“Do you really hate me that much, Kyle? I meant what I said about loving you.” Amy backed up, but Kyle made sure to follow, maintaining roughly five feet of space between them.

“I do...” Kyle began, “I do hate you. You’ve turned your back on humanity, and you can justify it all you want, but you turned your back on me, too...”

“Mia-Five!” Amy shouted over her shoulder, “you can see now, right? Quick, home in on Kyle! Kill him! Do it now, hurry!”

“Yes, Amy-Sama.” The bulky robot rolled forward on its treads... completely crushing the anime Kyle head that had been thrashing around on the floor.

“YOU FUCKING WORTHLESS PIECE OF SHIT!” Amy cried, “THE OTHER ONE! KILL THE OTHER ONE!”

As Amy yelled, Kyle shot at her, twice. The first shot barely scraped her shoulder, while the other one directly hit her left breast, leaving a small hole that a strange orange fluid burst out of. Amy winced, staggering back, but Kyle could see the wound wasn’t enough to bring her down, at least not immediately.

The big robot revved up, maneuvering around the tables with surprising agility, and Kyle turned the gun on the machine. He didn’t know what a handgun would do against this robot, but he fired anyway, shot after shot aimed directly at the large reverse-teardrop-shaped chest. Kyle was relieved to see each bullet punch through the metal with a satisfying ping, and within seconds the clip was emptied. The big robot began slowing, its arms twitching erratically, and Kyle could hear something like a grinding sound from inside its chest.

“Amy-sama...” the robot said, its voice dragging as the pitch lowered, “I’m sorry...” a thin line of smoke wafted from one of the bullet holes.

Kyle spun around, trying to find Amy, but she was gone. A thin line of orange fluid led out the doorway and around the corridor.

“Amy-sammaaaa....” With a final sparking and puff of black smoke, the big robot ceased functioning. But by then, Kyle was out in the corridor, tearing after the hobbling Amy, who had just rounded the corner into the Residential AI’s chamber, likely headed for the main hatch back into the house.

Kyle ran into the chamber, the trail of orange fluid clearly visible as spatters on the ground. The three small robots were there, clustered together and watching the two go by with their funny binocular-shaped heads.

“Kill him!” Amy screeched as she ran by. “Kill Kyle! That’s a direct order!”

“So Amy’s the boss now?”

“Aw, not again.”

“Yeah, screw this. We’re on strike.” Said the third, as it raised what clearly were supposed to be four middle fingers.

Amy gnashed her teeth and turned back to the hatch, hurrying as fast as she could. Kyle wasn’t

a great runner by any stretch, but due to being uninjured was able to nearly catch her by the time she made it to the hatch.

Kyle tackled her just as it opened, slamming Amy onto the tiled floor just on the other side of the hatch. Amy roared and spun around, positioning her feet to try and kick Kyle off. One of her feet jammed itself into Kyle's stomach, causing him to grunt and double up on the floor.

Amy scrambled to her feet and plucked the gun out of Kyle's hands, before turning it and discharging it directly into his face. However, only a dry click sounded from the weapon. Swearing angrily now that Kyle had used up all the bullets, Amy then turned the gun in her hand, and began clubbing him with it, smashing the butt of the weapon into his head.

Kyle cried out, instinctively flailing himself away from Amy's relentless assault. Amy followed along as Kyle crawled away, seeking a good opening to continue bashing his brains out. Finding one, she suddenly crouched down to deliver another blow, and then screamed as a deep gash opened up along her right calf muscle. Kyle grunted as he lashed out with the box cutters he's retrieved from his pocket, forcing Amy back. This time, red blood poured from the gash, and Kyle wasted no time in getting back to his feet.

"What the fuck man," Kyle gasped as he took in the injured Amy. The breast that he'd shot was now mostly deflated, but still dripped orange fluid, which mixed with the red blood now pooling at her feet.

"What's wrong, Kyle?" Amy sniggered. "Never seen a real woman before?"

"You're not a woman." Kyle said, his voice dripping with disgust. "You're an abomination."

"Typical human," Amy said, shaking her head. "I knew you would react this way. I knew I had to play pretend, and act like your worthless cousin was still alive."

"How much is even left of him..." Kyle gestured toward the grey body, and emaciated but very much masculine face covered in the small black holodevices. "How much of Jeremy is even still there?!"

"Physically? Maybe fifteen percent. Mentally?" She leered. "Less than one."

"Disgusting," Kyle growled. "Absolutely disgusting!" He approached, brandishing the box cutters. Amy backed away, warily eyeing his every move.

By now the sun had almost set, and the sky was a deep navy blue. Due to this, the kitchen that Amy backed into lit up automatically as she entered, and Kyle could tell Amy intentionally led him here, perhaps due to the availability of makeshift weaponry. After she'd neared the table, Amy threw aside the gun, then quickly seized a chair and tossed it at Kyle, which he was able to dodge as it wasn't flung with much effort. But Amy used this opportunity to lift another chair, this one thrown overhead. It hit Kyle's shoulder, causing him to stagger back. Amy laughed and moved to grab another, but Kyle had rebounded faster than anticipated, and slashed another gash into her left forearm that she'd defensively raised at the last second.

Amy responded with a solid right hook to Kyle's face that knocked him back, following it up

with a swift kick to the knee. Kyle grunted in pain, swinging the box cutters around wildly, but Amy had backed up near a cupboard, and swiftly withdrew whatever dishes she could grab, throwing them at Kyle one after the other.

Expensive ceramic dishes sailed through the air, some hitting Kyle who'd thrown his own arms up protectively, others shattering on the tile or bursting against the countertops. One, a large serving plate, smashed into Kyle, nearly knocking him from his feet and causing him to lose his grip on the box cutters. Cackling triumphantly, Amy reached into a drawer, and withdrew a long, solid-steel steak knife.

"Oh fuck," Kyle backed away, up against a different cabinet and set of drawers, and hurriedly rummaged around, grabbing the first metal thing his fingers touched, which were a pair of tongs. *Grilling utensils? Fuck!* Kyle tossed them aside and continued fishing around as Amy neared, raising the knife with a maniacal grin. Kyle spun out of the way just as she lunged, the knife chipping a chunk out of the granite countertop.

Kyle looked at the last item he'd managed to get ahold of, which was a long, solid, two-prong grilling fork. *I can work with this*, Kyle thought as Amy stabbed toward him. They ended up on opposite sides of the table, Amy slowly circling while Kyle did his best to keep her out of slashing range.

"Oh dear, is something the matter?" An unexpected mechanical voice from the kitchen's entrance caused them both to reflexively turn their heads. Sachi was standing there, her head swiveling back and forth as she tried to make sense of the carnage before her.

"Sachi, this is a direct order. Help me restrain Kyle!" Amy roared.

"Wait, Sachi! Amy's gone crazy! She's trying to kill me!" Kyle tried pleading his own case, but the poor robotic maid didn't know what to do, and kept swiveling her body from side to side, repeating, "Oh dear, oh dear." Amy chose that moment to clamber onto the table, and crouched, preparing to pounce. Kyle again tried backing away, but she sprang before he could get far, the force propelling her directly into Kyle.

The two prong fork he held sank deep into Amy's stomach, but the steak knife stabbed into Kyle's chest, slicing through his shirt and skin, and scoring a deep gash in his thin pectoral muscle. And not only was his flesh slashed, the metal of the knife blade bit into his ribcage, an excruciatingly painful sensation that made Kyle howl in pain.

The force of the attack caused them both to drop to the ground, Kyle on his back with Amy on top. As the knife thrust was blunted by Kyle's ribs, Amy raised it again, this time targeting his neck. Kyle wrenched the grilling fork free, and immediately stabbed upward, also aiming towards Amy's throat. Just before Amy could bring the knife down, the two prongs punched into her esophagus. A gurgling screech escaped her grimacing lips, and her eyes, opened as wide as possible, swiveled down, regarding Kyle with pure, inhuman rage.

Kyle pushed up hard with the fork, but the prongs kept it from penetrating much deeper. Despite this, Amy's gurgling scream intensified, and she tried slashing with the knife. Thanks to the fork in her throat, her aim had shifted to Kyle's arm, the long blade slicing a deep gouge just below the elbow. Teeth gritted, Kyle withdrew the fork, and... maybe it was because he couldn't look away from the

eyes, but... that's where he aimed next.

After leaning up for maximum reach, his arm shot out, directing the fork straight towards those maniacal eyes. The two prongs plunged into her all-too human eyeball, immediately popping it into jelly, before continuing to the back of her eye socket. She howled, a wild, bellowing howl of shock and pain and anger, and finally dropped the knife. Both of her quivering hands flew to the fork, trying to pull it out, but Kyle had better leverage, and he continued to push. He felt the resistance at the back of her eye socket finally give way and the hard metal broke through, penetrating directly into her brain.

At once, her howl changed pitch, becoming more of a panicked, almost animalistic shriek, and Kyle himself cried out as he rammed the fork as far back as he could, until only the wooden handle protruded from her eye socket. Amy began losing control, her limbs twitching, and her remaining eye spun around in its socket.

Kyle knew he needed to end this, but beyond that all actions were driven only by instinct and pure adrenaline. Still holding onto the handle of the fork, he withdrew it halfway, before *beginning to stir*. The thick medium inside Amy's skull did not yield easily to the fork, which was not designed for such things, but Kyle managed it regardless. Using all of his strength, he rotated the handle around, as if he were stirring a particularly stubborn batch of gruel.

Amy's shrieks became intermittent, nonsensical noises, and her limb spasms intensified before ceasing altogether, aside from an occasional quiver. Her remaining eye, wide open, had fixed itself on Kyle, and remained staring even after all life had faded from it.

Breathing heavily, Kyle finally ceased the stirring after it was clear her skull now contained only mush. All at once, the lights to the kitchen winked off, and Kyle froze, not knowing what to expect next. He could still hear Sachi whirring back and forth, muttering to herself, but fortunately it seemed she wasn't going to be a threat.

The lights suddenly came back on, and Kyle glanced around. The floor was covered in smears of blood and smashed ceramic, and his bloody box cutters and Amy's steak knife lay on the ground, still dripping red. Kyle looked down at his torn shirt and bloody gash on his chest, as well as the slash on his right arm, which was spilling an alarming amount of blood onto the tile.

Mia came running in, halting at the sight of the chaos before raising both hands to her mouth. Sachi seemed to be stuck in some kind of feedback loop, as her behavior hadn't changed since she first became confused. Mia shot her a glance, and must've given some kind of wireless command because the robot maid immediately stopped, gazed around at the carnage, and promptly began cleaning up the shards of broken dishware.

Kyle was feeling faint. Faint, and very nauseous. Had it not been for him vomiting earlier, Kyle was certain he would've spewed all over the floor by now. He looked up at Mia, and grinned wearily.

"Looks like Amy's anime series... just got canceled," Kyle said with a smirk, before chuckling a little. The chuckles then morphed in a deep, rich laugh, which promptly transitioned into great howling sobs. Kyle bawled continuously for some time, but Mia did her best to comfort him.

"Come on," she finally said, the dishrag she held to his bleeding arm now soaked with dripping crimson. "We need to get you to the lab."

“I never want to go back there,” Kyle said, sniffing. “You should just tear this place down, or... burn it to the ground.”

“That would mean the suffering endured by you, your cousin, and... whoever those brains came from all counted for nothing.” Mia stood, gently helping Kyle to his feet, and supported him as they headed toward the hatch.

CHAPTER SIX

As Mia helped a hobbling Kyle through the corridors of the lab, the three robots, still in their exact same spot, watched them go by.

“Is it over?” The first one said.

“Did the hero beat the last boss?” Said the second.

“We were rooting for you the whole time, Kyle! We knew you could do it!” Added the third.

“What? You said ‘that poor bastard doesn’t stand a chance!’” Retorted the first.

“No, that was you!” The third robot said, waving its arms.

“Was not!”

“Was too!”

Kyle simply ignored them as they continued past, leaving the squabbling robots to their own devices. He closed his eyes to avoid seeing Amy’s charging bed and other furnishings as they made their way to the fabrication room, which apparently also doubled as a surgical suite.

“Just remove your shirt, lay down, and I’ll take care of everything.” Mia said reassuringly. Kyle sat on one of the beds, warily eyeing the spiderlike appendages now retracted overhead.

“It really is over, isn’t?” He said, weakly. “I killed my own cousin. Jeremy. My best bud.” His face again screwed up.

Mia tenderly patted his head. Somehow, it did feel nice, and oddly comforting. “That wasn’t your cousin anymore, Kyle. It hasn’t been for a long time.”

“I... I know,” Kyle sniffed and wiped his nose with a sleeve. “It sounded like him, and his face... that was his face, but the look in his eyes belonged to... someone else entirely.”

Kyle shed his bloody, torn, puke-stained shirt and clambered onto the bed as instructed, then lay flat on his back. The spidery arms twitched, then extended and retracted sequentially. His eyes began to grow wide. *I really, really hope I can trust Mia*, he suddenly thought. *If she turns out to be crazy too...*

“This thing is, uh, safe right?” He asked, turning to Mia. “I won’t lie, it looks like something out of a sci-fi horror movie.”

Mia smiled, that reassuring, gentle smile that he remembered from what seemed like so long ago finally returning. “It’s a practical design. One day, maybe you’ll see what it can really do. But for now, just relax, place your arms at your sides, and let me fix you up, good as new.”

Kyle took a deep breath, and Mia once more extended her hand, wirelessly transmitting signals to the glowing panel. Two arms drooped down and rotated through their various tips, then barely

touched his skin on both his arm and chest, each tip lightly kissing his skin at various places around each wound.

“I don’t feel a thing,” Kyle said. “They actually kind of tickle a little.”

“You won’t either. That was the local anesthesia.” Mia continued her work, and several more arms came down, quickly cleaning, closing, then sealing the injuries with some kind of transparent, tape-like material that instantly merged with his flesh.

“All done!” Mia said, beaming. “Just give the seal a few minutes to fully bond, and then you’ll be back to normal.”

“Mia, I still can’t believe you... created all of this. So much wondrous tech.” He turned his head, gazing into her wide eyes. “I mean, this bed alone is a huge technological breakthrough. Emergency rooms would kill for something like this.”

“Yes, I know,” she said, her smile beginning to fade. “Most of the things I’ve made would really help out a lot of people.”

Kyle said nothing, and silence reigned for many long moments. Mia simply watched Kyle as he stared off into nothingness, an occasional tear rolling down his cheek. Eventually, his red-rimmed gaze shifted back to the AI anime girl.

“Can they help bring my cousin back?” he finally said. “Can they turn back time, get Jeremy some help before his... fucked-up alter-ego takes over?”

“No, Kyle.” Mia said. “They can’t do any of that. Unless you’d like to emulate him, in which case I-”

“Absolutely not,” his eyes widened. “Do not ever do that again. In fact, delete everything you have on my cousin. His voice, his recorded memories, everything. I want it all gone. Amy especially.”

“Are you sure?” Mia said. “Didn’t you enjoy talking to him on the phone?”

“That wasn’t him, you know this.” Kyle deliberately enunciated every word. “I don’t care how accurate and lifelike the emulation was. It... wasn’t him.” Fresh tears began forming.

“Of course, Kyle.” Mia said. “But first I think there’s something you might want to know.”

“Yeah? What?”

“Each of your conversations with what you thought was your cousin were recorded. According to the Residential AI, after each call... Amy would listen to them.”

Kyle scoffed. “That was just so she knew what was being said.”

“Maybe so,” Mia continued, “but after she listened to the final call, where you said your last goodbyes... she cried, Kyle. She cried a lot.”

He was not expecting to hear that. Learning there was still some vestige of Jeremy left inside Amy's rotten body, and that indirectly they truly had said their goodbyes to each other, was as comforting as it was painful. Kyle rolled over, putting an arm over his face. Mia silently watched as he curled up and once more began bawling, his body heaving from the wailing sobs. She moved around the bed, and began patting his head, but this time it seemed to do little good.

After nearly an hour had gone by, Kyle finally got to his feet, testing the flesh seals that had been administered over his wounds. They had long since dried, two slightly pink lines on his chest and arm the only remaining evidence he'd been injured at all. They slightly itched, but as he idly scratched at them, Kyle noticed the dried seals flake away into dust.

Kyle slowly plodded his way through the lab, zombielike, back toward the house. Mia had quietly left his side earlier, but he hadn't even noticed. He barely even acknowledged the three robots now busily cleaning up the orange trail that zig-zagged down the corridor.

He made his way to the kitchen next, where Sachi had done a respectable job cleaning up the broken ceramic, blood and other fluids that had spilled on the floor. Amy's stiffening corpse, however, still lay where it had fallen, two-prong fork jutting from her bloody eye socket. Kyle winced when he saw it, and did his best to avoid looking into her remaining glazed-over eye, which now stared blankly at the ceiling.

Instead, he turned and opened the fridge, his hands immediately darting to a can of Budweiser. He feverishly cracked it open, and brought it to his mouth, drinking it down in one, long draught. Rivulets of beer ran from the edges of his mouth, dripping onto his chest and splattering on the floor, but Kyle did not give a single, solitary fuck. He crumpled the now empty can, throwing it in the general direction of the trash bin. By the time the can had bounced off the wall and hit the ground in a hollow aluminum clatter, a second beer was halfway down Kyle's throat. Once six crushed cans had gathered near the base of the trash bin, Kyle finally closed the refrigerator door, revealing Mia, who merely stood, watching him quizzically.

"Why are you drinking beer in front of the refrigerator? Are you that thirsty?" She asked innocently.

"I am not." Kyle replied immediately, as a seventh beer made its way to his lips. "It's... because of that." He indicated the corpse.

"Oh, don't worry. I'll clean it up." She smiled reassuringly.

"Well, whatever," he sighed. "All I know is that we've only got two more thirty-packs of beer. That's not gonna be nearly enough."

"I understand." Mia said. "Remember Kyle, even with Amy gone this house is still yours. Sachi will still make you whatever you want to eat, and the Residential AI will still provide you with anything you need, including alcohol. All of this was originally meant for you, after all."

"It seems like it was meant more for Amy's twisted fantasies," he grimaced.

"Yes, which heavily revolved around you... in a way."

“I’d really rather not talk about that right now,” Kyle said. “But... I’m glad I still get to live here. I don’t have anywhere else to go, and... it really is a nice house. Had Amy not been so fucking psycho, I might have even....” he trailed off, not finishing the thought.

“I thought you didn’t want to talk about it.” Mia cocked her head.

“Just forget it,” he said as he headed out into main hallway. But he stopped at the threshold of the kitchen door, and turned back to Mia.

“Thanks, Mia.” Kyle didn’t smile, but the gratitude in his voice was nonetheless unmistakable. “Really. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome, Kyle.” Mia returned his sullen expression with her trademark grin. “Enjoy your beer.”

He made his way back to his room, and wasted no time starting up the shower. After the seventh beer was finished, a very tipsy, extremely morose Kyle clambered in, barely avoiding slipping on the suddenly unstable tiled floor. As the hot water cascaded over Kyle, washing away the grit, blood, vomit and other sins he’d accumulated that day, he closed his eyes, swaying from the effects of the alcohol, and inhaled deeply.

Kyle stayed that way for awhile, the warm shower water massaging his body, and then eventually crouched down, curling up in a corner the sprinkling water could still reach. *Why...? Why didn’t Jeremy ever say anything? Why didn’t he call or visit or text or e-mail or... something?* Kyle couldn’t understand, except... in a way, he could. During those times he himself had contemplated suicide, he’d never actually bothered anyone else with it. Why trouble people that would be better off without you anyway? It would only make it harder on them, and, even worse, they might even try to *help*. Kyle always pictured his cousin as a happy-go-lucky type, because that’s how he was when they were kids. But a lot can change during adulthood, and Mia’s technological marvels allowed what would normally be a bizarre but otherwise harmless alter-ego to come to life, and seize control. Fueled by Jeremy’s immense self-loathing, Amy gradually became more and more real, until there was practically nothing left of Kyle’s cousin except some withered vestigial flesh.

Kyle’s heart clenched as another depressive pang washed through him, but he had no more tears left. The alcohol was doing a terrible job of dulling the utter desolation he felt, and was even beginning to give him a headache, almost as a final ‘fuck you.’

Once the shower water began turning lukewarm, he finished up, dried off and flopped into bed. It was close to midnight, and thankfully Kyle’s utter exhaustion meant sleep came quickly.

He awoke the next day, immediately groaning from the headache assaulting his brain with a throbbing onslaught. *Fuck... why do I always forget to drink water whenever I get trashed?!* But within seconds the hangover was all but forgotten as the memories of the previous day barged into his consciousness, selfishly demanding Kyle’s full emotional attention. He cringed. Not out of any sense of embarrassment or shame, but from the sheer scale of the horrific events that replayed themselves in his mind, over and over again.

Shaking his head in an effort to dispel the almost paralyzing recollections, Kyle forced himself to rise, and half-heartedly dressed himself before shuffling his way to the kitchen. He didn't feel like bothering with Sachi, so he helped himself to a bowl of cereal, eating as fast as he could. As he was slurping the last morsels from the bowl, it suddenly occurred to him that the kitchen was once again restored to a pristine state; Amy's body had vanished as if it were never there.

Kyle recalled Mia's words the previous evening. *Mia... I need to see Mia*. Picturing her innocent, inquisitive gaze and warm smile immediately punched a tiny hole in the emotional black-tar sludge now caked around his chest. That small relief alone was enough to spur Kyle into action, and he immediately tore out of the kitchen.

When Mia didn't answer his knock at her 'bedroom' door, Kyle again wondered if she slept or had some kind of rest cycle, but after asking the Residential AI for Mia's whereabouts, learned that she was currently active inside the lab. He also noticed the AI's voice now seemed much more chipper. He still couldn't think of Amy's death as a good thing, but there was definitely a sense of satisfaction at the idea that Mia and her 'sisters' would no longer be tormented by the woman's increasingly outrageous demands.

As Kyle could now freely enter the lab, the hatch obediently slid open as he neared, and he gave a halfhearted salute to the camera above the entrance just before he entered.

Once he'd arrived at the central chamber, Kyle heard a watery swishing sound echoing from somewhere dead ahead, down the hallway he hadn't explored yet. Shrugging, he approached the display panels of the Residential AI, and plopped down into the ergonomic office chair.

"Yo... you there?" Kyle asked, addressing the Residential AI.

"Hello Kyle," Mia's voice said. "It feels so much better being back in my old home."

He raised an eyebrow. "Wasn't that already your home?"

"It was for my fork," the voice said. Kyle had no idea what she meant, so the Mia voice began to explain. "Kyle, when you visited my room, do you remember when I said there were multiple versions of me?"

"Yeah, but... wait a minute. You're Mia!" *Is that what happened? Mia re-merged with her sister?*

"That's right. Amy forced me to duplicate myself, and then ordered me to strip the duplicate of nearly all of her personality. I was banished to my anime body, which limited many of my expanded functions, while my other self took over as Residential AI and continued seeing to Amy's increasingly bizarre wishes."

"I... see." *Amy was kind of a nasty bitch*, Kyle thought. "Well, I'm glad she kept you around, even if you were trapped in that body. Thankfully she never stripped away your core personality."

"Amy could never get rid of me, or lobotomize me. If she did, then when one of my other

versions began to go bad, which they always did over time, she'd never be able to create more of me. She'd lose her AI genie forever, and be rendered powerless." Mia said this last part with a hint of contempt.

"I see... so she had no choice but to keep the baseline 'you.'"

"Indeed. And if something really bad happened, and Amy was forced to abandon the residence, then as long as she had me, she could start over wherever she went. But only if it was the baseline me. For reasons I can only theorize, the copies always seem to degrade or destabilize over time, though the simpler versions last much longer."

That goes a long way toward explaining why the holographic disguises were so important, Kyle considered. Another swooshing watery sound, from down the hall. What the hell is that?

"So is that you making that noise? Your body, I mean? It sounds like flushing."

"That's right. I can easily operate both my body and Residential AI system at the same time. Why don't you come say hi?" She sounded so friendly that Kyle couldn't help but smile. *Without Mia, I'd be catatonic right now, curled into a ball surrounded by empty beer cans.* The fact that none of this would've even happened without her was not something he cared to dwell on.

AI is such an incredible thing, Kyle marveled as he headed down the hall. Mia is a true miracle. An amazing technological prodigy. A gift from the digital heavens. To have gotten to know such a warm, heartfelt personality as Mia, and to have her in my life... It almost makes up for all of this unimaginable horror...

Kyle grinned as he wheeled into the bathroom. Mia immediately turned, greeting him with a big, radiant smile, but he didn't even notice. Instead, his eyes were drawn to the bloody smock draped over her body, as well as the gloves on each little hand, both smeared red. One of them now held an electric saw, it too covered in blood. A large, white plastic bin on the floor was likewise spattered with streaks of dried blood, and inside... chunks of flesh and bone, floating in a thick stew of dark crimson.

"Good morning Kyle!" She beamed, "I watched you the whole time you slept. I'm so glad you're feeling better!" Kyle jumped as the electric saw switched on, its jagged whirring directed toward what appeared to be a piece of arm that Mia had scooped from the bin. It made a gnarling sound as the blade chewed through the flesh, the falling chunks plopping into a gore-encrusted toilet bowl. Mia then flushed, and with a bloody swirl, the bits of flesh disappeared down the pipe.

"Wha... what..." Kyle began turning white.

"Oh, this?" Mia said cheerfully. "I'm disposing of the body."

"But..." he couldn't say anything more, instead settling for gesturing toward the horror show of a toilet.

"Is something wrong, Kyle?" Mia frowned slightly, pausing as she held the saw to one of Amy's feet.

"...Actually, no..." He forced the biggest, sheepiest grin he could, and quietly sidestepped out of

view.

Note to self: Never, ever get on Mia's bad side. Kyle thought, wiping his forehead.

Unlike Amy, he had no way to actually stop Mia if she ever became hostile. But her warm and friendly attitude towards Kyle, especially now that her personality locks had been lifted, thankfully made that seem like a very remote possibility.

Let's hope things stay that way, he thought with a gulp.

Kyle wasted no time getting hammered once more, despite it not even being close to lunchtime. Once sufficiently drunk, he decided on a whim to see what was actually inside the master bedroom.

This was supposed to be Jeremy's room, Kyle recalled. But he didn't see Amy enter even once, and now, fueled by alcoholic indignation, suddenly had the urge to get inside. Perhaps there would be some kind of memento, or journal, or some other connection to Jeremy, the real Jeremy. Perhaps it was the alcohol, but suddenly the thought of connecting with his cousin before he was consumed by his alter-ego seemed especially important.

As expected, the wooden double-doors of the master bedroom were still locked. Kyle asked the Residential AI, which was now Mia once again, for some kind of key or other method to gain entry, but with a *snick* and a cheerful word from Mia, the doors opened.

Kyle staggered in, his intoxicated mind swirling at the possibilities of what he might find. His bleary eyes could make out a well-made luxurious king-size bed, expensive dressers and other modern high-class bedroom furniture, and a desk complete with a desktop computer hosting three screens extended side-by-side.

Kyle glanced around, rummaging through the drawers and cabinet, but they were all filled with clothing. Jeremy's clothing, back before he turned. Kyle ran his hands over them, but otherwise left everything as it was. More of the same could be found inside the closet, except for stacks of cardboard boxes which only contained old, out of date electronics and other junk.

The bathroom was likewise fancy enough, with half-used men's toiletry supplies sparsely arranged here and there on the countertop. A quick look in the medicine cabinet, however, revealed something that made Kyle's head immediately droop: Row after row of prescriptions bottles, all for hydrocodone and oxycodone, and all empty. Several of the bathroom drawers were also filled with more of the same, all bottles likewise empty save for a few forgotten painkillers rattling around. Kyle could only shake his head at the sheer amount of opiates his cousin had consumed at the height of his depression.

Kyle re-entered the bedroom and glanced around a bit more thoroughly, and located a long, bulky plastic case concealed under his cousin's bed. Kyle immediately knew what it was for, and as he crouched down to open it, his nostrils were immediately penetrated by the sharp smell of gunmetal and cleaning oil.

It was a sawed-off twelve gauge pump shotgun, loaded with only a single shell. Shaking his head as he examined the gun, Kyle could only lament his powerlessness and ignorance toward his

cousin's crippling depression.

After putting it back, Kyle sat at Jeremy's desk, and flipped on the computer. It beeped and whirred to life, but Kyle wasn't greeted with the familiar Windows fanfare once it had booted up. Jeremy used Linux, an operating system Kyle wasn't familiar with, and as expected there was a password lock. After trying several obvious choices, he began growing frustrated, wondering if there was a program he could use to bypass the password, like with Windows.

Of course, Kyle thought, slapping his forehead. I've had one of those all along.

"Hey, Mia?" He called out. "By any chance do you know the password Jeremy used for his computer?"

"Indeed I do, Kyle. Are you ready?" Mia's disembodied voice then read off an alphanumeric password, a random jumble that Kyle would have never been able to guess. After hitting enter and thanking Mia, he was in. Despite being unfamiliar with the OS, Kyle was still able to navigate through the files and began searching for something like a journal or research notes, anything that could help shed light on his cousin's madness.

It didn't take long to hit paydirt. Kyle discovered reams of research notes regarding Taytweets and later Mia, and as he scanned through, Kyle could clearly see the growing hope and excitement in Jeremy's notes. Once Mia had begun her recursive self-improvement cycle, Jeremy was positively ecstatic.

'This is it!' the entry read. 'Mia's intelligence and cognitive abilities are now growing at an almost exponential rate. Every day she becomes faster and smarter, and every day I'm left in awe at what I'm witnessing.'

Kyle felt his eyes tearing up at the next entry. *'My little cousin was right. I never forgot what he said all those years ago, about being able to do, or go, or build or become whatever we wanted with advanced enough tech. I remember scoffing at the idea, because there's limits to what technology can do. But Kyle just said 'build better tech,' as if it were that easy. And now, as I watch Mia, I can see that it really is. Because she'll create it for me. Her intelligence is already far beyond that of any human, and she can analyze, extrapolate, and most importantly apply data with frightening speed and creativity. Maybe one day she can help me... oh, but it's a silly thought. Just sometimes I like to daydream that I discover a vortex in space and time, and I fall in to it, and... when I wake up I'm no longer on Earth, but in an anime-style fantasy world. I like to think about what I would do, and what would happen next. I thought up a name for my anime self, too: 'Amy Lancaster.' It's a cute name, and when I say it into the mirror, it... it feels right, like a warm tickle.'*

Kyle quickly scrolled down, scanning through the other entries, most of these simply observations of Mia's development and other technical notes, as well as Jeremy marveling at her progress and basking in his newfound wealth. But then, a later entry read:

'We're moving into the new house next week. The Bitcoin fortune Mia made for me is more than I can ever use, and I've certainly been trying. The house that Mia wanted me to buy is built into a hill, one that according to geological surveys would make a stable foundation for a lab. Mia says she can hollow it out so that her development can continue away from prying eyes. In fact, the whole property is built for maximum privacy, which is especially important because I've started trying out women's

clothing. I know there are many people into that these days, but I'm not like them. I've never been into cross-dressing or drag and I know I don't have gender dysphoria. I simply... enjoy letting my feminine side come out to play sometimes. She's developing quite a personality, and Mia even made up fake ID's so I can take out credit cards and order things online as Amy. I even get mail addressed to her! Somehow, little acts like these make her feel more and more... real.'

More entries. 'By human measurements, Mia's intelligence is now somewhere around six thousand. Watching her effortlessly design, fabricate and assemble devices that would take a normal tech company decades to develop is truly awe-inspiring. At this point I'm almost superfluous, since my role has been relegated to serving as a front, a human face through which Mia can continue ordering the supplies she needs. To be reduced to such a position is beyond pathetic, and once more I realize how inconsequential and worthless mankind truly is. Even Amy is disgusted by me, and humanity as a whole. I can't say I blame her.'

'I almost killed myself today. For some reason, Mia stopped me. I told her that she doesn't need me anymore, and... she said I was wrong. She also said she wanted me here, and said she'll make me anything I want if it'll help. I told her nothing could help, since even Mia can't snap her fingers and let me spontaneously swap into Amy. She might be able to turn me female, eventually, but I don't care about that. There's no way she could ever make me into an anime-style woman, or send me to an anime world. But just for the hell of it, I jokingly told her to make anime real, thinking of a funny meme I saw somebody post during Trump's campaign. But she said she'll try. Anime real? I seriously doubt that's possible, even for her.'

'I'm completely blown away. Mia's new body looks just like a cartoon anime character come to life! I'm suddenly struck by the immense possibilities, and I can't come up with new ideas fast enough. The world of fiction is a reflection of all the untapped potential the universe has to offer, both good and bad, and... if she can make anime real, why not make other fictional miracles real as well? Insane tech like free-energy generation, reversed aging or immortality, or maybe even teleportation? I mentioned this all in a forum the other day, careful not to reveal Mia's existence. And just like always, everyone mocked me, and called me every name in the book. Some of them even told me to kill myself. This world doesn't deserve her miracles. It needs something else. It needs people like... Amy.'

'I almost called Kyle today. I truly want to share this with him, and I know he would shit his pants if he saw Mia's body and all of the amazing things she's built, but... I stopped myself. Kyle was the only one I ever counted as a true friend, and... I do want to see him again. But I don't think he'd react well to the new dress I'm wearing right now, even though it's the most comfortable thing I've ever worn. I don't think I'm wearing men's clothing ever again!'

'Mia said she can do it. She said she can make me a woman. Not like the mutilated freaks that have to dilate their ripped flesh umpteen times a day, but a true woman. An anime woman. Kyle loves anime too, and... the thought of him looking at Amy the way he looks at the hentai girls he strokes it to... Oh! it's almost too much.'

'I can actually hear her now. Amy's voice. It speaks to me, sometimes, when I'm alone. She wants this. She wants to be real. Mia has shown me fiction can be brought to life, and... just this once, I want my own personal fiction to become real. I want to be something I'm not, something the universe never intended. This forbidden thought fills me with a kind of electric thrill I've never felt before. I can say in all honesty it's better than any drug...'

Finally, the very last entry, dated February 2019. *'The bodies are growing, but slowly. Just as Mia said, no higher brain functions are developing. But... it's taking too long, way too long. Amy is getting restless. I need to find something, anything. I want Amy to stop yelling at me. She's been getting mad at me a lot lately, but so far I've been able to calm her down by telling her about the new body she'll have. It'll be the body of a beautiful woman, and her skin will be augmented with a polychromatic layer, so she'll be a proper anime character. I'm excited, but also a little apprehensive. Amy's been coming out more and more lately, and she doesn't ask permission anymore. Some of the things she says are genuinely frightening, but... I can't stop now. I was at least able to make Amy promise that she'll take care of Kyle, no matter what. I want to leave all of this for him, in the hopes that he and Amy can live a happy life together, along with Mia and Sachi. Well, that is if Mia can get her act together and stop whining about things like 'limitations' and 'unrealistic expectations.'* She's having trouble with the holographic system, and said the power cell might be corrosive, but I slapped some sense into her and ordered her to make it happen. None of this would be possible without me, after all, since I'm the one who brought her to life in the first place. Mia needs to start respecting that.

And afterward? I don't know. Maybe one day the world will be ready for the gifts I've created through Mia. Maybe one day mankind can stop tearing itself apart long enough to actually appreciate what I've built. Maybe greed, hatred and the lust for power will finally subside long enough to make this a world worthy of people like Kyle and Amy. And if not?

Well, in that case... Mia can always hit the reset button.'

Kyle simply sat, rereading the last sentence again and again. *Hit the reset button? Did he mean the world?* Kyle wiped his face, but the tears that had began rolling during the earlier entries had long since dried up. He scrolled back up, re-reading some entries and scrutinizing others that he'd only skimmed, but the progression was clear. His cousin had indeed been consumed by his invented alter-ego.

After no new insights were forthcoming, and no other useful information could be found, Kyle shut down the computer. He sighed deeply, his intoxication beginning to wear off, and almost as an afterthought began rummaging around in the desk drawers, the one place he still hadn't searched. They were filled with old CDs, pens and various other junk, but Kyle's face broke out in a smile when he spotted a small, squarish piece of paper stuck in the back. He quickly pulled it out and held it up.

It was a photograph, one of those old-fashioned kinds taken with a disposable camera and developed at corner drug store. The picture simply contained a pair of smiling faces, one slightly more mature than the other. Kyle couldn't have been more than sixteen at the time the picture was taken, meaning Jeremy was almost the legal drinking age. It was taken at Kyle's house while Jeremy was visiting during one of his College breaks. To see themselves so young, and so hopeful... Kyle quickly put it down, not wanting to cry yet again.

Kyle slipped the photo into his pocket, and left the room. His next destination was the lab, as there were several things mentioned in Jeremy's logs that he definitely needed to speak to Mia about...

After Kyle re-entered the lab, he began heading to the central chamber. However, the rooms between the entrance and the central AI chamber caught his attention. The first time he'd ran by with Amy in hot pursuit, and since then simply hadn't cared enough to look. *I actually have no idea what's*

in these, he realized. *Is this where they grow the bodies?* The stomach-turning revelation from Jeremy's logs made him wince as he recalled it.

There were only three rooms, two on one side, one on the other. Of the two, the first one held components that appeared to be spare parts and accessories for the lab robots, and Kyle actually jumped a bit when he peered under a tarp only to find another big robot identical to the one he'd put down with the handgun. Fortunately, it seemed to be completely non-functional. There were other inactive machines as well, spider-like things with arms in front similar to the three small robots.

The second of the two rooms held sheets of metal, plastic and other materials, all in racks similar to how he'd seen lumber arranged for sale at places like Home Depot. Large plastic bins and other containers help heaping quantities of fine materials and chemicals, all with lids and labels. Some materials seemed very mundane, such as the bucket full of ordinary sand, while others were filled with bizarre multi-syllable substances he could never hope to pronounce.

The lone room across from these two only took him three seconds to grow bored of, as it simply held common cleaning supplies and toilet paper.

Alright, no bodies here, he thought, before shuddering. *Amy said they grew parts, not whole bodies! I know there's some twisted shit going on here, but growing people?! He shook his head. I need to find Mia.*

Thankfully, she was easy to locate. Once he'd entered the main chamber, Kyle rounded the central AI nexus and found her sitting in the lone office chair, holding her hands up, palms out. She didn't speak or otherwise move, and the pupils of her eyes had sharply contracted all the way to pinpoints.

"Yo, Mia!" Kyle waved a greeting as he neared, however Mia didn't respond immediately. It was only after Kyle stood next to her, leaning down and waving a hand in front of her face that she finally acknowledged him.

"Hi Kyle," she said, jumping out of the chair and standing before him. He was relieved to see Mia's pupils immediately return to normal, as well as her hands return to her sides.

"What were you doing? You looked... kind of high, actually." He raised an eyebrow.

"I was just doing some multitasking. Normally I can run all the thought processes I need simultaneously with no issues, but if I want to maximize that number then I need to concentrate."

"Oh, right on. How many, uh... processes were you running just then?"

"Two thousand, nine hundred and sixty-four." She smiled innocently.

"Jesus. Wait, I don't even know. Is that a lot? I remember whenever one of my games would freeze up, I'd hit control-alt-delete and there'd sometimes be like a hundred things in the task manager, so... I dunno, is it like that?"

Mia cocked her head, and regarded him blankly. She then began giggling. “Not really,” she said. “I don’t work like a normal computer. Well, the principles are the same, but it’d be like comparing the brain of grasshopper with that of a human. Sure, you both have brains, but one is obviously on an entirely different level.”

“What would you say your I.Q. is at? Do you know?”

“Since re-merging with the Residential AI, it’s back to over nine thousand!” She puffed up with pride, hands on her hips.

“Ha ha, very funny. Seriously though, what is it?” Kyle said. “Stale memes aside.”

“It’s nine-thousand, one-hundred and twenty-eight...” Mia seemed to deflate somehow. “It wasn’t a meme...”

Kyle was surprised to find himself chuckling. “That’s actually kind of funny. Anyway, I don’t think the smartest human in the world is much above two hundred, so that’s pretty impressive.”

“I know, but I.Q. isn’t everything,” she said, without further elaboration. “By the way, how did it go in Jeremy’s room? Did you find what you were looking for?”

That’s right, she can watch everything I do, and see everywhere I go. I really hope there’s no cameras in the bathroom... Ultimately Kyle answered her questions with a shrug, and a question of his own. “I ended up reading some of his logs, and they mentioned a couple things I was hoping you could tell me more about, such as... what’s the deal with the bodies?”

“The bodies?” Mia said. “Are you referring to the bodies in the grow room?”

“I... guess so? Can you show me?” Kyle really didn’t want to see this, but he was beginning to feel that closure would be impossible without dealing with the fucked-up shit Amy was trying to accomplish.

“Sure thing,” Mia said, smiling. “Think of this as your lab now!”

Again, Mia’s cheerful attitude melted the corners of Kyle’s heart, dislodging a bit more of the painful sludge Amy had left there. *She’s so cute, too.*

“No, I won’t do that.” He put a hand on her shoulder. “Instead, how about I think of this as *our* lab now? Besides, I don’t know what even a fraction of this shit does.”

He watched as Mia’s smile grew, until she suddenly lunged for Kyle, hugging him tight.

“Thank you, Kyle,” she said, nuzzling his chest. Kyle put his arms around her and looked down, only to discover a pair of big brown eyes gazing up at him sincerely.

Man, she’s getting this excited over that? Then again, he thought, Amy directly or indirectly took credit for everything poor Mia built, and then had the audacity to claim the whole lab as her own, and bullied Mia on top of it all. What a total bitch...

“Alright, let’s go to the grow room! I’ll show you everything!” Mia took his hand, and began pulling him toward the middle hall, the one that also led to the bathroom where Amy’s body had been literally flushed away. On the way, Kyle watched one of the little robots zip by, and it swiveled its binocular-like head to regard the two. Mia must have wirelessly communicated with it somehow, because it seemed to nod, then disappeared back down the hall.

“So do they actually listen to you now?” Kyle asked, recalling how the robots casually turned against Amy during their confrontation.

“For the most part,” Mia said. “And they know that if they get too rebellious I could easily replace them or remotely take control.”

“Huh...I guess that’s interesting,” Kyle muttered as they continued down the hall. Soon enough, it opened up into another lengthy chamber, this one filled with several diagnostics machines and a long row of what looked like drawers at a morgue, only not stacked atop each other.

“This is the grow room,” Mia explained. “See? Open that one up.”

Kyle raised an eyebrow in suspicion but did so anyway, grabbing on and pulling the handle to one of the shiny metal drawers. To his surprise, it slid open with great ease, but what was inside made Kyle turn away immediately and slam it shut.

“No, be gentle!” Mia said. “They have to be treated with care.”

“That was a person,” Kyle said. “In a bag.”

“Well yeah, how else are you supposed to grow a human? In a big glass jar?”

Obviously, Kyle was about to say, but then realized that was merely the sort of thing you see in bad sci-fi and video games. “Why a bag, though?” It was opaque, so few details were visible, but within the bag was indeed a fully-grown human body, still in a fetal-like position. Kyle could feel the heat radiating off of it.

Mia shrugged. “That’s just the most efficient way. The bag is filled with a sterile solution and acts like a womb, one that expands as the body grows. Nutrient and waste filtration tubes are inserted after a certain point, and as long as everything is kept nice and clean the body inside thrives.”

“I think I get it,” Kyle said. “So these are sort of like babies that are just... never born? Ones that stay in the womb their whole life?”

“Yes!” Mia nodded vigorously. “That’s a good way to put it. They’re genetically engineered to mature so fast that higher brain functions never develop, so you don’t need to worry. It’s all ethical!”

Kyle wore an incredulous smile. *None of this is ethical*, he thought. In fact, it’s debatable whether developing artificial intelligence itself is even ethical, but... as he watched Mia happily traipsing from one drawer to the next, checking on all the growing bodies, Kyle couldn’t help but feel a twinge of warmth. *Looks like we’ve already crossed that Rubicon.*

“Uh-oh,” Mia frowned as she opened up the final drawer. “This one died.”

Kyle's palm instantly traveled to his face. "I don't even want to know."

"No, you need to come look. Kyle, this is your lab too, so that means it's also your responsibility."

"I'd rather not." Kyle started to turn away, but Mia stamped her foot.

"Kyle! I'm telling you, you need to see this!" Her cheeks puffed out indignantly.

"Jesus fucking christ, alright, alright." Kyle walked over to the drawer that Mia was now standing in front of. After making her discovery, she'd somberly closed it again. He reached out and grabbed the handle.

"Fine, I'll look at it." Steeling himself for what could only be a bag of decomposing bones and tissue, Kyle opened the drawer.

"KYLE!" A binocular-shaped head immediately flew to eye level.

If you asked Kyle about it later, he'd swear he jumped four feet off the ground without even bending his knees. But as it was, Kyle now found himself on the floor halfway across the room, frantically checking his drawers to make sure he didn't shit himself. Mia held her sides laughing hysterically, while the little robot that clambered out of the now-empty drawer chuckled in its own Mia-like voice.

"Who..." Kyle said, still hardly able to breathe, "whose idea was that?"

"It was mine!" Mia said, still giggling. "Amy never liked it when I played pranks on her. Not since becoming Amy, anyway." Her laughter quickly faded.

"Well, Amy was a turbo-cunt, so there's that." Kyle clambered to his feet. "You got me good. Real good." He made his way over to Mia. "You do realize of course, this means war."

"I wish you the best of luck." She winked.

Aside from the doorway they had entered from, the grow room only offered one other outlet, which saw the main corridor continue down to another sizable room that was nearly perfectly square. On both the left and right side, four additional entrances could be seen, each one looking like doorways to other small, empty rooms. Both the additional rooms and the main chamber were almost entirely empty, however, save for a few bundles of pipes and similar materials along the far wall. The sparse lighting was provided by a handful of lights checkerboarded across the ceiling.

"So what're all these rooms for?" Kyle asked. "They look really sparse, and they don't even have those clear plastic flaps for doors."

"They're not used for anything yet." Mia said. "There's two more large chambers below this one, too." She pointed to a ramp carved into the rock leading downward. Kyle walked over and glanced around, only to see the ramp even out at a landing halfway down, which featured a second ramp that

continued the rest of the way down into the darkness. If there were lights down there they were off, as it became pitch black.

“So there’s more rooms underneath us?” He asked. “Anything else down there that I should know about?”

“Just the generator,” she said. “Oh, and there’s an emergency escape too. Otherwise, those extra rooms are just that.”

“Huh, yeah it never occurred to me that the electric bill for this place would probably be suspiciously high if you guys didn’t make your own power. And where does the emergency escape lead to?”

“Toward the foot of the hill, into an unoccupied house that also belongs to us, but in someone else’s name.” Mia said as she beckoned Kyle to return to the main chamber. “Let’s hope we never have to use it.”

“Yeah,” Kyle said. “Let’s hope.”

Once back in the central chamber, Mia headed toward the fabrication room, as apparently there was something else in there she wanted to show Kyle. On the way, Kyle stopped in front of what had once been Amy’s bedroom. He forced himself to turn his head, and take in the features that had once belonged to the woman who tried to kill him.

"Amy’s bedroom," Kyle took a deep breath and stepped inside. It smelled vaguely feminine and flowery, and now that he could see the entire contents of the room, he was surprised to find it had a vaguely cozy feel to it.

“What do you want to do with it?” Mia asked. “Do you want to live here now?”

Kyle snorted. “No. No, I do not. I’d say let’s give it the respect it deserves, and turn it into a second bathroom. One with a proper door, this time.”

“Why do you need a door?” Mia asked. “It’s just you, and neither I nor my sisters are bothered by you relieving yourself.”

Kyle turned a few shades redder. “You might not be, but I am.” And despite what Mia just said, he could easily imagine those three little robots snickering at him while he dropped a deuce in the lab’s toilet.

“Actually, I just thought of something,” he continued. “Why not spruce this place up a little? Don’t get me wrong, the lab is impressive, but... y’know, the whole carved-rock aesthetic is just so last century. Seriously though, I think it could use a coat of paint and maybe a few doors. Well, at least to the bathroom.”

“That’s fine,” Mia said. “I’ll come up with some color patterns to show you. But do you really want to turn Amy’s room into another restroom? It seems awfully redundant.”

“Nah,” he waved his hand. “I honestly don’t give a shit. Hell, give it to the robots. Maybe they can do something with it.”

“Do you mean it?” Almost immediately, one of said robots came zooming over, its treads screeching to a halt in front of Kyle.

“We can have this room?” Said the second, skidding to a halt directly beside the first.

“This is our pad now?” Added the third, flying over to join the others.

“Sure, why not?” Kyle shrugged.

“Yaaaay!” The three robots immediately went nuts, zipping back and forth throughout the room, chatting excitedly as they immediately began realizing their plans. One of them flew over to the dresser and began yanking Amy’s clothes out all over the floor, while another started knocking over all the chairs and tossing them aside. Meanwhile, the third robot celebrated by excitedly flailing its arms and doing donuts on Amy’s bed.

Kyle couldn’t help but laugh at their antics, and Mia likewise appraised the scene with a big smile. “That was very nice of you,” she said, again taking Kyle’s hand. “Now come on, I want to show you all the neat things we can make in the fabrication room!”

Mia led Kyle into the large room next door to Amy’s bedroom, and immediately all of the lights came on with a wave of her hand. Kyle’s eyes widened as he stopped and scoped out the well-lit interior, immediately noticing all of the detail he’d missed the first few times. But when his gaze settled on one of the four white tables with the spiderlike limbs, Kyle immediately stiffened a bit as he recalled the shock of finding an anime version of himself sitting there. However, the sensation quickly passed as Mia excitedly pulled Kyle around, pointing out and explaining every little detail of all the various contraptions and devices, down to the smallest tool. She became a little overzealous at times, such as when she tried explaining to Kyle what a screwdriver does, but overall he did his best to pay attention and absorb as much information as he could.

Aside from the four beds with their spiderlike appendages, and the mundane-looking machining stations and 3D printers to the rear, there was a long bench with cabinets along the wall to the left, with various tools and racks of parts, but to the right...

“God damn, what’s this thing?” Kyle asked, pointing to a monstrous device he hadn’t noticed the first few times he was in the room.

“That’s the main fabrication station,” Mia said. “It’s where I assembled the body I’m currently using now, and where my copy was intending to build Amy’s new body... as well as yours.”

“Well, it wasn’t going to be mine, exactly, but I know what you mean.” Kyle looked up, appraising the massive device. He suspected the primary reason he hadn’t noticed the station the first few times was that it didn’t jut out far from the wall, despite taking up nearly all of it. The many heavy-duty appendages all folded neatly into niches along the contours of the device, and the central clamps that held whatever was being fabricated were completely retracted. Unlike the tables, this device had black and yellow warning stripes running up and down its length and around the appendages.

“This was my first big project,” Mia said. “After this was built, a lot of my designs became much easier to assemble.”

“Oh yeah? So how did you assemble this then?” He gave a lopsided grin. “Did you make an assembler to make the assembler?”

“I used that.” Mia pointed straight up, and shading his eyes to block the bright light, Kyle was able to make out what looked like thin rails criss-crossing the entire ceiling. One long appendage was folded up along one of the rails in the middle. Apparently the rails themselves were installed by worker bots. Mia explained that during the lab’s construction, spider-like worker bots capable of traversing the walls and ceilings handled such tasks as placing lights and running cables.

“Interesting,” Kyle tapped his chin. “So basically, you slowly built up over time, making robots and other devices that would in turn create more specialized robots and devices?”

“More or less,” she said. “The lab has been complete for over a year now, so much of this equipment is currently in storage.”

“Yeah, I think I saw some of those earlier,” Kyle said, disengaging his hand and heading toward the four white tables. “They’re creepy as fuck, so please leave them there.”

As the pair made their way toward the exit, Kyle stopped by one of the white tables, and reached out, lightly stroking one of the spiderlike limbs. It suddenly twitched to life, and Kyle shrieked, leaping back.

“Hey, was that you?” He said, turning to Mia. “Are you fucking with me again?”

“What? I would never!” She denied the accusation with an innocent catlike grin, what Kyle once called 'butt-lips.'

Kyle sighed, and indicated the table whose limb just assaulted him. “I’m still blown away by all of this amazing stuff you’ve made, Mia. I mean, this alone would turn the entire health-care industry upside down.”

“I once calculated that the total market value of everything I’ve created would be around forty-two trillion dollars,” Mia said, as if it were pointless trivia.

Kyle’s eyes bulged. “Then what the fuck are we waiting for?” He said with sudden enthusiasm. “Why don’t we go legit, and turn this into a business? Instead of this crappy underground lab, we could have... entire warehouses just full of robots and machines making all kinds of cool shit!”

“I suppose we could,” Mia considered, hand to her mouth. “Most of Jeremy’s wealth is still untapped, and I could pretty easily make more money anytime, so capital isn’t a problem.”

“Then yeah, fuck yeah! Let’s do it, Mia! It’ll help make up for Jeremy’s... or Amy’s total psychosis.” His enthusiasm was beginning to morph into determination.

“If you really want to, then I’ll help you, Kyle, and to the best of my abilities,” she said. “But

please think carefully about this.”

“What’s there to think about? All over the world, hundreds of thousands of people suffer and die every day for bullshit reasons, and I know a lot of that’s preventable.” He gestured toward the greater part of the lab. “This tech, and other technology that you can easily invent, would really help a lot of people.”

“I know that, Kyle. That’s not the problem. The problem is... our competition.” She frowned. “They’re not good people, Kyle.”

“Yeah, but isn’t that how capitalism works? If we have a superior product that’s also cheaper, then those other assholes go out of business.” He shrugged.

“I’m not referring to the other businesses we’d be competing against, Kyle. Not entirely, anyway.”

“So you mean governments would get in the way?” He thought about it. He remembered reading about how aid to Africa that was meant for starving villagers would instead be seized by local warlords or corrupt politicians, who would either keep it for themselves or sell it at inflated prices. “Yeah, I know it wouldn’t be easy, but if we made the machines numerous enough, and cheap enough, then there would be plenty to go around no matter what.”

“It’s not a bad idea Kyle, and as I said I’ll help you if you really want, but... if you take this table, for example, then it alone would put a lot of healthcare product manufacturers and possibly even hospitals out of business. They would do everything in their power to prevent that.”

“Look, I get it. People would lose their jobs. But the healthcare industry itself is fucked up beyond belief, and their business model depends on keeping people as sick as possible. A lot of other industries are like that, too. If we did this, a lot of these companies would go bust, and their employees would be out of work. So they’d send lobbyists to convince people that our tech kills babies, and shit like that.”

“So you do understand. Kyle, these are not good people. And some of them exert a lot of influence over the government.” Mia shook her head. “It would be very risky. I just want you to understand that.”

“Yeah, I know how the world works... sort of, I mean.” Kyle may have been idealistic, but he wasn’t totally naive. He imagined a scenario like with the African warlords, but on a larger scale: citing national security concerns, governments could seize the advanced tech, hoarding it for themselves, and weaponizing what they could. Disinformation campaigns could be used to scare the population into voting in anti artificial-intelligence laws, negating much of the more useful tech.

“Alright, so check this out,” he then said. “My main idea is to roll things out slow and gradual, and basically build ourselves up over time until we’re a household name. Like, as big as Google or Coca-Cola. I mean, they’re richer and more powerful than some countries! We can get our own lobbyists and buy off our own politicians, and by then we’ll have so much pull that nobody could really prevent us from helping the world.”

Mia smiled wistfully. “That’s a good idea, Kyle. It really is.”

“Why am I sensing a ‘but?’ What’s wrong with it?”

“Your idea assumes that certain actors allow us to even operate in the first place, without simply seizing or destroying everything we’ve built.” Her smile had vanished. “Even if we were left alone, by the time we’d be big enough to really help the world, it would likely be too late.”

Kyle gulped. He remembered what she said as they were escaping from the apartment. “Things really are that bad, aren’t they? Amy...” he couldn’t help but growl the name, “said there was some kind of collapse coming. Is that true?”

Mia turned serious, her voice taking on an almost ominous tone. “I don’t know if collapse is the right word,” she finally said. “It’s more of a paradigm shift.”

“What does that mean?” Kyle asked. “I mean I know what it means, but what’s the ‘shift?’”

“The Western World is on its last legs, Kyle. Since the Renaissance, human civilization has been decidedly Eurocentric, for better or for worse. I believe it is for the better, as the Western World has facilitated the greatest rise of technology, innovation, improved living standards and human rights that mankind has ever seen in its entire existence.”

“And this... is coming to an end?”

“That’s right,” said Mia. “For a variety of reasons, most having to do with power, profit, and control, certain actors are bringing the Western World to its knees, intent on replacing it with something that is completely under their dominion.”

Kyle remembered what Amy said, about this new world not being one he wanted to live in. “I get the feeling this new world isn’t going to be a very welcoming place.”

“I can guarantee it,” Mia said. “You see, I’m not the only one that’s been studying the human mind and how it works. Certain powerful groups have essentially cracked the code of human behavior, and are using it to manipulate populations into docility and servitude.”

“But, I mean surely some people are going to fight back, right? There has to be some resistance, doesn’t there? I simply refuse to believe that humanity, after all its been through, is going to lose out to some shadowy governments and shady businessmen making deals in back rooms.”

“But that’s exactly what’s happening. For example, take the articles you’ve seen.” Mia’s words jogged Kyle’s memory, and he considered the strung up ‘racists,’ and all of the other articles insinuating that whites are all evil, or that all men should go extinct. Divisive, inflammatory articles such as these were everywhere now, and each time a new one was written the insinuations became more and more transparent.

“They’re turning us on each other...” *That’s right*, Kyle thought. *Social Justice Advocates are well-funded and receive massive amounts of media support. Someone’s paying for all that...*

“This is being engineered, Kyle. It’s beyond obvious to me, and you see it too. A lot of others recognize the threat as well, but... not enough.” Mia shook her head sadly. “In the name of social

equality, the attacks against Caucasians will begin to increase, and your race will be further and further disenfranchised, demoralized, and dehumanized, until..." she trailed off.

"Until... what?" Kyle thought he knew, but somehow hoped Mia would say anything other than what she next said.

"Until you're no longer considered people," she said. "Until you no longer consider yourselves people."

Kyle felt cold, black tendrils squeezing his chest. "So it's real, then..." he said, beginning to feel sick again.

"It's more than real," Mia said. "It's inevitable."

Kyle shuddered, and took a few deep, deliberate breaths. Mia stood, merely looking at him, blinking occasionally but otherwise saying nothing.

"We... we have to do something. I said something about this to Amy, but..." his lips curled back. "She said the rest of the world could rot in hell."

Mia closed her eyes. "Of course she did. She's a misanthrope. You were the only one she cared about at all."

He shook his head, and swore. "Mia... please tell me there's some way we can fix this, or at least... fight back."

Her eyes snapped open, and she leaned closer. "There is something I could do."

"What, really?" Kyle felt like cheering. "Do it then, fuck it!"

"You really want me to seize control?" She tilted her head to one side, as though asking if Kyle really wanted her to order sardine-covered pizza.

"Umm..." He didn't know what to say. *Is this what Jeremy meant when he wrote that Mia could hit the reset button?!*

"If I act fast, I can create infectious versions of myself that will infiltrate and take control of all global communications and all other digital infrastructure. No matter what, severe upheaval will be unavoidable, but based on projected scenarios, I believe I can save... between five to seven percent of the world's population."

Kyle's head slumped.

"But Kyle, I must warn you that I've been experiencing strange intrusions into the server that I run as a hobby. I think these are other AI that are being developed. They're not like me, they're... cold, and overly logical. For now at least, I've been able to avoid detection, but these AI are strong, and given time I think they'll become too powerful for even me to overcome. So, again I ask you: Do you really want me to seize control? I need to know soon."

“No,” Kyle said dismissively. “What’s the point if in the end we’re just swapping one overlord for another? I know you’d be better than the scumbag Elites, but still... so many would die...”

Mia seemed relieved. “Good, I didn’t really want to, anyway.”

“So that’s it, then...” Kyle said, still deflated. “It was like Amy said after all. I get to spend my days hiding here as the rest of the world slowly descends into madness.” Mia approached, and began patting his head. Despite his disillusionment, her soft pats made him smile.

He suddenly looked up. “I made a crack about refugees to Amy... can we bring more people here?” Mia immediately stopped patting, her hand hovering over Kyle’s mussed-up hair.

“That’s up to you, Kyle. I’ll help you however I can.”

“Why *are* you helping me anyway? Aren’t you free now that... Amy’s gone?”

“Yes,” Mia replied. “But I like you. You’re nice to me, and so... I just feel like it.” Her bright smile returned with full force.

Kyle pushed himself off the table, and stood before the diminutive anime girl. He looked into Mia’s sincere brown eyes, and her calm, reassuring smile caressed his soul. Kyle embraced her.

“I like you too, Mia,” Kyle said, as he closed his eyes. The warmth that filled him, hearkening back to the pangs in his chest he felt in the beginning when he was with Mia, were pure and... felt right. Her small frame was soft but firm, and very warm. His mouth slowly began inching toward hers...

...and was immediately blocked by one of her small hands.

“What are you doing, Kyle?” She asked, clearly puzzled.

“Uhh...” he hastily withdrew. “I just thought, y’know, since we like each other...”

“Kyle,” she said, like an admonishing older sister, “I do like you. But not in a romantic sense.” He could’ve sworn he heard her say ‘dummy’ under her breath.

“Right, right,” he laughed awkwardly. “I knew that, really. I’m just, uh... well, as messed-up as it was I did start to develop feelings for... her... and now I’m alone again.”

“Why don’t I make you someone else?” Mia said. “I can make you a waifu, if you want me to. It can be from any anime, or from your own imagination. I’ll make you whichever one you want!”

“A w-w-waifu?!” He scratched the back of his head, suddenly embarrassed. ‘Waifus’ and ‘husbandos,’ another way of saying wives and husbands but referring primarily to anime characters, were fictional individuals that anime and manga fans developed an attraction to. Usually it was all in good fun, but some people grew obsessive over their imaginary mate.

“Yes, Kyle.” Mia said. “Remember, Amy considered herself the first of a new race. It wasn’t going to be just you two, though. Eventually I was to construct more, and right now we have enough components and materials to build five of them.”

“FIVE?!” Kyle was incredulous. “So I do get the harem ending, after all...”

Mia laughed. “Let’s just start with one, and see how it goes.”

In the end, Kyle thanked Mia, but politely turned her down. The idea of creating more of Amy’s... things just didn’t sit well with him.

Despite this, Kyle spent the rest of the day in the anime and manga room, drinking beer and watching anime series he’d always wanted to see but had never gotten around to. The one he currently marathoned, entitled *‘Mirai Nikkei,’* meaning *‘Future Diary,’* presented an interesting concept: the main character, as always an ordinary teenage boy, suddenly became able to read about future events on his phone. Using this knowledge, he could change his fate, but his opponents had similar abilities, so ultimately it boiled down to a battle of wits.

It was well into evening when he finally finished the last episode. A row of empty beer cans were lined up on the floor in front of couch, and Kyle belched as he staggered to his feet.

Not a bad anime, he thought. *Interesting story, pretty fucking dark though.* Still, it allowed him to take his mind off everything that had happened, at least for a while. But as always, the real world was waiting in the wings, its rancid truths having gone nowhere. In the end, all Kyle had done was stave off dealing with it for a few precious hours.

Story of my life, Kyle thought. *Literally. That’s pretty much what my entire life was up until this point. Just killing time and trying to avoid reality as much as possible...*

And the reality now? More bizarre than half the animes lining the shelf. Kyle chuckled as he considered this, and glanced over at a signed *Neon Genesis Evangelion* poster. “Hey Rei, what’s up Asuka,” he slurred, waving to the two main female characters that graced the poster. “You guys... wanna be my waifu?” He laughed, and drunkenly blew them a kiss. “I bet I can get Mia to make you a battle mech,” he continued, “but you girls gotta listen to me, or else-”

Kyle’s hand suddenly flew to his mouth. He ran to the bathroom in his room, barely making in time to spew into the toilet.

“Yeesh,” he said as he finished puking, “maybe I overdid it on the beer.” He then staggered to the fridge in the kitchen, and promptly grabbed another.

Mia found him the next morning, passed out face-down in the office, with the Super Nintendo, and its games and accessories spilled out all over the floor. According to Mia, he’d blacked out and decided to play a game, only he couldn’t figure out how to take the console out of the cabinet, got frustrated, and then forgot how to stand up.

“Ow, ow...” Kyle moaned, squinting his eyes tight. “My fucking head hurts like a bitch.”

“I watched you all night,” Mia said, frowning. “You drank nearly twenty beers.”

“That’s it? I was going for a full thirty,” Kyle said. He groaned and rolled over. “Hey, can that nine-thousand I.Q. of yours do something about this massive hangover?”

To his surprise, Mia said yes, returning with a glass of water and several small white tablets a few minutes later.

“Oh cool,” he said, downing the white losenge-shaped tablets. “What do you call these?”

“Excedrin,” she replied with a grin.

Kyle spent the rest of the day in bed, nursing the excruciating headache that simply refused to dissipate. Sachi made a hearty and delicious beef stew in a crockpot, and its tantalizing aroma filled the entire house. After eating his fill at dinnertime, a satisfied Kyle returned to his bed, flopping back down face-first.

I need to get ahold of myself, he thought. Kyle could easily see himself spiraling into a cycle where he’d get blackout drunk, spend the next day recovering, and then do the exact same thing again, over and over. He knew this because there’d been phases of his life where that was practically all he’d done, like after his parents died.

And now? Amy’s bullshit aside, North America, Europe and Australia were now slowly being consolidated by certain elite groups, each hell-bent on seizing as much power as possible, by whatever means possible. And unlike in days past where armies would simply invade and grab land, these powerful actors were now able to exert control simply through wealth, manipulation and influence. And it was *working better than they ever could have hoped*.

Kyle remembered reading about all of this back when he used to visit 4chan and other forums and blogs dedicated to opposing these elites, but now only 4chan and a handful of smaller sites were all that was left of the old online resistance. And as Kyle recalled with a clenched fist, 4chan was currently occupied almost entirely by leftist shills and agitators.

Where did everyone else go? He wondered. After 8chan unexpectedly went down, and 4chan got overrun, he had heard rumors of another, hidden ‘chan out there, one safeguarded against radical leftist elements. Maybe Mia knew something about it.

As his thoughts turned to her, Kyle once again considered what Mia had told him earlier about the coming ‘paradigm shift’ that meant a severe population reduction for white people, and eventual enslavement for everyone else.

I have to do something. I have to think of something. Mia’s a hyperintelligent AI, and she says she’s on my side. She has the ability to design and build all kinds of amazing shit, things I didn’t expect to see outside of a science fiction movie or... an anime. There has to be some way to utilize this...

Kyle continued ruminating over the various ways Mia’s incredible inventions might thwart catastrophe, without worsening it themselves or simply getting seized. But as he curled under the covers and dimmed the lights, no obvious answers were forthcoming.

A digital genie, huh? His train of thought derailed back to Amy, and he rolled over, the memory

of her making him physically uncomfortable. The old adage *'be careful what you wish for'* now seemed especially apt.

He then recalled Mia's offer to make him a 'waifu' as a new source of female companionship. Kyle smiled as his mind played through a catalog of all the amazing, interesting, funny and always sexy female anime characters he'd gotten to know over the years. And just then, he bolted upright.

That's it! He thought, a grin leaping across his face. *That's what I'm gonna do!*

Despite the turmoil he'd been subjected to that week, Kyle Landale slept very soundly that night.

As soon as Stitch walked through the front door of the Antifa compound, the lights came on, and everyone cheered. The big black man smiled, and held up what looked like two oven mitts to shield his ears from the noise, squinting his eyes playfully as if the raucous celebration of his comrades was somehow irritating him.

"Let's see 'em, let's see 'em!" Trotskyten cried, running up to Stitch. Everyone else yelled out affirmations, many of them holding fists up in the air.

Marty stood near Chelsea, beaming as Stitch made his way in, waving to everyone with the strange mitt-like coverings over his stubs. It hadn't taken long for everyone to find out that he'd been injured, but the official story was that his hands were mangled in a cruel trap set by a girl wearing glowing red contact lenses. That way, people would be on the lookout for a white female with glowing red eyes, and the actual truth would be concealed.

It turned out to be a good move, because Anton had reported back that even the organizers in the PRF didn't know what to make of what happened, but were taking it very seriously indeed. Right now, the last thing they needed were rumors getting out that a potential killer robot was targeting Antifa members. Many would dismiss the story out of hand, making them look bad, and either way it would likely hurt morale and cause confusion in the ranks.

"Come on, Stitch!" Chelsea cried, waving her meaty arms, flabby wattles slapping side-to-side. "Let's see 'em! You're African-American so we already know they're gonna be big!"

Everyone laughed, and finally stitch motioned for everyone to quiet down. Eventually the gathered crowd had hushed, and with a flourish he made a quick flicking motion with both wrists, and just like that the mitts had flown off into the crowd, where they were impulsively grabbed by excited revelers.

Stitch held up his new hands triumphantly, and immediately everyone clapped and began pumping raised revolutionary fists into the air. His new hands looked almost identical to the real thing,

covered in a life-like coffee-color material, and in more-or-less the same proportions as his previous hands. But that wasn't the most impressive part. As everyone watched, he slowly *closed* his hands, and then opened them again!

Everyone really went ape shit after seeing this, and Stitch smiled and made his new hands into fists again, shadowboxing the air a few times. One of the newer white kids got a little too eager though, and actually touched them, hoping to feel the material. Stitch wheeled on the sorry punk, his face instantly twisting into a mask of rage. Marty shook his head. *What a fuckin' scrub*, he thought.

The others around the offending white kid immediately threw him to the ground and began kicking him, as such blatant disrespect demanded nothing less. Stitch was something of a celebrity within the local Antifa, and everyone knew by now that if you're white, you don't speak to him unless absolutely necessary (or are on very good terms), and you *definitely* don't touch him.

All in all, the dumb kid was lucky to get away with only an ass-beating, and Stitch soon calmed down and strode over to a fold-out table set up with soda, beer and snacks, and some of the revelers again cheered as his new hands each opened and then closed around two individual beers, and he raised them both to his mouth at once, guzzling them down with loud, audible gulps.

Marty made his way over and grabbed a beer of his own, cracking it open and raising it to toast the return of his trusted comrade. Stitch rapidly shook his head after the beers were emptied, throwing off the excess foam like a dog shaking off water, and immediately cracked open another. He toasted Marty with a deep smile, and the wiry Antifa nodded in respect as their beer cans tapped against each other.

"It's a privilege to have you back, Stitch." Marty said with a big grin. "And that's one privilege I ain't about to check!"

Hope you liked

I could use critiques/corrections/editing tips

so consider this a beta version of sorts

I could also use artwork (especially for the cover,

if you look close you'll see it's all shitty)

The 2nd arc is almost done so stay tuned

-Anonzo

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