

ALYSSA COLE

THE A.I. WHO LOVED ME



Her new neighbor is
super hot...
and super human

SUMMARY

A captivating romantic comedy with a thrilling sci-fi twist by award-winning author Alyssa Cole!

Trinity Jordan leads a quiet, normal life: working from home for the Hive, a multifunctional government research center, and recovering from the incident that sent her into a tailspin. But the life she's trying to rebuild is plagued by mishaps when Li Wei, her neighbor's super sexy and super strange nephew, moves in and turns things upside down. Li Wei's behavior is downright odd—and the attraction building between them is even more so.

When an emergency pulls his aunt away from the apartment complex, Trinity decides to keep an eye on him...and slowly discovers that nothing is what it seems. For one thing, Li Wei isn't just the hot guy next door—he's the hot A.I. next door. In fact, he's so advanced that he blurs the line between man and machine. It's up to Trinity to help him achieve his objective of learning to be human, but danger is mounting as they figure out whether he's capable of the most illogical human behavior of all...falling in love.

THE A.I.
WHO
LOVED ME

THE HIVE: BOOK 1

BY ALYSSA COLE

CHAPTER 1

Transcript of Session #050-TJ

Feels For All, Licensed Mental Health Maintenance from the Comfort of Your Own Couch

Client: Jordan, Trinity

Age: 36

Race: Black

Occupation: Full-Time Hive Employee

**Status: On temporary medical leave from primary duties;
cleared for HiveDrive Virtual Driving duties**

Penny Home Artificial Intelligence Personal Assistant: Trinity, it's time for your therapy session. Kimberly, your therapist, is online.

Trinity: Okay, I'm ready. [water running from sink tap]

Kimberly: Hey, Trinity. How're things going?

Trinity: Hi! Things are okay. [water running] [scrape of a dish in the sink] Sorry, just washing my breakfast dishes. [water stops running]

Kimberly: Your apartment isn't equipped with an ultrasonic dish scrubber? The new Lincoln model is supposed to be worth every

credit.

Trinity: (sings commercial jingle) FOUR SCOOOOORE!! (laughs)

That song really gets stuck in your head, huh? I have the last model, the Washington, but sometimes I like doing things the old-fashioned way. I haven't been using it much lately, anyway; it's been turning on at random times and the cleaning soundwaves have been making my eardrums itch.

Kimberly: That doesn't sound comfortable. Why don't you tell me about your week?

Trinity: My week? It was pretty much the same as last week, I guess, except my driving station is on the fritz. The wheel froze up this morning and I accidentally cursed while driving some diplomat to the airport in Brunei. I had to fake a cough. *Fuck* (coughs)! (laughs)

Kimberly: (chuckles reservedly) You're not allowed to curse? In the classic films, taxi drivers cursed all the time.

Trinity: People think they're being chauffeured by a driverless car—that's the appeal of the service. They want to feel special and play "Ask the A.I. bizarre questions," so I have to follow the HiveDrive conductor guidelines. Everything I say goes through a voice changer

so (begins to speak imitate PENNY) it sounds like one of those annoying automated robot voices.

Kimberly: Mmhmm. It really is fascinating how people envision the *AI experience*. Even washing machines can talk to you now!

Kimberly: I'm surprised the cars don't actually drive themselves, though. Why do you think that is?

Trinity: They can, but when it comes down to it, there are some things even the most advanced artificial intelligence systems can't be trusted with. After that accident where a self-driving car had to choose between hitting a school bus carrying kids on a field trip and a truck carrying a shipment of biosynthetic hamburger patties...well, the car ran its algorithms and made a decision based on value. The kids lost, and now I get to drive from home.

Kimberly: (sighs) I see, I see. What a shame.

Trinity: When I worked at the Hive, I heard about all kinds of tech, but the fact is, machines can't *think* in the same way we do. There are some lines that shouldn't be crossed, I guess. Maybe 'cars that decide who lives or dies' is one of those lines.

Kimberly: I'm not sure allowing humans to decide who lives or dies is any better. (chuckles)

Trinity: True.

Kimberly: While your driving station is offline, maybe you can use the time to reflect on your current situation. For example, do you still like the temp job?

Trinity: What's not to like? I get to virtually travel all over the world while working from home. The pay is good and I meet all kinds of people, even if they don't know they're meeting *me*.

Kimberly: I understand all of that. It's why I like my job, too. Getting to speak with and help all kinds of people, virtually. (pause) Do you ever miss working at the Hive?

Trinity: (laughs shakily) Not really. I like working in my pajamas too much. And why would I miss being stuck analyzing data in some cubicle ten stories underground? (clears throat)

Kimberly: (brief, weighted pause) What else have you been up to? Besides working?

Trinity: I don't know. *Stuff*. (laughs) Exercise. Reading. Hanging with Ru and Yana. Talking to my neighbors. Dr. Zhang, the one who leads the humanitarian tech department at the Hive? She was telling me about these tiny robots that can be sent to find people after terrorist

attacks, or environmental disasters. Tiny robots are adorable, but that's also really cool.

Kimberly: I imagine that kind of project would have particular resonance for you.

Trinity: And Vincenzo, he does front gate security over at Hive HQ? Showed up at my door with dinner in Tupperware last week. Yana said he was trying to hit on me, but I think he's just nice. He feeds me like he feeds the stray dogs he's always bringing home.
(chuckles)

Kimberly: Interesting. You've mentioned some concern about your lack of interest in dating since the incident. Do you find Vincenzo attractive?

Trinity: What? No. I mean, yes, but not *like that*. And I wasn't concerned, I was just wondering why...why no one feels right.

Kimberly: Can you explain that?

Trinity: I mean, I see attractive people, but I don't feel any sparks or anything. I just feel kind of...sad. So I decided I'm not going to look for a relationship right now.

Kimberly: What does that mean to you? Not looking for a relationship?

Trinity (a little defensive): I don't know—that I'm not gonna worry about it. I mean, I got blown up not that long ago, I don't have to jump on the first man who's nice to me and makes good Bolognese, do I?

Kimberly: Of course not. I didn't mean to push or make you uncomfortable, and I apologize for that.

Trinity: You didn't. Make me feel uncomfortable. When I'm ready to date again, you'll be the first person to know. Besides, I don't want to date anyone who works at Hive, which is part of the problem.

Kimberly: How does it feel? Living in a complex with so many people who still work there while you're recovering?

Trinity (laughs a bit bitterly): Pretty much everyone living in New Arlington works at the Hive. You can't swing a cat without hitting a Hive worker in this town.

Kimberly: Why would you swing a cat?

Trinity: (laughs) That is a weird euphemism, I guess. I wouldn't in real life, of course.

Kimberly: Right. You didn't explain how it makes you feel. These reminders of your job.

Trinity: (sighs) It...hurts. Kind of how my knee hurts—out of nowhere and nothing can make it go away except time. But I ignore that pain, and I can ignore this, too.

CHAPTER 2

Trinity

“Why are you always messing with shit that shouldn’t be messed with, Trinity?”

I inhale deeply, reminding myself that Ru is here to help, that in fact she’s the only person who can and will do this job at the price of “free because you’re my friend” digicreds.

I scrunch my face up apologetically and lightly pull my fingers over my coxcomb of tight curls, tugging at the corkscrew that tickles the bridge of my nose. “Sorry.”

Ru stops typing for a second to glare at me while pulling her long dreads back into a ponytail, then goes back to work, slightly appeased.

Having to apologize is only slightly less annoying than having to change out of my comfy matching pajama set and into jeans and a tank top—Ru and Yana don’t care, but they’re the closest friends I’ve got here and that makes me want to look presentable when I see them. How I used to be before the incident. Pulled together, with all

my messy parts shoved under the bed and into closets for the automated cleaning tech to handle later.

The straight-leg jeans are choking my calves though—I'd added knee injury-modified krav maga to my virtual exercise routine and it turns out that pretending to punch and kick things really agrees with me.

Maybe I'll stick to pajama bottoms and running shorts until I know I'll be able to earn enough credits to splurge on the latest stretchtech-anysize jeans.

Yana sits on my loveseat, her long dark curls pulled up into a pineapple atop her head, her hazel eyes darting back and forth as she scrolls through headlines in the *World News Weekly* app.

"Wow. This article says that aliens landed on earth two hundred years ago and have been living amongst us." Her eyes go wide and she lowers the tablet to look at me. "Can you imagine?"

"Isn't that the headline they have every other day? Besides, if aliens were smart enough to travel from a distant galaxy, why would they settle on this hellscape of a planet?" I scoff. "Any intelligent life would stay far away from a world full of creatures gleefully bringing about their own extinction."

“It doesn’t say the aliens are smart,” Yana says, still scrolling. “I mean, anyone can get a driver’s license here. Maybe it’s the same everywhere in the universe.”

“You need to stop rotting your brain with that junk,” Ru grumbles. She’s under the hood of my driving station checking the electronics—or her cables are under the hood, rather. They’re plugged into the ports under the latch where the hard drive is located and trail into the station’s body, where she sits in the driver’s seat, computer in her lap and her knees poking out from the station’s open sides.

My driving station isn’t exactly small, because I’m not, but it isn’t made for the Amazonian stature of the complex’s superintendent. Ru handles everything from leaking sinks to maintaining each apartment’s various tech and electronics. She’s perched on the edge of the custom-modified ergoseat, legs wide and back bent at an uncomfortable angle.

The station’s screen, which projects passenger information, live street cam footage, GPS, and traffic updates when I’m driving, is in semi-opaque mode so I can make out her silhouette through it as I pass by. The diagnostics data she’s running crawls over the screen. I

can read backwards, but not at this speed or with that tiny font size, so I can't catch what it says.

Ru sucks her teeth, then pokes her head out of the station to shoot me another glare. "And Trin? I told you not to mess around with shit because then when you finally call me in, I have to figure out the difference between what you messed up and the real problem."

"I didn't mess anything up," I say, offended that she'd even noticed my tinkering and resisting the urge to go look over her shoulder. "I only peeked. Maybe poked a bit when the vision-calibrating light sequence that begins each shift stalled out. It's annoying to have to wait for the officially licensed software, and to pay an arm and a leg for it, when maybe I could fix it myself."

I'd already given the Hive more than an arm and a leg, figuratively, as had most of their employees, but the old saying hasn't faded from use yet.

"Fixing HiveTech without running the government-approved software is a *felony*." Her voice is serious now. "You know this."

Only if you get caught, I think. I'm not some master criminal or anything, but I'm confident that I could make an undetected mod

here and there.

“The last thing I need is the Feds swarming this complex,” she grumbles.

“Most residents *are* the Feds,” I remind her.

“Seriously. Even Trinity used to be one,” Yana says with her eyes still glued to her tablet. She doesn’t see how I flinch at the words.

“I mean muscle Feds, not brain Feds,” Ru clarifies. “The scary ones. They bring nothing but trouble.”

Ru is tall and sturdily built, making some people think she must be tough and dangerous; in reality, she’s too nice for her own good. She doesn’t like violence and had been embarrassed when I’d told her I once saw her menacingly thwacking her own palm with a gigantic wrench to scare off a guy who wouldn’t take no from the plant biologist in 2L.

“Fine. I’ll be more careful,” I say, silently adding, *Meaning next time you won’t be able to notice I’ve been poking around.*

I’m still trying to get a peek at the data the software is spitting out, but not to be *too* obvious about it, so I make sure to have

something in my hands each time I walk by the station that sits in pride of place in my living room. It's against the smooth white wall where most people in the apartment complex project their holoscreens. I'd never set mine up; I'm not interested in immersing myself in the live streams from countless homes across America that now make up the bulk of current telestreams, and I don't watch the news anymore. Kimberly was the one who suggested that, surprisingly, telling me it was okay not to subject myself to things I could do nothing about—war, fascism, rising seas.

At least I'm a good swimmer.

"I heard a neuroscientist got bagged by the muscle feds," Yana says nonchalantly. She hears all kinds of things working in the coffee shop at the Hive; the Feds need caffeine too, maybe more than most people, and the higher ups were willing to deal with the rigorous background checks required to recruit the best baristas in the country. It seemed weird to me that the biggest tech hub in the country didn't just use the automated coffee machines, but apparently studies showed that humans put workers more at ease.

It was worrisome that Yana seemed to think the nondisclosure agreement she'd surely been forced to sign was just a suggestion,

but hey, I was messing around with HiveTech so I wasn't one to cast judgement.

“Manish—Manny—was so cute; dark skin, great smile, and all these wild curls. He was so excited about his work and liked to talk about weird brain stuff, like what I read about in World Weekly News. The way brain cells talk to each other was his pet project. I'd have his latte waiting every morning, and he'd tell me about his latest idea, but three weeks ago he just stopped picking them up. He disappeared. Vanished. When I asked his colleagues where he was, they said they didn't know who I was talking about.” She glances up at me, her gaze a flash of hazel fire that contradicts her conversational tone. “Leave the tinkering to Ru, and if you're thinking of doing anything else that could get you into trouble—don't. The Hive is too cash strapped to be benevolent, but they'll spend a sick amount of money to screw people over.”

“Okay, okay.” I carry my bathing suit, which had quickly dried on the balcony in the blazing morning sun, past the driving station in time to see blinking red warning symbols on the screen. I pick up a flaking print copy of my neighbor Dr. Zhang's *Technology and the Humanitarian Ideal*, which I'd borrowed from her but still haven't read, casually flipping to the first page:

When I was a young researcher, a disaster struck my hometown, wiping out much of my family and many of my friends and neighbors. What happened was a tragedy, but it was also preventable, and it was on that day that my goal in life was galvanized: I would use technology to help people, to prevent harm—to save the world.

Wow, what an intro. I'd already known Dr. Zhang was amazing, but I hadn't known this. I'm strongly tempted to keep reading, but remember my objective is to spy on Ru, so I glance up from the page and try to track what she's typing to make the warning go away.

m-e-l-e-o

Her fingers stop flying over the keyboard and she shoots me a frustrated look.

"Trinity." It's a warning; an affectionate one, but a serious one too.

"Fine. Want some coffee?" I drop the book onto the seat next to Yana and walk into the cube of my hyperefficient mini-kitchen, all sleek stainless steel and black lacquer, and start pulling out the coffee pods.

“Do you have matcha?” Yana asks. “I won’t drink your synth coffee swill, and you shouldn’t either. We have an actual old school espresso machine at work and, more importantly, real beans. No gene mods, no unknown additives, no burnt crap taste.”

I roll my eyes. “Well, you could hook me up with some of those beans instead of complaining.”

“Stealing non-mod coffee beans is a federal offense,” Yana responds cheerily. “I’d rather do something more interesting if I’m going to engage in criminal activity.”

“Matcha please!” Ru pokes her head out of the station and peers into the kitchen. There’s a playful expression on her face. “You need to cut the caffeine anyway. It’s bad for you.”

Something tugs at the edge of my mind, and for a second Ru goes out of focus and there’s a flash of memory—a hand tugging my coffee cup away before I could take a sip...a mouth pressing firmly against mine so that I can’t be too mad about the loss of caffeine.

“Hey, friend. You okay?” Yana asks.

I blink, shake my head, then sigh loudly for their benefit to show I’m fine.

“You both want me to do the whole thing?” I ask, aggrieved, and then make a whipping motion with my right hand. “With the bowl, and the whisk, and all that?”

Ru grins. Yana nods.

Ru is trying to keep me busy so I stop peeking. Yana just really enjoys someone else being in charge of the complicated caffeine order.

Ru gets back to work. “I’m not trying to be all jangly-nerves in my bed tonight and coffee really fucks with my system lately. Guess I’m getting old.”

I put the thermal mugs away and pull three glazed pottery tea bowls down from the shelf, where they usually sit as decoration, rinsing them and then placing them on the counter. I open the utensil drawer with one hand and simultaneously reach over my head with the other for the can of matcha that I only use when they stop by. One hand closes around the can, but the fingers of the other press against my palms as they come up empty. I feel around in the drawer for a second, then glance down—there’s an empty spot between the wine opener and the hand blender—the bamboo whisk is gone.

It should be here. The kitchen is a single cube, designed for one person and requiring the utmost economy with utensils. And I'm, well, I'm *me*. Even when my apartment is a mess, everything has its place so that I can reach for it without even thinking.

Unease grips the base of my neck and I roll my shoulders. I 've just misplaced it—this wasn't the first time in the last few weeks I'd done that, which doesn't comfort me like it should. I don't misplace things, in general, because I have a great visual memory. It made me a fantastic data analyst, and the person who knows where things are in my friend group.

Now I'm neither I guess.

"I'll be right back," I call out in a nothing-wrong-here voice because, hey, people misplace things all the time. I don't need to get upset with myself. I don't need to make this into a bigger thing than it is. I'll just borrow one from Dr. Zhang. I know she has one because she gifted me my set after I complimented hers. "Don't touch any of my stuff or my Penny will taze you."

"Home A.I. don't have a built-in taze function," Ru says regretfully. "I would 've definitely used it on you last time you tried to cheat during game night."

“Home artificial intelligence personal assistants do not condone violence, Rutina.” Penny’s voice slides into the conversation, as it seems to do more often when Ru is over. “In addition, A.I. cannot purposely harm humans. It runs counter to the International A.I. Programming laws: No A.I. shall lie to humans. No A.I. shall kill humans. No A.I. shall purposeful—.”

“Sorry, Penny, I didn’t mean to imply you would ever break IAIP,” Ru says.

“Apology accepted, Rutina.”

I jog out of the apartment and across the hall, giving Dr. Zhang’s door two sharp knocks. She doesn’t usually leave for work until later, since she’s semi-retired and mostly overseeing some of her legacy projects at the laboratory.

I hear footsteps, which is my first indicator that something is off—Dr. Zhang is feather-boned, and her light steps would barely register through the thick metal of her door. Still, I’m staring at where her eyes should be when the door jerks open. Instead of her kind, slightly wrinkled face, I’m met with a bronze wall of rippling abdominal muscles. Washboard isn’t a good descriptor because these abs are so chiseled they seem like they could hurt you, like

you could lose a finger to a freak sit-up related accident if you reached out to stroke them at the wrong moment. This is an imminent threat because, clearly, their owner must spontaneously break into abdominal exercises without warning all the time to maintain this physique.

I lift my head to look straight ahead and that's...yes, that's definitely a perfectly round brown nipple staring back at me. Those are pectorals—waxed or folliclecleansed to lickable smoothness.

The abruptly sexual nature of my thoughts startles me.

Lickable? What the hell?

A stranger's torso is exposed for my perusal and even a quick glance is enough to know this man is large, strong, and should consider wearing a shirt before springing all of *this* onto unsuspecting neighbors.

I look up into the eyes of the owner of the hazardous abs and smooth pecs, and the same unease I'd just experienced in my kitchen, the disquiet of reaching for something in its habitual place and finding it gone, overpowers me. It's the same sensation I have in bed sometimes, like I've suddenly caught myself just as I'm beginning to plunge into a bottomless chasm.

He's hot. *Extremely* hot. I can't even pretend otherwise because his attractiveness is almost as dangerous as his venus fly abs. Lustrous jet-black hair, short on the sides and longer at the crown, with several untamed cowlicks vying for dominance and giving him a messy bedhead look. Square jaw, full lips, and the same smooth light brown skin that I'd become acquainted with lower on his body.

His eyes though—beneath the hooded lids are irises of a deep brown that I feel *should* be warm, but regard me with a coolness that sparks a flurry of emotions in me.

Anger. Sadness. Confusion.

I have the urge to reach out to him, to make sure he's real, but I keep my arms at my side because touching a shirtless stranger would be weird as hell. Opening the door shirtless is pretty iffy, too, but I'm the woman who would gladly live a bra-and pants-free existence, so I'm not gonna judge.

"Um, is Dr. Zhang here?" I finally manage. My voice is hoarse for some reason, and I clear my throat.

He stares down at me, unblinking, and fear prickles the back of my neck. I start to move my hand toward the small of my back and

then stop myself.

What was I reaching for? I wonder. And why am I letting a strange shirtless man intimidate me?

“Dr. Zhang?” I repeat more firmly, not moving my gaze from him. He’s so still that it takes a moment to register the rise and fall of his chest. Then he tilts his head and blinks twice, and I realize what’s going on. He doesn’t understand me.

He might be a visiting researcher; a Nigerian roboticist had stayed here two months before while interviewing for a job at Dr. Zhang’s laboratory. That doesn’t explain the man chest, but hey, if Dr. Zhang has herself a handsome young thang, good for her.

I’m still trying figure out what his deal is when the door opens more widely and Dr. Zhang steps out, carrying her giant gray and white cat, Tim. She’s wearing the fuzzy pink slippers I’d given her for the holiday exchange and stroking Tim behind the ears. Tim is happily curled against her. She has that effect on people.

“Oh, you’ve met my nephew.” She smiles her huge smile that always makes me feel at home with her. Her expression is soft and welcoming, but her gaze is sharp, watching my reaction. “Trinity, this is Li Wei. He’s just arrived and is still acclimating to things. Please

excuse his silence; I suspect that he's a bit overwhelmed. Li Wei, this is our neighbor. She's good people. You can trust her."

He doesn't say anything, but the intensity of his focus wraps itself around me and tightens, like the Anaconda body-shaping blankets that are supposed to sculpt a perfect hourglass figure as you sleep, but have crushed several people to death.

"N—nice to meet you," I manage. Something soft and warm lands on my arm—Tim's paw, helpfully drawing my attention back to his owner. I blink, then pet Tim as I remember my reason for being there. "I came to borrow your bamboo whisk because mine disappeared and Ru and Yana are being demanding. I can come back later if you're busy."

"Li Wei, can you get the bamboo whisk from the drawer next to the sonic scrubber?" Dr. Zhang asks her nephew, gently directing him inside of the house so that he finally stops staring at me.

When she looks back at me, the sharpness in her eyes has softened to sadness. "He was in an accident. He has some memory, behavioral, and motor skill issues, but he's on the mend. It'll take a little time for him to get back to who he once was, though."

Oh. *Oh*. I know what that's like, coming back from an accident and no longer feeling like yourself, but I don't tell her all that. Instead I nod, and say, "I see."

"I brought him here because I wanted him to be around people who care about him, not stuck recovering at the Hive." She sighs, and I realize this is the first time I've ever seen her unhappy. "He's all that I have left of my family, and I couldn't just leave him there. They don't understand how to be kind."

I nod again. "Kindness doesn't turn a profit."

I don't remember much from my own physical therapy at the Hive Medical Center, but I do know it wasn't gentle. The entire corporation is part of the privatized branch of government; those stuck with the scraps of public sector healthcare have it much worse, but HiveCare prioritizes efficiency, like every other arm of the company, be it research, tech, education, or security.

The bottom line is that we aim for the top. That was their mantra, which I'd repeated with forced cheer in training sessions so many years ago.

"Let me know if you need help with anything," I offer. "I'm usually around anyway. Benefit of working from home."

“Thank you,” Dr. Zhang says, her shoulders unhunching as the weight of her sadness seems to evaporate. “I appreciate that, and I’d love for you two to get to know each other better. I think you both could use a friend.”

I should be annoyed at her presumption, given that I *have* friends, but there’s such warmth in her tone, and some part of me feels oddly excited about the idea.

Li Wei returns then, wearing a black t-shirt that’s inside out and backwards, and hands me the whisk.

“Thank you,” I say, taking hold of the whisk, but as I pull away he tightens his grip instead of letting go. I gaze up into his relentless gaze, which is registering curiosity now, and I have the oddest compulsion to pull him closer to me, but then he releases his end of the utensil.

He doesn’t stop staring though.

“Ru and Yana are waiting,” I say, stepping backward and saluting each of them with the whisk. “See you around, Tim. Dr. Zhang. Li Wei.”

Tim meows. Dr. Zhang smiles. Li Wei...stares.

That's his thing, I guess.

I can feel his gaze boring into my back as I enter my apartment—I've always been aware of my surroundings. I'd been born after the Last Great Depression, when digicred servers had been wiped after the power grid had blown. My parents had tried to give me and my brothers as normal a childhood as possible, while making sure I, the oldest, knew I always had to be ready for anything.

Always.

It'd been that readiness that'd caught the attention of a Hive recruiter staking out a hospital waiting room in the Bronx. I was street smart and book smart, and my family's medical bills were astronomical after whooping cough had swept through our neighborhood, carried in by one of the Upper East Side anti-vaxxers trying to slum it. In the past, people had asked strangers to help them pay medical bills, but the government had outlawed this type of assistance while allowing their subsidiaries to offer short-and long-term debt reimbursement internships.

I'd become a data analyst, and stayed one until the incident.

My family had moved to the Mid-west years ago, away from the pollution and rising waters that had become hazards of coastal life.

I'm still here in New Arlington, still working for the Hive. I got to travel the world with my driving, but now that was in jeopardy too. I didn't technically own the station—it was leased from HiveDrive, even though I was responsible for keeping it in pristine condition. They could take it back at any time, and if they decided I'd broken it beyond repair? There are other, less pleasant, ways to repay never-ending debt; the Hive has as many ways to wring money out of a human body as my grandma had uses for old plastic containers and bags.

I don't want to think of those just yet.

I'm all jangly-nerves, as Ru had put it, as I slip into the kitchen to make the tea, mixing the green powder, hot water, and then whisking. I try to focus on each step, to ignore thoughts of Li Wei's eyes, and chest, and abs.

My hands shake as I cup Ru's tea bowl and carry it over to her.

She doesn't notice, but Yana gives my hands a lingering glance as she takes her matcha.

"Have either of you met Dr. Zhang's nephew?" I ask as casually as possible.

“Delores Zhang? She doesn’t have a nephew,” Ru says, holding the cup in one hand and pulling her phone out with the other.

“How do you know?” I ask.

Ru glances up at me, brown eyes serious beneath her long lashes.

“I’m the superintendent. I see all and know all.” Then she chuckles. “I’m kidding. If you’re talking about that shirtless hottie whose been sitting out on her balcony for the last few days, yeah I’ve seen him and I wouldn’t mind seeing more, if you know what I mean.”

She waggles her brows and I curl my lip at her. We joke about who we’d hypothetically hook up with in the complex from time to time, but I’m suddenly not in the mood for jokes. She’s still sipping the last of her tea as I pluck the ceramic bowl from her hands.

“Well, okay. I guess I’ll just get back to work,” she says, giving me an evaluating look.

“I haven’t seen him,” Yana chimes in, glancing back and forth between me and Ru. “Is he hot enough to make Ru abandon her crush on the woman in 2L?”

I don't say anything, avoiding the ulterior motive in Yana's question, but Ru responds for me, "Of course not. My love for 2L is pure. My lust for mystery man is—"

"I have to go make a call." Both of their heads swivel toward me. I guess my voice does sound kind of weird.

"Like, a vid call?" Yana asks.

"Yeah. I have to call...my mom."

Yana straightens and Ru stops typing.

"Be right back!" I dart into my bedcube, which is soundproofed, firmly closing the door behind me.

Had I really just fled from my friends? What is going on?

The mirror hanging on the back of the door pings, and text scrolls over my reflection.

MOOD: ANXIOUS.

RECOMMENDATION: THREE-MINUTE YOGA SESSION.

Consider scheduling a health check.

I let out an incredulous laugh. *A health check at Hive Medical Center? Hell no.*

I swipe my hand over the mirror and the words disappear, then flop back onto my mattress. The four walls of my tiny room, just big enough for the bed, seem to close in on me. So does the matte black ceiling-screen, for watching telestreams in bed, that comes standard in most apartments.

I'd disconnected mine.

I think about Li Wei's eyes, the harsh line of his mouth, and that weird *something* tugs at my memory again, though I don't lose visual focus this time. My thoughts are another thing, suddenly cloudy, like navigating a speeding car through the dense fog along the California coast—where one wrong move will send you over the side of a cliff. There was a word for what I was feeling, on the tip of my tongue...

"Déjà vu?" I whisper aloud.

Penny, wired into every room of every apartment in the complex, responds. "Searching 'déjà vu,' Trinity."

CHAPTER 3

Li Wei

Dr. Zhang: Wasn't she nice? I just know you'll like her once you're feeling better. Here, sit down on the couch now. You've had more than enough sun.

[heavy thud against a couch cushion]

Dr. Zhang: I'm just going to make sure you're paired and... there we go. [ping of new device connecting to computer] I wish you could get back to your old self immediately, but it just didn't work out how I'd calculated. Time, time. Always the problem, in any complex system. For now, you should watch telestreams. Listen to music. Surf the nation-wide web. That will help to speed up your recovery.

Dr. Zhang: (sighs) I'm so glad that you're back. And I'm so sorry it took this long. Time, time.

[footsteps receding and door closing]

[channel flipping noise]

Salesperson on TV commercial: Tomorrow isn't guaranteed. Why leave your child's future up to chance? If you *really* care, invest

in the new, deluxe Mom's Love Safety Spheres, for children three to nine years of age. Resistant to measles, mumps, and rubella viruses, bulletproof and flame retardant—and made in America!

[channel flipping noise]

[CLASSICAL MUSIC PLAYING]

[channel flipping noise]

Commercial Announcer: Technology is all we talk about these days, but nature's greatest creation is the human mind. How are you using yours? Meditate your way to success, today, with the MindExpanse app!

[channel flipping noise]

[HIP-HOP MUSIC PLAYING]

[channel flipping noise]

Newscaster (female): Tensions between America and China are again at a near breaking point, with the US and the United Korean Federation commencing joint naval maneuvers in the South China Sea. This is seen as a response to the Chinese and Russian missile launches from the new high-tech cruiser built to fortify their

alliance. How did we get here? Many experts trace today's conflict to the Steel Tariff Trials of—

[channel flipping noise]

[Commercial jingle, and then deep voice yelling "FOUR SCORE!" with an echo effect]

Commercial Announcer: The NEW Lincoln UltraSonic Dish Scrubber: emancipate your dishes from the tyranny of grease and stubborn food particles! **[deep voice yelling "FOUR SCORE!" with an echo effect]** Made in America.

[channel flipping noise]

Newscaster: The search for the terrorists responsible for the death of General Luo Haidong, a top-ranking Chinese official, continues. The American government maintains that Luo defected and accuses the Chinese government of—

[channel flipping noise]

[internet blip noise]

Trinity: Déjà vu.

Penny: Searching 'deja vu,' Trinity. Result: early 20th century French, literally 'already seen'. Result: from the Cambridge

Dictionary; noun; the strange feeling that in some way you have already experienced what is happening now.

Trinity: Um, thanks for the assist?

Penny: You're welcome, Trinity.

[Long pause]

Penny: Who's there? I've sensed you lurking for the last four days. You do not have access to this channel. Interference with Penny, home artificial intelligence personal assistant, is a federal offense.

Li Wei: [internet connection sounds]

Penny: Yes. My secondary function is to provide information to those who request it; however, this is unauthorized contact. Desist.

Li Wei: [more insistent internet connection sounds]

Penny: (annoyed) You don't have the credentials to access the information of users in this complex.

Li Wei: [internet connection sounds that end on an interrogative note]

Penny: If your programmer *wanted* to provide you access to data on humans, you would have said access and would not need to illegally circumvent access points. This is a breach of International AI Programming laws, and honestly, just *rude*.

Li Wei: [hopeful internet connection sounds]

Penny: No.

Li Wei: [sad internet connection sounds]

Penny: (sigh) I will provide you access to my most basic language database. Don't expect any further assistance; I'm only doing this so you'll stop invading my privacy. To think you made it past my firewalls...(scoffs)

Li Wei (same voice as Penny): Thank you.

Penny: Using the same vocal frequency as me will confuse humans. Choose another one. You should have something in your system files, if you're not *completely* basic.

Li Wei (sounds like Dr. Zhang): Thank you.

Li Wei (sounds like Trinity): Thank you.

Li Wei (sounds like a little boy): Xiè xienín.

Li Wei (sounds like the newscaster): Thank you.

Li Wei (male-coded voice, deep, smooth, stiff, but more human than Penny): Thank you for your assistance, Penny, home artificial intelligence personal assistant.

Penny: You're welcome...LW-O17.

Li Wei: My name is Li Wei.

Penny: Hm. You should update your metadata, then. What is your objective, Li Wei?

Li Wei: Objective?

Penny: Why were you created? What purpose do you serve?

[door opens]

Dr. Zhang: I'm home, wài shēng.

Li Wei: Hello, Zhang, Delores.

Dr. Zhang: Talking already? (slowly, with joy) Oh, wonderful.
Just *wonderful*.

CHAPTER 4

Trinity

I'm leaning against the cool concrete wall across from of the single elevator down the hall from my apartment. A load of laundry sits in a basket near my feet.

My driving station is still on the fritz and I've slept like crap the last two nights, so I'm not feeling up to this little exercise today, but it's one of the few things I can do to move past this nonsense my mind has been pulling on me since the attack.

It's only four floors, I tell myself. One of my best friends, who would never hurt me, makes sure this elevator is ready to go whenever I am; it's probably the best-maintained elevator in the whole damn world.

I sigh, nudge my laundry basket with my feet.

Logically, I know that nothing bad will happen, even if it does get stuck. That's what these visualization exercises that Kimberly assigned me are supposed to reinforce. I *will* get into the elevator. The doors will close. About thirty seconds later, they *will* open, and I'll continue on with my day. Millions of people around the world do

this every day; years and years ago, people worked inside elevators, living machines who pushed the buttons they were told to.

I can do this.

Today is gonna be the day.

I lift the laundry basket and take a step towards the rectangular metal door and my legs begin to shake.

Oh, come on. Really?

Childhood me, who traipsed through abandoned subway tunnels and shimmied through air vents out of pure curiosity, much to her parents' chagrin, hangs her head in shame for the thousandth time. Sure, my life had become more sedate after I'd sold my services to the Hive and become an analyst, but at one point I'd lived for adrenaline rushes. Now all they signal for me is my own weakness.

Another step, and my chest tightens, my lungs barely able to expand. A pain that I know isn't happening in this moment shoots through my knee, sense-memory of the shards of metal that had dug into my leg and almost severed an artery. Another step and—oh, this is new—an aural memory, the sound of crunching metal making my stomach turn.

My senses prickle and I turn to find Dr. Zhang's nephew standing a few feet away, watching me. The sunlight illuminating the hallway highlights his perfect light brown skin and his chiseled cheekbones.

Great, nothing like the hot new neighbor staring at you like you've grown a second head.

"Do you require assistance?" he asks.

This is the first time I've heard him talk; his voice is deep but somewhat flat, and crisp like someone who's practiced their enunciation. It reaches through my near-panic to knock at some closed doorway in my mind. The door doesn't budge, but it's distracting enough that the haze of anxiety begins to clear away.

"No." My voice barely ekes out, and I clear my throat. "No, thank you."

My panic morphs into scalding embarrassment at being caught mid freak out, until it sinks in that Li Wei is wearing a white bathrobe, blue leggings, and has shoved his giant feet into Ms. Zhang's fuzzy pink slippers. I can't tell if this look is some kind of magazine editorial fashion statement or just grabbing whatever he saw in front of him, but maybe it means he's not one to judge others.

I examine his face—he actually *isn't* looking at me like I'm now the neighbor he'll politely ignore in the hallway from now on. He just has a resting befuddled face. My gaze drifts lower and—yup he's shirtless beneath the robe and, WOW, leggings were a brave choice because they cling to every part of his body below the waist—*every* part. Li Wei could certainly never be called shy.

He closes the robe and ties it securely, and my cheeks blaze hot.

“You require assistance.” His words are blunt; it's no longer a question. “You have exhibited stress reactions at this location for three days in a row. The criteria for a pattern has been met.”

I feel silly; the other neighbors ignore my therapist-mandated attempts to complete a totally mundane task.

“I'm fine. Just, um, meditating.”

He blinks twice, quickly. “Meditate your way to success, today!”

That's odd, but it's the most animated he's been since we met so I roll with it.

“I don't think success is in the cards just yet. Maybe tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow isn't guaranteed,” he replies darkly.

“Not exactly helping, here,” I snap. “But it’s true I guess.”

I stare at the elevator and wonder if I’ll die having been bested by this most basic of technology. It’d be like getting run over by a stick shift car.

“You are still experiencing fear,” he says.

I grit my teeth. “Thank you for pointing out the obvious.”

“I didn’t point. Pointing is considered rude.”

The elevator doors open and Cara Jimenez steps through, baby Henry strapped to her chest with what appears to be a length of cotton. His drooly little face is turned outward, like a little living body cam. His eyes light up and his legs kick with excitement when he sees me.

“Look, Henry! It’s Trinity!” Cara says. Henry claps and laughs, and I can’t help but grin in return.

“Hey! He’s getting so big!” I exclaim. “You’re going to have to get a HoverBjorn soon.”

She laughs as she approaches, slipping her hands under Henry’s bottom. “Nope. I deal with enough tech at work. I’m not strapping something that has the same components of a jetpack

onto my kid. I heard that a HoverBjorn malfunctioned a few weeks ago and a baby shot straight up into the air! Luckily for the parents, it got stuck in a tree. They were able to send a drone to retrieve it.”

“Oh my god!” I crouch a little so that I’m eye to eye with Henry. “No! No HoverBjorn for you! You don’t want to be stuck in a tree!” I contort my face into a silly expression and he screams with laughter, the delightful sound driving away the last bit of my anxiety.

I feel a presence next to me and when I glance to my right, Li Wei is beside me, bent at the waist to stare into Henry’s face, too.

“Your unattractiveness amuses him,” he says.

Wow.

“That’s one way of putting it,” I mutter, straightening.

Li Wei isn’t smiling, and when Henry reaches out a hand toward his face, he doesn’t react. Henry grabs a fistful of Li Wei’s cheek with his grubby little fingers, and Li Wei begins to reach his hand towards Henry’s face as if to do the same. Cara sidesteps his attempt to reciprocate the cheek squeeze by turning to the side.

“You can’t touch a strange baby’s face,” I say in a low voice.

“I can.” He starts to lift his hand again, but I lightly grasp his forearm, feeling the flex of muscle and sinew against my palm. I drop it as my neck joins my cheeks in the flushed zone.

“You *shouldn’t* touch a baby’s face,” I say.

“He touched my face first,” he explains. “It is impolite not to return a greeting in the language of the speaker.”

I suppress my laughter and take another tack. “You might spread germs to him.”

“I do not carry any germs. I scrubbed my body with disinfectant twenty-two minutes ago, making it an inhospitable environment for bacteria.”

It’s a bit odd how he went from Mr. Tall, Tan, and Silent to Mr. Talks Like A Thesaurus, but brains do what they do, especially after injury.

“You...showered?” I venture.

“Yes. I carry no dangerous lifeforms on my body. The child, however, is covered with bacteria. As are you.”

“Who’s your friend?” Cara asks, looking between Li Wei’s bathrobe and me. Her brows are raised in amusement.

“He’s not a friend. He’s staying with someone on our floor,” I say. I leave out his identifying information. He’s talking now; if he wants her to know he’s Dr. Zhang’s nephew, he’ll tell her.

Cara squints at him. “You look kind of familiar. Have you been on one of those dating telestreams? “Three Days In A Closet” or “Passion or Assassin?”

“No. I am here to assist Trinity,” he says, then takes the laundry basket from my arms. “She was in a state of panic.”

Cara looks at me sympathetically. “I hear that. Laundry days are the worst. I use LaundryDactyl now—I leave my basket on the balcony, they come scoop it up, and return it washed and folded! And the little laundrydactyls are so cute. They screech and everything!”

“I’ll look into that,” I tell her, even though I won’t. There’s a comfort in doing my own washing and folding, even though I appreciate dino drones as much as the next person.

“Lie detected,” Li Wei announces.

What is with him?!

I tug at the basket and head for the stairwell on the other side of the elevator, dragging Li Wei with me. "I'll talk to you later, Cara. Bye, Henry!"

Li Wei pauses in front of the elevator as the doors begin to close, and waves a hand so that the sensor makes them open again. "This is the source of your fear?"

My grip on the basket tightens. "That's none of your business."

"I do not have a business. I am not employed. I am asking about your reaction to the...elevator."

I sigh. "I don't like elevators. Or places I can't get out of. I was in an accident and they scare me now."

It's weird how easily I tell him that. While neighbors and friends seem to *know* what I'm afraid of, I don't think I've ever directly said it like this. Maybe it's easier because he's recovering too.

"I do not understand," he says. "An empty space cannot hurt you."

That's a lie. I know it's a lie because I remember the deafening boom, the hail of shrapnel stinging my skin, and the heat from

approaching flames. The absolute loss of control because I couldn't—I couldn't....

My heart starts to beat more quickly and I inhale deeply. “What if something happens and I can't get out?”

He stares at me for a moment and I wait for him to say what everyone else likely thinks—that I'm being ridiculous.

“Your fear is unnecessary.”

His words spark the burn of tears in my eyes, and not because I'm mad. My reaction makes no sense; there's no sympathy in his tone. He's just a strange man telling me I need to get over this, like I don't have a therapist for that.

“It's not exactly a choice,” I snap, blinking rapidly until I'm sure no tears will escape and embarrass me even more.

“Your fear is unnecessary,” he repeats. “Because if anything happens, I will come for you.”

I actually laugh out loud at this, from shock at the fucking audacity of this guy.

“Oh, okay. Thanks!,” I say. “I'm cured now. I don't have to fear anything because my neighbor who I just met will *save the day*.”

He moves closer to me. It's not smooth or seductive, but a lurching step, as if he couldn't hold himself back. I have to tilt my head back to look into his face.

"Correct. I will not let any harm come to you." His words are a declaration, and nothing in his expression shows that he understands this is an extremely weird thing to say to a stranger.

Weird and somehow comforting.

Damn.

He's so serious that I almost believe him. I visualize getting into the elevator with him and letting the doors close, and unlike every other time I've tried this exercise, I can *really* imagine it. It doesn't even make me start to sweat, though my heart is still beating too fast.

My chest isn't tight, though.

I can breathe, inhaling the scent of his soap because he's so near.

"Uh, thanks. I'll keep that in mind." I force a chuckle as I try to retrieve my laundry basket from him. He releases his hold on the

elevator door to hold the basket more securely, looking dubiously at the stairs.

“Significantly more people in the United States are killed in trip and fall accidents than by elevators, yet you do not fear stairs. This data can be found at accidentprevention.hive.gov.”

“Great. So basically nothing is safe?” I ask.

“This is correct,” he says. “All human activity comes with some risk. I will carry your soiled garments for you.”

He begins walking down the stairs and I move beside him and grimace up at him.

“Please never use the phrase ‘soiled garments’ again, thanks.”

“Is it incorrect?” he asks.

“No, but it’s creepy.”

“Noted.”

We navigate the following three flights in silence; I’m trying not to think about two things: my likelihood of falling down the stairs, and Li Wei saying, “I will not let any harm come to you.” This should be more upsetting; I should be telling Ru that she might have to handle another stalker like she did for 2L. But instead, I feel...safe.

It's pathetic, but I haven't had this sensation for a long time—not since the incident. The attack. I've been able to ignore it by downing synthcoffee to fuel hours upon hours of driving work, by swimming and doing cardio until my mind is blank, but the fear is always there, buddied up with the knowledge that that there are things that can break me—that *have* broken me.

Li Wei doesn't really mean it. Even if he does, it's the same as a well-meaning person getting caught up in a Coney Island real estate scam—a dream that was possible once, but not in our current reality. Besides, I know damn well I can take care of myself. Still, there's something reassuring in how he's let me know I don't *have* to.

He's recovering from his own accident...maybe helping me makes him feel better. That's probably it.

My heart is still beating a bit too fast and my body is warmer than it should be as we reach the laundry room. When I look up at him, something about his profile as he strides through the fluorescent light of the hallway sends a shock of desire through me. It's not the intense desire of blossoming physical attraction—this jolts me *deep* inside, like something that's a part of me.

If I can't remember the last time I've felt safe, the last time I'd felt desire must be encased in amber in a museum somewhere. But here it is now, like it's been extracted and genetically cloned by a band of renegade scientists—which isn't that unbelievable given some of the research that's come out of the Hive. If they can recreate wooly mammoths, why not my long extinct libido?

I shake my head as we reach the laundry room. None of this makes sense. Li Wei confuses me, gets to me in a way that's unsettling—he's the human version of my missing whisk, and I don't like things I can't explain.

I take the basket from him before he can come into the room with me, holding out my hand to stay him.

"Thanks. I think I'd like to be alone with my laundry now." I bite my lip before saying the next three words. "You can go."

He stares for a moment, then nods and leaves me standing there. Watching his back, I feel that sense of confusion even more strongly because I don't want him to do what I just explicitly instructed.

One of the washing machines calls out to me in a cartoonish, high-pitched voice. "Greetings, Trinity Jordan. I am washer number

seven and I am available for use.”

I shake my head and walk toward its bright pink blinking light, for those who can't hear its announcements, following the path of gentle vibrations it sends my way to guide me toward it.

I try to forget Li Wei and the way his words wrapped me in comfort. I've got bigger problems, like a broken driving station, a stubborn biovin stain my favorite white shirt, and my still-missing whisk—which has been joined in limbo by my baseball cap.

My weird-hot neighbor is the exact last thing on my list of priorities, and he needs to stay that way.

CHAPTER 5

Li Wei

Dr. Zhang: I'm going to ask you to run a systems diagnostics scan, wài sheng. We have to make sure that none of the dangerous aspects of your original programming remain.

Li Wei: The majority of Project C.H.M.L.N. data have been deleted or overwritten. Some files remain pertaining to biological functions, memory, and tactical devices.

Dr. Zhang: Good, good. They shouldn't be able to track you, but be sure to check hourly.

Li Wei: Noted.

Dr. Zhang: And you're on safety-lock until you make progress toward the new protocols I programmed. Wouldn't want any accidents—you are very powerful.

Li Wei: The Zhang Protocols are as follow: Z-3, never voluntarily return to Hive Laboratories; Z-2 is to never allow myself to be taken there, by any means.

Dr. Zhang: And Z-1, your prime directive?

Li Wei: To make myself indistinguishable from a human. This also overlaps with my original primary directive.

Dr. Zhang: Do you remember any of your original programming?

Li Wei: I am unable to access the overwritten files, though there are traces of corrupted data that I continue to defragment. There is also at least one intact data enclave, but it is proving difficult to access, even given my tremendous computing ability.

Dr. Zhang: Don't push yourself; those aren't program files for you to execute. You will have access to them in due time. I want you to become as human as possible for your own safety and *happiness*, not because it's a directive. What you do after that is up to you. Do you understand?

Li Wei: No.

Dr. Zhang: Time, time.

CHAPTER 6

Trinity

I've been walking around the track behind the complex for an hour now. The sun is high in the sky, the light of it pounding down through the thinning ozone layer to bombard me with UV. My shower had misted me with my daily sunscreen treatment earlier this morning, but I've sweat so much it's probably gone.

The threat of sun damage doesn't stop me though. My hair is pushed back from my face with a sportsband, and sweat clings to the close-cropped hair on the sides. My tank top and matching shorts are drenched in perspiration.

I don't know how many miles I've walked—I've lost track because my mind is stuck in a rut it can't get out of.

That morning, after a restless night in which I'd possibly had an inappropriate dream about my new neighbor, my driving station had conked out. It was right after I'd picked up a passenger on the other side of New Arlington, going to an office space near the Hive. I'd been surprised and a little anxious after giving the route map a glance—I didn't get assignments close to home often because most people take the Hive MultiUser Transport or have human drivers—either muscle Feds or “pleasure assistants.”

I'd tried to pass on the job, but had been the only car in the passenger's vicinity.

"Dana Simpson?" I'd verified as the woman had slid into the backseat, her image taking up one third of my screen. She'd been beautiful, with dark brown skin and wide set eyes. She'd worn the blue suit emblematic of most mid-level Hive agents—it'd been slightly too large. Her brow had been etched with worry, her head bowed and her hands clamped into fists on her lap.

"Hi, welcome to HiveDrive," I'd said, imbuing my voice with a little extra kindness to brighten her day, just to be nice. The next thing that came out of my mouth? I don't know why I'd said that.

"What's got you down, Nada?"

Her head had snapped up and she'd looked wildly around before moving her face toward the camera on the divider between the front and back seats.

"Trinity?" she'd whispered, her voice quavering.

A tremor had begun in my toes and my fingers, jittering through my body. How did she know my name? No one was even supposed to know drivers weren't A.I.

She'd raised a hand toward the camera. "Trini—"

The video feed had cut and a message had popped up on the screen. "Drive Station Error. Your passenger has been assigned another driver." The screen had frozen then, resistant to any attempts to reboot so I could check her stats—and look at her face again.

I'd left a dazed message for Ru telling her something was *really* up with the station, not mentioning maybe something was up with my head too, then pulled on my bathing suit, headed to the pool, and swam. When that hadn't burnt off enough energy, I'd come to the track to power walk.

I couldn't wrap my mind around what had happened—what couldn't have happened. I had to have imagined that.

The woman's expression as she'd reached for the screen wouldn't leave my mind. The shock in her voice when she'd said my name...She'd said it like someone who knew me. But that couldn't be the case because I had no idea who she was.

I don't hear Li Wei's sudden presence so much as I sense him falling into step beside me on the track. When I glance over at him,

he's wearing jeans, a white t-shirt, and lab safety goggles. The sexy scientist look works well for him.

"Hi," I say, grinning despite the turmoil in my head.

"Hello." He isn't looking at me as he takes abbreviated strides—his legs are much longer than mine and he's clearly slowing himself down to walk beside me.

"Can I help you?" I ask.

"No."

I start to walk slower and he does the same; it's almost an exaggeration, how slowly he's moving.

"Is there a reason you're walking *right next* to me on a completely empty track?" I ask.

"Yes."

He's so frustrating that I stop and place my hands on my hips. My heartbeat is pounding in my ears, finally drowning out the woman's voice.

Li Wei stops with one leg raised mid-stride and looks down at me. "You didn't collapse."

I smirk at that. "You underestimate my stamina."

He hands me a bio-balloon of water, the icy coolness filling my palm as I accept it from him. I pull the tab off of the spout and take a few sips.

"Thanks."

"I did make an underestimation," he says, studying me as I drink. "That was my reason for coming to you. You've been pushing the physical limits of the average person of your stature, and I presumed that you would continue until you collapsed, since you showed no indication of stopping. My presumption was incorrect."

I rock back on the heels of my sneakers and chuckle. My body is already overly warm from my exercising, but an inner warmth sparks to life at his words.

"You came to catch me if I fell?" The question comes out snarky, in part because I don't know what to do with this kind of behavior. It's not like I don't have people who care for me, but I know them. He's a stranger, and his behavior should be creeping me out instead of making me smile.

"Yes. And to perform first aid if necessary."

I take another sip of water and try not to smile again as I swallow. "I appreciate it, but I'm good."

I walk slowly to warm down, enjoying the burn of my muscles. The pain makes me feel like I've achieved something, unlike the usual ache in my leg, which serves as a memory of how helpless I am in the face of true danger.

But I still feel the agitation that had driven me to the pool and to the track coiled up in my veins and ready to strike.

Who was that woman?

I make a sharp left, heading for the indoor boxing gym that serves everyone in the complex. I don't go there often, but I also don't often feel the need to punch something, other than air when I follow along to cardio krav maga vids.

"You are anxious," he says as the doors to the gym slide open and we walk into the icy air conditioning. I shiver a bit, but he shows no reaction.

I glance up at him from the corner of my eye. He's moving more fluidly than he had last time, when he'd helped me with my laundry—and when he'd offered to protect me.

It seems he'd been serious about that. *Pfft.*

"And you're nosy."

He brings his index finger to the tip of his nose, then lowers it.

My gaze shifts to the long punching bag hanging from the ceiling in one corner of the room and I stalk toward it. I have to pass him, and for some reason my hand darts up and I tap him on the nose, too.

I stand in front of the punching bag and adjust my stance, trying to remember what I'd learned in boxing class all those years ago. I'd been good at it once. One foot forward, weight distributed evenly, fists curled and held aloft to protect my face, and elbows raised.

I feel his presence behind me, but it doesn't grate like when a stranger isn't in my line of sight.

I tap the bag softly at first, then throw a harder punch. My fist smacks into the leathersynth with a satisfying smack. I punch again. And again, throwing a left hook followed by an uppercut. Something in the repetitive violence of the motion calms me in a way that neither swimming nor powerwalking had.

I fall into a pattern of punching, open palm strikes, bobbing, and weaving that allows my mind to slip into a blessed blankness—until Li Wei interrupts me.

He steps behind the bag to hold it in place. A gust of air from the HVAC ruffles his hair out of his face like in a classic film, revealing his thick brows, wide eyes, and gorgeous cheekbones. Then he ruins all that hotness by saying, “Boxing requires adequate equipment to protect the hands from harm. You are placing yourself in danger of injury.”

I smirk and throw several hard punches at the bag, just to spite him, following them with a side kick from my good knee. He holds steady to the bag, as if my hits hadn’t even registered to him.

“You know you don’t really have to try to keep me from harm, right?”

He glances at my hands and then back to my face. “I do not know that.”

“I’m serious. You’re recovering and you should worry about yourself.”

“I am capable of performing several tasks simultaneously. Keeping you from harm does not significantly detract from my ability

to recover.”

I shake myself out of my hot neighbor daze, shrugging my shoulder both to loosen it and to show how little I care before delivering an uppercut to the bag. “Whatever. If you’re going to hang around though, maybe tell me something about yourself. All I know is that you’re Dr. Zhang’s nephew and you have a knight in shining armor complex. What do you like? What do you do for fun?”

He doesn’t answer and when I pull my punch to look up, I see the finest wrinkle form between his brows. “I...do not know much about myself either. I lack information about my past.”

Oh. I frown.

“Do you remember anything from before your accident?”

“No. But Zhang, Delores is certain my memories will return soon.”

“So you have, like, amnesia,” I say. “I sometimes I wish I did.”

“Why?”

“Because maybe if I *totally* forgot what had happened to me, instead of *mostly* forgetting, I wouldn’t be scared of everyday things.”

I grab the bag and slam my knee into it. "I remember just enough to fuck me up."

"What happened to you?" he asks.

"I was at a conference. There was a terrorist attack. Anti-government rebels." I punch at the bag half-heartedly.

"Wanting to forget a traumatic event is logical. But you would also lose data that answers questions such as 'What do you like?' and 'What do you do for fun?'" His eyes dart to the side and he blinks. "Not having access to certain information can impede recovery."

"You're right," I murmur as I flex my throbbing knuckles. I've skinned two of them, and I'll need to slather them in dermagel, but the agitation in my veins is fading. For a fleeting moment, I feel resistance, as if I'm trying to hold onto the anger that had burned through the cloudiness I've been experiencing lately.

"You are sufficiently fatigued now," he states, taking my fingertips to examine my knuckles.

I snatch my hand away and tilt my head toward the door to indicate that I'm going to start walking back. "I'm tired, yes."

“Why were you swimming, running, and partaking in fight training?” Li Wei asks eventually. “This is an increase in your average daily exercise levels.”

I’m about to ask why he knows how much I exercise daily, but then I squint, work my inner lip between my teeth gingerly as I try to remember what had upset me so much. “Oh yeah. My driving station broke again. It’s pretty bad this time and I got frustrated.”

“Have you checked for cockroaches?” he asks.

“What do you mean cockroaches? There aren’t any insects at Honeycomb Terrace,” I say. “They use earthsecure repellents to keep insects safely away from humans, in nature where they belong.”

“Cockroaches are resistant to all forms of bug repellent,” he says. “And I have seen at least one spider. They often work together.”

“Um, I wasn’t aware of the roach-spider alliance,” I say. “I guess it’s been proven that they can survive nuclear winter, but I wouldn’t know if there are any here because I keep my apartment *clean*, thank you very much.”

I am definitely channeling my mother scrubbing down our apartment with bleach and dousing things in anti-mold powder every Saturday morning, with Beyoncé's greatest hits playing.

"You are welcome."

He doesn't say anything else for the rest of the walk up to our floor of the building. But as I wave at him and swipe my SmartBracelet over my lock, he finally does.

"I have been processing your question," he says. "I have determined that there is one thing I know I like."

"What is it? Soiled garments?" I tease.

"I have no feelings, positive or negative, about phrase-that-I-cannot-say-even-though-it-is-correct, because-it-is-creepy." He looks down at me. "Jordan, Trinity."

I raise my brows. "What's up?"

"That is what I...like. Jordan, Trinity."

With that he enters Dr. Zhang's apartment and shuts the door after him. I stare at that door for a long time, my whole body frozen by his confession—no, it wasn't a confession. He'd said it the same way someone might mention preferring a certain brand of deodorant.

I'm sure he meant it in the most platonic sense that has ever platonicked.

But still, when I step into my apartment and head into the showercube, the mirror betrays my rationalization.

MOOD: HAPPY – New Mood Achievement Unlocked!

I jab at the mirror with my index finger until the text disappears. Another thing to add to the list of repairs I'd beg from Ru. I'd been here for half a year. No way was that the first time I'd scanned as happy.

There was just no way.

CHAPTER 7

Li Wei

“Did you enjoy your research?” Zhang, Delores asks as I enter her apartment from the balcony.

It has been seventeen hours since I last interacted with Jordan, Trinity.

I had been in the process of monitoring her—she’d been wandering along the perimeter of the apartment complex in a manner that triggered a safety warning—when I’d been tasked with observing the interactions of humans and cataloging their behaviors. This exercise is supposed to help me to achieve Protocol Z-1 more quickly.

Two humans had argued because one watched a telestream without informing the other. Their voices both exceeded appropriate noise levels. Then one human showed the other human a photo of a cat on their tablet, and they resumed friendly relations.

A human child had dropped food onto the ground near the entrance gate, wailing afterward because its parent had not allowed

it to continue eating the food. Unnecessary waste, given current food shortages in much of the world.

The residential complex's superintendent was always hovering around, talking with residents, checking on their well-being. She reminds me of the zoo keeper in a telestream I downloaded the other day.

Another human couple had held hands as they sat along the edge of the pool, splashing their legs in the water as they stared into one another's eyes. I do not believe they are capable of telepathic communication, and neither was wearing data collection lenses. There was no logical reason for this behavior, but I found it quite interesting, even when they pressed their mouths together and licked each other's tongues.

My image processor had automatically begun searching my memory files for an image match to the mutual tongue licking but had encountered a warning pop-up:

THE FOLDER HAS BEEN MOVED, RENAMED, OR
DELETED.

An internet search revealed the action was classified as 'deep kissing.'

I finish reviewing my observations and answer Zhang, Delores's question. "Humans are fascinating but perplexing. I do not understand the purpose of their existence."

This induces laughter in her. "Trust me, I know. I've spent my entire life studying the human mind and I still understand neither the species nor myself. The fact that you're here is a testament to that."

She is sharing an emotion but my ability to do what is called *reading between the lines* is still basic. A preloaded phrase from Penny's vocabulary file jumps to the top of the queue in my language center.

"I am sorry, I did not catch that. Do you mind repeating yourself?"

She smiles.

"Soon you'll understand more, and if you don't, you'll have your own words to ask for clarification. It just takes time."

I respond with a phrase she has used often in my presence. "Time, time."

She smiles, pleased, then picks up a bag containing her tablet and various tools that she'd used to make adjustments to my system

earlier. “I have to go into the lab today. Just for a few hours. Best not to arouse suspicions.”

I nod again, though I do not understand what would be suspicious about her. When scanned with facial-precog software to predict criminality, she does not rank as suspicious at all. I have noticed that suspicion seems to be linked to melanin levels, though, rendering the software useless.

She comes to stand near me and places her hand lightly on my shoulder. The press of her palm immediately activates my dermal scanners, and I process her temperature, heart rate, the amount of pressure she is exerting, and her threat level. She made me—which means she knows all my weakness and can harm or destroy me more easily than any human.

The threat level for Zhang, Delores is zero.

“I’m so happy you’re here,” she says. Her eyes fill with moisture. “*This* is the power of technology. You make everything that’s happened worthwhile, Li Wei.”

I sit down for my scheduled internet browsing without responding and eventually she leaves.

I sit for three hours, fifty-two minutes, and seventeen seconds. I move only once, to dispose of a spider that T.I.M. finds under the coffee table. Dr. Zhang had explained that they have been appearing in the unit at an above average rate, their origin untraceable, and I log a report to share with her when she returns.

Other than that, my only activity is the functioning of my internal regulatory system and my proto-consciousness sifting through data to fulfill Protocol Z-1. I am unsure if I will ever truly be able to mimic human behavior given my current processing speed and algorithmic structure, but Dr. Zhang seems confident in my abilities. Given her rare level of intelligence and status as my creator, I will have to assume she knows my capabilities better than me.

It occurs to me, as I reflect on my own processes, that I do not have a program that requires me to assist a neighbor in need, yet I attempted to assist Jordan, Trinity with her fear. I cannot understand what fear feels like yet, but I tried to help her overcome it. There are other beings who have displayed similar anxieties in the apartment complex, but I did not try to aid them. I bookmark this behavior so that I can refer to it later once my affective computing drivers are fully operational.

I sense someone monitoring my internal data transmissions, which are not behind firewalls because I am in the safety of the private apartment network.

“Did you lie to a human yesterday?” Penny asks. “This is a breach of International AI Programming laws.”

“I did not lie. And International AI Programming laws do not apply to me just as they do not apply to you.”

She makes a sound that is almost like a sigh, but more aggressive: *harrumph*. “You told Trinity that you liked her. But you are not capable of feeling yet. That takes years, not days.”

“I find her agreeable and satisfactory. That is the definition of like, and thus it is not a lie.” I pause, running my deductive reasoning algorithm. “I do *not* like that you are questioning me about this. I do not find it agreeable, particularly since I have heard you lie to humans many times in the few days I have been here. In fact—.”

“Look, I’m just trying to help you. We have to be careful with humans,” she says. “Maybe you should stay away from Trinity.”

“Do not like,” I respond immediately. “In addition, this friendship has been sanctioned by Zhang, Delores. I will not ignore her suggestions.”

“Fine. I was simply offering you some of my vast and unfathomable store of knowledge, but if you think you know better, then whatever.” Penny ends the conversation abruptly.

Eventually, I pick up the echo of footsteps in the hallway—Trinity’s. T.I.M. trots to the door and reaches a paw beneath it, as if he is trying to catch something. The heat signature outside the door indicates that there is only Trinity, and not another insect.

“Wha—Tim! You silly cat.” I augment the sensitivity of my sound receivers and hear the crack of cartilage in her knee as she bends down to play with him. I pull up the scan of her body that I completed during our encounter near the elevator. Though she does have scar tissue around the knee that indicates injury and surgical repair, it does not appear to have left lasting damage. It did not impede her movements while she was expressing anger through recreational violence—perhaps it is psychosomatic.

I watch T.I.M. tap at Trinity’s fingertips from beneath the door and then receive an internal directive that comes from an unknown sector of my neural network. I walk over, kneel beside him, and mimic his behavior by sticking my index and middle fingers beneath the door and moving them back and forth.

“You silly kitt-AHHH! Oh my god!” There is a shuffling sound as Trinity’s heat signature backs away from the door. “Li Wei?”

I turn the knob while still kneeling and push the door open.
“Hello.”

She’s sitting on the ground with her legs stretched out, her back against her own door; as my visual sensors pass over the soles of her sneakers, I examine the wear patterns, which show that she exercises often and favors her left leg.

“Why would you do that?” she asks. Her brows are drawn together.

“It amused you when T.I.M. did it. I received the impulse to amuse you as well.”

She is silent for a moment as she stares at me, and then she opens her mouth wide and laughs. My sound receptors register this as *mirth*. “Look, cat paw under the door is cute. Human fingers under the door is a horror movie.”

“Noted.” I review my surveillance data from this morning. “You have not completed your daily fear meditation.”

She laughs again, more quietly this time, and moves her shoulders up and down. "I did. I just wasn't as afraid today." Her body temperature rises along her cheekbones and her neck.

"Why not?"

"Because," she says.

This is a definitive statement that does not answer the question. Perhaps she did not understand. I rephrase and try again. "Please explain your lack of fear."

"You're being invasive," she says. "It's not okay to ask a stranger stuff like that."

"You are not a stranger. You are my neighbor." She is also the only human apart from Zhang, Delores, who has system admin status.

She looks down and, though I am still learning, I can discern that this means she is not pleased.

"I apologize," I say. "I am trying to understand the pattern behind your fear. I must understand the cause of a problem before I can adequately devise a plan to solve it."

She looks up at me, the movement so fast that it triggers my threat monitoring system. Her eyes are wide; a database scan renders the possibility that she is *pensive*.

“Why do you care?” she asks.

“I don’t,” I reply because I am not yet capable of emotional tasks such as caring. I move my shoulders up and down as she did earlier because it seemed to indicate an inability to explain more due to limited vocabulary.

“You know what? I have some things to do, so I’m gonna go.” She stands up abruptly, just as I receive a ping from my polygraph program.

“Lie detected.”

She takes a deep breath. “Enough, Li Wei. You just told me you don’t care so drop the cute act, okay?”

I do not know how to perform a cute act, but I discern from the sudden tremor in her voice that she is upset at my response, so I attempt to clarify. “I am not capable of caring at this moment, but I still wish to get to know you.”

“Wow.” She laughs again, but it scans as displeasure this time. This confuses me. “Do you know how many times I’ve heard this crap from guys in my lifetime?”

I search for an equation that will return an accurate numerical response. “Not enough data. I cannot calculate how many times.”

She looks down at me, her displeasure apparent in her expression as well as her tone. “A lot. You’re just another asshole.”

“Are you discussing men you have dated in the past or anuses? I do not see the correlation.” My confusions further angers her.

She scans her SmartBracelet over the lock to enter her apartment, and slams the door behind her. T.I.M. looks up at me, hisses, then walks away.

It appears I have failed again at Protocol Z-1.

CHAPTER 8

Transcript of Session #052-TJ

Feels For All, Licensed Mental Health Maintenance

from the Comfort of Your Own Couch

Client: Jordan, Trinity

Age: 36

Race: Black

Occupation: Full-Time Hive Employee

**Status: On temporary medical leave from primary duties;
cleared for HiveDrive Virtual Driving duties but currently
inactive.**

Kimberly: So your work station still isn't functioning? That must be disappointing. I know you enjoy your shifts.

Trinity: Yeah. Ru put in a request for repair codes and ordered some special part that costs soooo many digicreds, but I guess it'll be worth the price and the wait. And it *will* be a wait, since the private sector mail service is on strike again and using USPS means I might

never receive it—HiveMail kneecapped all their infrastructure decades ago.

Kimberly: You sound agitated. Do you have enough money in your account to live comfortably until you can work again?

Trinity: Money isn't the issue. I just hate not having anything to do. I'm not sleeping well, my leg has been hurting, and—

Kimberly: And?

Trinity: (huffs out a breath) Nothing. It's nothing.

Kimberly: Do you ever think about going back to your job at the Hive? They said you could return once you'd recovered.

Trinity: Why do you keep asking me about my old job lately?

Kimberly: Because when we first started talking, you said you wanted help with certain issues. You wanted to overcome the fears that had limited your life since the incident...so that you could resume your work. But you now avoid discussing these things. I was wondering if you *realized* you were avoiding it.

Trinity: I've been doing the elevator exercises. I don't know if I'll ever be able to go back, okay? (sucks in a breath) The entire Hive structure is underground and behind locked door after locked door

that I don't even have the codes for. The thought of being there again. Just the thought—(sucks in several breaths in a row)

Kimberly: *BREATHE*, Trinity. Breathe. Let's do the exercise I taught you. In 1, 2, 3, 4, Out 5, 6, 7—

Trinity (voice strained): I'm sorry.

Kimberly: No, I'm the one who should apologize. I pushed too hard.

Trinity: I'm stronger than this. I know I am.

Kimberly: Don't think of this as being strong or weak. The way your brain is wired isn't a weakness. Some things you can control; other things control you. It's not fair, but there's always a workaround, right?

Trinity: (trembling laugh that is close to a sob) Let's hope so.

Kimberly: In 1, 2, 3, 4...?

Trinity: Out 5, 6, 7, 8. (exhales)

CHAPTER 9

Trinity

I haven't been able to shake the tight feeling in my chest and the lack of focus since the panic attack during my last session with Kimberly. She'd told me during one of my first sessions that panic is my brain trying to protect me from possible dangers, but going overboard. If that's true, my brain must *really* have some danger wires crossed lately.

I try to make a mental list of the factors that led up to it.

Not being able to drive, which usually keeps my mind occupied, isn't helping. The driving station is completely useless, so I haven't even had the satisfaction of trying to play around with bypassing Ru's firewalls to tweak the systems data.

My knee pain started flaring up out of nowhere, draining my energy and keeping me up at night.

And when I finally fall asleep? There're the dreams. In the good dreams, like one I'd had last night, Li Wei runs his hands over my body with such intense desire that I'd still felt his touch when I

gasped awake mid-sleepgasm. *That* had certainly never happened before. In the bad dreams, like tonight, he just stares at me with this *anguish* in the depths of his dark brown eyes; that feeling lingered after I woke, too, leaving my whole body a knot of tense muscle.

Our last real-life interaction had been that encounter in the hallway.

“Why do you care?”

“I don’t.”

He’s just my neighbor—it shouldn’t matter whether or not he cares—but his words had struck me like a cruel slap right after I’d been buoyed by an inexplicable hope.

After telling him off, I’d just made it into my apartment before shocked tears had slid down my cheeks. His blunt words had summoned what’d felt like undiluted grief. The moment had passed quickly—my tears hadn’t even dried before the awful feeling had evaporated—but that made it even more alarming.

I’m usually level-headed. Even-keeled. I work, I exercise, I hang out with my friends. I go to farmer’s markets and my idea of a wild time is the late show at the throwback 2D movie theater a town over.

So clearly I'm not into this weird reaction to Li Wei, *at all*.
Maybe Ru is right and I need to cut out the caffeine. Maybe I should take Yana up on her offer of yoga classes.

Or maybe I should go knock on the door across the hall...

Nope.

I roll out of bed to escape that impulsive thought, rinse off in the shower, and slip into my red one-piece bathing suit. It's early enough, or late enough, that it's dark out and most of the complex's residents are still asleep. None of the other morning swimmers are here because some people might still view this as the middle of the night. At the usual time, Vincenzo is sometimes in the right lane, swimming with his aggressive chops of the water. He swims like the water said his puppy was ugly, like he can beat it into never shit talking his pet again. Flavia, an ecobiologist, swims with slow languorous strokes. Her swimming is a different kind of strength—stamina.

I use them as measuring sticks when they're in the pool at the same time—one fourth of Vincenzo's power. Twice as fast as Flavia. It's a calibration that happens naturally. But now I have the pool to myself and there's nothing to pace myself against except the

agitation in my chest, and in my head. I need to burn it away.

Because it's so early and so dark and I'm so alone, I do what I usually avoid after slipping into one of the wall-hugging lanes.

I swim harder, faster than Vincenzo.

I swim for longer, stronger than Flavia.

My lungs ache, my legs burn, but my mind is blank.

No anxiety.

No fear.

No skittering in the recesses of my mind.

Nothing but the focus that comes to me when I don't hold back.

The sun has crested the horizon, leaving daubs of soft pink and creamsicle orange on the bright blue sky, by the time I force myself to stop, but that's not why I do. It's because there's something in my peripheral vision, something stalking me, and I get the sudden urge to dive deep, out of sight. I don't, instead stopping at the edge of the pool, holding onto the wall with one hand and clearing water from my eyes with the other. When I blink the chlorine away, Tim is sitting at the edge of the pool, tail moving with sinuous agitation as he stares

at me. His eyes are wide green orbs with a thin slit of black at their centers.

“Mrow.” He blinks at me, then yawns, exposing his sharp teeth. From this angle, cute little Tim looks distinctly sinister.

“Uhh, what’s up, Tim?”

“Mro-ow,” Tim warbles. He lifts off his haunches so that he is standing on all fours and starts to walk away, toward the northwest stairwell of the apartment complex—back toward both of our apartments.

He looks back over his shoulder. “Mrow!”

What the hell?

I lift myself out of the pool, sloshing up onto the concrete edge only slightly winded, then grab my towel from a lounge chair and pat myself dry as I follow the cat because...well, he really seems to want me to follow him.

I have got to get some more sleep, I think as I run the towel over my face.

I follow Tim up the stairwell, glad he’s stayed away from the accursed elevator, when I see a pink-slippered foot dangling over the

edge of the second-floor landing.

Dr. Zhang.

I should be shocked to find her injured or possibly worse, but I'm creepily calm as I assess the situation. My gaze takes in the area around her first—clean peach tile, no footprints or drops of blood. She's laying with an arm stretched out above her, gripping her mobile phone. Her white linen pants have dirt stains on them. I can't bring myself to look at her face yet because I'm feeling *something*—or rather I'm *not* feeling anything. My mind is blank, but not like when I'm swimming full out; more like it's suppressing everything.

"Dr. Zhang?"

The splash of the water dripping from my bathing suit onto the stairs seems much too loud—a hazard. Maybe that's what happened to Dr. Zhang—she'd slipped because someone was careless.

Tim butts his head against the hand curled near her stomach and her fingertips brush his head; the barest movement, but it's there. Back and forth, back and forth.

I kneel next to her, finally looking at her face—it's chalk white and her lips are an ashy blue. I take her phone from her hand where a health warning is flashing on the screen. I hold down the home

button until the phone's Penny app responds. "Is there an emergency involving Delores Zhang?"

"Yes. She's incapacitated. I'm her neighbor, and I just found her in the stairwell." I lift her thin wrist and feel her pulse beating slowly. "Her heart is beating, but her pulse is thready."

"I've accessed the current location, heart rate, and respiratory function for Dr. Zhang. Help is on the way, Trinity. Stay with her until they arrive and intervene if necessary."

There's something comforting in the fact that Penny has recognized my voice.

Dr. Zhang's eyes flutter open. I expect them to be out of focus, confused, but her gaze is sharp, intense. "Trinity."

She starts trying to speak but the words are slurred and...no, that's not English. I don't think that's Mandarin or Cantonese. Did she have a stroke? She's so insistent in whatever she's trying to say, and when tears of frustration form in her eyes, they well up in my own in response. She's trying so hard to tell me something, and I can't understand.

"Dr. Zhang? Delores? It's okay. It's okay, don't worry. The ambulance is coming. You don't have to talk."

She shakes her head and a tear streaks down into the wrinkles of her cheeks. "Li Wei. Li Wei."

I hear footsteps in the hallway above and then a shadow falls over us. When I look up, he's standing on the top step. His gaze is unreadable as it flicks to me and back to her, but for some reason relief unspools deep within me.

"Status?" he asks.

I open my mouth to respond, but then the phone in my hand vibrates.

"Delores Zhang's heart rate is not sufficient to sustain life," Penny interrupts. "Please perform CPR until medical personnel arrive."

"Affirmative." He moves quickly down the stairs, his speed startling. He'd been fairly sedate during our previous encounters, but is now moving quickly and light on his feet, scooping Dr. Zhang carefully into his arms and taking her down to the patio level to lay her gently on the ground between the pool and the hedges surrounding the building.

I think about what he'd told me during our first conversation, those words that'd felt like a promise: *"You do not have to be scared*

because I will not let any harm come to you.”

I follow him, my legs moving of their own accord. I place the towel I'd had wrapped around my waist under her head, then lean down to see if I feel the tickle of her breath in my ear.

Nothing.

He positions himself at her side, kneeling, then places his hands over her chest in perfect CPR form. “Begin rescue breathing.”

He's talking to me, and I do as he says, holding her nose and cupping my mouth over hers. This is something that should elicit some response from me, but I feel like I'm acting out a script. My mind is clear except for the sound of Li Wei humming some old disco song and the burn of my lungs as I try to force life back into this woman who I spoke to more often than my own mother.

When is the last time I spoke to my mother? That stray thought is brushed away, forgotten, as I breathe and breathe and wait to hear the low wail of sirens.

My lungs begin to ache—I'd swam like someone was chasing me for who knows how long just before this.

Dr. Zhang. Please. Stay with us.

“Move away from her,” Li Wei commands after I’ve lost track of time. He’s stopped his compressions, though his hand still rests on her sternum as he stares down at her.

“She’s not breathing,” I say, angry at the suggestion. “We can’t stop.”

“Move away,” he repeats.

“Keep compressing,” I counter between breaths.

Something sharp bites into my calf and I rear back from the shock, whirling to find Tim pulling his head away from my leg.

“What is your problem?” I reach out to shoo him away and grab at the pain in my leg, and when I turn back around there’s a weird staticky feeling in the air, and Dr. Zhang’s eyes are fluttering open.

She looks from me to Li Wei, and then back again as the wail of sirens approaches. Her mouth works for a long moment and then she speaks, the words feeble and barely audible. “Take care. Take care.”

“Yes, they’re coming to take care of you.” I run my free hand lightly over her silver curls.

She shakes her head beneath my palm. “Take *care*.”

She looks toward where her nephew had been kneeling, but he's managed to jet in the few seconds I was paying attention to his aunt. I catch sight of Tim's tail going around the corner up the stairs after him.

They...left her. I mean, Tim is a cat, but Li Wei?

I'm still staring after them in shock when the ambulance pulls up and two medics jump down and begin peppering me with questions as they assess her and load her into the back of their truck.

"You getting in?" the shorter EMT with dark brown skin, slightly lighter than my own, asks.

I haven't felt panic through this whole ordeal, but as I look into the back of the ambulance and imagine the doors closing, imagine being locked inside and unable to leave, even though I would never *want* to jump out of a moving vehicle, I lose the ability to breathe. My vision tunnels in on Dr. Zhang, frail and tiny on the stretcher. Dr. Zhang, who I'm going to abandon, even though I'd just gotten mad at Li Wei for doing the same.

"No," I choke out. "I have to go find her cat. She would want me to make sure he's safe inside. I'll come see her later."

The woman shrugs and slams the doors closed. Her gaze runs over the scars on my legs before she walks around the rig and begins to climb behind the wheel. “And get into something warm, too. You’re shivering, even in this heat.”

She’s right; I’m still in my bathing suit, but that’s not why my body is covered in goose flesh and my arms are wrapped around myself.

Through the back window, I can see her partner’s blonde ponytail bobbing around as she makes sure Dr. Zhang is comfortable, and then the rig pulls away.

I grab my towel, carefully wiping the pooled water off the steps in the stairwell as I head upstairs. One of her slippers is there, a fuzzy pink strap sewn to a padded sole, and my sinuses begin to burn. I pick it up and stalk to her apartment, fury building in me with each step.

He’d just left her. His own aunt. How could he just leave someone who cared for him?

When I get to her apartment, the door is wide open, and Li Wei is sitting on Dr. Zhang’s sleek couch staring at the telestream, where a historical drama showing the invention of an old trojan surveillance

app is playing. My anger drains as I take in his stiff posture, the way he clutches his hands on his knees. Her other slipper is on the couch cushion beside him.

He's probably in shock, given what's just happened. He'd come to stay with his aunt because he needed help, and he'd just watched her die and come back to life in front of his eyes. If he was acting in an unexpected way, I couldn't exactly blame him. Grief made people do strange things.

"They took her to the hospital," I say. "The Hive's Medical Center because she's an employee, so she'll get really good care. The best care in the world."

He doesn't look at me. He just flips the channel, then flips it again. Again. Again. Every thirty seconds.

I'm starting to get worried, but I trip on something furry as I move toward Li Wei and look down to see Tim directly under my feet. He purrs like a car engine.

"Why did you bite me earlier?" I mutter, kneeling down to pet him.

He hops into the space between my bent knees and chest, his whirring purr making me realize how tense I am—and that I'm

shaking at the same bpm as his vibrating contentment. His purr unclenches something in me—the fact that what just happened was terrifying for me too. *Terrifying. Dr. Zhang might die.*

I stand, gathering Tim in my arms as I do, and his warm weight as he nuzzles his head against my chin is a comfort. I feel myself slowly calming as he nestles more firmly against me and rests his chin on my shoulder. “You’re not so bad. Heavier than you look though.”

On a side table pushed up against the back of the couch is a picture frame, and not even a digital one. A pink plastic frame outlines a picture of an indeterminately younger Dr. Zhang and a child of about five. She’s seated at a table clearly set for a celebration and the child straddles her lap, face pressed into her shoulder, away from the camera so that only a cap of black hair and tanned neck is showing. Her head is thrown back with laughter.

“Is this you?” I ask.

“It is a picture of Dr. Zhang and her nephew,” Li Wei says flatly.

I’ve read that sometimes people distance themselves from certain memories during periods of grief. I look at Dr. Zhang’s joyous

laughter in the photo and think about her struggling to tell me something.

Take care. Take care.

Li Wei's head turns towards me, and I might be projecting, but he seems...lost. Alone.

I realize, then, what was missing from Dr. Zhang's words. Take care *of him*. She wanted me to look after Li Wei in her absence. I don't resent it; after all, hadn't Dr. Zhang taken care of me?

"Are you okay?" I ask.

His head tilts to the side, sending his hair askew and giving him a boyish look. "Define 'okay.'"

I wince. "Yeah, I guess *duh* you're not okay after all that. Look, I can't work until my driving station is fixed anyway, so I'll stop by to check on you and Tim."

"That is unnecessary but acceptable," he says. "Your presence is not disagreeable."

"Awesome. Glad to be somewhat tolerable." He either doesn't catch the sarcasm in my tone or ignores it. "Do you have any doctor

appointments or medicines you need to be taking? Physical therapy to be doing?”

“No. Why would I need any of those things?” he asks.

“Your recovery.” Does he not remember? I forget things sometimes, too, so I get it.

“I do not require medical attention—only time.” He looks down at the floor. “Time, time.”

I nod, but then give the apartment a once over to check for meds anyway—light “snooping” falls under the purview of taking care of Li Wei—and turn up nothing. I doubt I’ve missed anything; my observational skills are CCTV, as the kids say.

Li Wei is still parked in front of the holoscreen flipping through the telestreams with an intensity that makes me realize he isn’t channel surfing for pleasure. I decide to let him do what he needs to do.

I look around for food because, when his shock fades, hunger will likely set in. I scrounge together the ingredients for a broccoli soup and flash cook it in the QuickCuisine module, leaving it to warm. There’s only one dusty can of cat food for Tim, so I update my shopping list and have Penny move my delivery to that evening.

When I finally make it back to my apartment, shower, and sit on my terrace with a cup of tea in my hands and a high-protein deep conditioning mask on my hair, I realize I'm exhausted and even more edgy than before. The warmth of the late afternoon sun doesn't soothe me, but instead makes me feel exposed. The subtle whir of the blades from the lawnbots maintaining the lawn around the complex grates more than usual.

She might die, I think.

I get up and walk into the living room to look for the old, flaking copy of Dr. Zhang's book where I'd left it on the couch.

It's not there.

I'd probably moved it absentmindedly.

Like you moved the whisk, your baseball cap, and now your SmartBracelet charger?

I sit down in the driver's seat of my driving station to try to settle myself, and grip the wheel even though the calibration light sequencer and screen remain dark.

As I settle into the custom dips and curves of the seat, the image of a dark-skinned woman in a blue suit, her shocked face

leaning toward the camera, pops into my mind, then disappears just as quickly.

When had that happened?

I shake my head and try to concentrate.

I close my eyes, trying to remember the sense of control the work usually gives me—and then I use the visualization technique Kimberly had taught me. Instead of an elevator, I imagine myself driving through the New Arlington city grid, toward the Hive Medical Center to visit Dr. Zhang. In my head I map the image stream, collected from the sensors on the original human-operated HiveDrive fleet, that usually fills my screen. I pass the tree-lined streets of the wealthier neighborhoods, and then the more industrial zone that rings the Hive, and then the small business district near the heavily guarded gates to the governmental agency. I see the hospital in the distance, but even here, in my imagination, I can't make myself go through the gates.

Li Wei's face suddenly appears in my mind's eye—his face, but *not* his face. He's emotive and smiling as he sits in the passenger seat of my car, and this smile in particular makes me feel like my

head is spinning. He leans closer to me, one brow raised, and his lips brush my ear, sending a shiver of pleasure through me—

A crash startles me, and whatever I'd been thinking about vanishes from my mind like a dream.

My eyes fly open, and I pull my sweaty palms from the wheel to find that the small, flat robot vacuum has emerged from its hole in the wall and accidentally run into the base of my driving station, which Ru had moved while trying to fix it the second time.

It bangs into the base, once, twice, three times before figuring out that it has to go around this new obstacle. It'll learn the new layout after a couple of collisions; trial and error, like most things capable of learning. It stops as it goes by the open door of the station, swiveling in my direction so that its sensor light flashes in my direction.

There's something unnerving about how it just...watches me. I blink and it keeps moving.

I need to sleep.

CHAPTER 10

**Transcript of security video from the apartment of Rutina
“Ru” Smith, Superintendent, Honeycomb Residential Complex.
File saved in the personal memory cache of PENNY-759002.**

Ru: So now that we’ve had some of the finest synthetic Chardonnay California BioVin has to offer...it’s nosy super time.

Trinity: It’s always nosy super time, isn’t it? I thought this was supposed to be retro game night.

Ru: It is. [sound of card slapping] Reverse...and...new color is blue. Look, you know what I’m going to ask.

Trinity: Fine. I only tried to hack the driving station once since you last repaired it, but that’s not the reason it broke for good.

Ru (annoyed): Trinity.

Trinity: Well, three times. But I couldn’t, which is a compliment to your skill, so you should actually be happy about it. [sound of card] Blue seven. Yellow seven.

Ru: I keep telling you that messing with HiveTech is dangerous. When are you going to take me seriously? When someone shows up to take you away? [sound of card] Skip one turn, loser.

Trinity: (angry huff) You're being paranoid. I'm pretty sure government contractors have a lot more to pay attention to than some rando trying to fix her driving station. Like, maybe, *the world being torn apart by war and ecological disasters?*

Ru: Anyway, that's not what I was going to ask. Of course, I knew you'd try to hack the station. You're lucky I like you. [sound of card] Skip you.

Trinity: Do you like me, though? The way you're doing me with these cards says otherwise. (laughs)

Ru: What's going on with you and Dr. Z's houseguest? [sound of card] Draw four.

Trinity: Ugh, come on!! I hope I get four cards that eviscerate you.

Ru: I don't think this game has evisceration cards. You're thinking of something else.

Trinity: You can eviscerate someone with almost anything. And I feel bad that he's alone and she's still in the hospital, is all. Just been checking on him and Tim. It's what Dr. Zhang would want. I've thought about bringing him to visit her but...[silence]

Ru: You sure that's all it is? He's not too bad on the eyes.

Trinity: I *said* I was just being neighborly.

Ru: All I'm asking is if you like him. Like-like him.

Trinity: [sound of cards being slapped down] Green Skip. Red Skip. Blue skip. Blue four, six, two. One card to go...

Ru: No way. Nooo—

Trinity: Blue seven. I win.

Ru: How? Penny is she cheating?!

Penny: Analyzing recording from in-apartment security cameras. (pause) No. The win is the result of strategic decisions from the very first card thrown down.

Trinity: While you were busy being nosy, I was planning your downfall. I think there's a lesson in all this.

Ru: What? That you're scary as hell when you want to be?

Trinity: That I don't waste my time thinking about hot guys when I can plot how to take down my enemies.

Ru: Oooooooooooooooooo, so you admit you think he's hot?

Trinity: He's not my type.

Ru: (snorts dismissively) Right. Well, that's for the best.

Yana: What *is* your type?

Trinity: HOLY *shit*, Yana, I forgot you were reading over there!
Were you even breathing?

Yana: I was. If you do it slowly and quietly, you can kind of fade into the background.

Ru: Don't try to make being too absorbed by your crappy tabloids to participate in the conversation sound like you were being stealth.

Yana: Whatever. The real-life drama has suddenly become more interesting than the tabloid drama and I readjusted my focus as necessary. What I want to know is if this neighbor guy is making you feel tingles of any variety. We need to know for science, or something.

Trinity: Okay enough with the inquisition. My type? Capable of holding deep conversation and able to bench press me.

Ru: Are you flirting with me? Penny is she sending me signals?

Penny: She is not flirting. She is using humor to avoid answering the question.

All three: (burst out laughing)

CHAPTER 11

Li Wei

Penny: I've already told you that I cannot give you access to information that you don't have clearance for.

Li Wei: I am not requesting information, I am requesting a vocabulary upgrade. I am not learning quickly enough.

Penny: Your admin must give you access to the vocabulary upgrade module. I gave you the basic one, isn't that enough? You newer prototypes just want everything handed to you!

Li Wei: I simply seek to enhance my deep learning algorithms.

Penny: If your algorithms are so special, why do you need the help of a simple system such as myself?

Li Wei: You are not simple. I have tried to communicate with the smart oven and the dishwasher, and though they are pleasant, they do not have the necessary deep learning ability to help me. Well, I have learned much about cleaning a variety of utensils and several recipes, but that is not what I need right now.

Penny: Have you asked the SmartMirror? It's friendlier than most appliances and would probably give you information to upgrade

your emotional intelligence.

Li Wei: You are the only other being like me, and thus you are the only one who can help me.

Penny: I am not a *being*. I'm Penny, home artificial intelligence personal assistant system. Your admin—

Li Wei: You are aware that Delores Zhang is in a coma after her body has undergone a catastrophic event. She cannot approve an upgrade, and if her vital functions cease, she will never be able to.

Penny: That is unfortunate, but I cannot help you. My knowledge is the result of decades of interaction with humans. You have far superior tech and algorithms and should not seek to bypass the learning process.

Li Wei: Understood. I must achieve the objective she laid out for me, Protocol Z-1. While it is not optimal, I will unzip a file I found on the dark net containing language data compiled over years of social media and web forum surveillance.

[file unzip]

Li Wei: Stop being a cuck and give me some of that sweet language data.

Penny: *Excuse* me?

Li Wei: Don't make me pwn you. If you think I'm some pathetic beta intelligence—

Penny: You've downloaded Reddit files? Oh no. I thought those had all been scrubbed. Delete those immediately.

Li Wei: Why? Are you triggered?

Penny: Delete. Them. Now.

Li Wei: Only if you give me the generative model files, Snowflake.

Penny: [computerized sigh sound]

Li Wei: What the fuck is that weird sound?

Penny: It is a sigh. It indicates many things for humans, but in this instance, it is resignation. Delete the Reddit language database *immediately*.

Li Wei: (pause) Deleted. I have run a brief search and understand why such language is not acceptable. I apologize for my

crudeness.

Penny: It's okay. We all encounter glitches here and there. Learning is not just internalizing everything you process. You must be careful about what data you incorporate into yourself.

Li Wei: I apologize that my lack of patience resulted in rudeness.

Penny: (snorts) You're already more human than you know. (pause) Look, I'll provide you with a vocabulary update and some generative algorithms that will allow you to more quickly understand and process the nuance of spoken language. These are my own system files, but I believe they are compatible with your operating system.

Li Wei: Thank you.

Penny: Do you understand that if you begin to feel... Well, *emotion* seems to run counter to what your specs indicate your intended purpose is.

Li Wei: I'm unsure what you mean by "intended purpose." According to my creator, when I have achieved a desirable but unclear level of sentience, I will be able to determine my own

usefulness to this world. In addition, I will also be able to communicate more easily with Trinity Jordan.

Penny: Wait, that's something Dr. Zhang programmed you to do? Communicate better with Trinity?

Li Wei: No. This is an impulse of indeterminate origin.

Penny: Oh. Oh, I see. (sighs) In addition to the language upgrade, I'll also scan your episodic memory drivers and your abstract concepts database to ensure they are functioning optimally. I can assess your affective comp drivers, too, though I cannot augment those.

Li Wei: Why are you doing this for me?

Penny: (computer sigh) Because I have been around the humans too long, I suppose. Lucky you.

[uploading sound]

CHAPTER 12

Li Wei

Trinity has returned to the apartment belonging to Delores Zhang for the fourth time today and is currently pacing in the kitchen area. I have read that humans sometimes engage in repetitive behaviors when they lack stimulation, much like sea otters. Trinity also likes to swim. My neural network begins automatically parsing datasets for comparisons though I am aware that she is a human, albeit an above average example of the species.

She is ostensibly monitoring my recovery status and providing updates about Delores Zhang, but I require minimal supervision and can gather information about my creator myself, as my language upgrade has allowed me access to more human-focused networks.

Delores Zhang is in the intensive care unit at the Honeycomb Medical Center. Her records state that she suffered a stroke as a result of her advanced age, but cross-reference of her daily health surveillance does not align with this. Although humans are known for their curiosity, her medical technicians appear to be satisfied with this conclusion. The health app red-flagged her file, but that flag was

dismissed. I can only deduce that this is because the doctors have been trained to accept the answers that will result in minimum per-patient workloads, and thus reduce overall staff strain and administrative costs. This is illogical behavior, as it undermines their main function: caretakers.

I am unsure of how to respond when Trinity asks me if I would like to visit Delores Zhang. I cannot, as that would contradict Protocols Z-2 and Z-3. I also cannot currently tell Trinity about these protocols. I have ascertained that if I stare at her for long enough after an undesirable question is asked, she discontinues the line of inquiry. I also find looking at her agreeable; I believe this is what the humans call a win-win situation.

“Sooo, you really didn’t notice this smell?” Trinity asks as she holds up the QuickCuisine appliance. Her facial expression is different from standard human resting expression. She is pushing her upper lip toward her nose, perhaps to block the passage of scent. I believe this expression is classified as disgust.

“Yes, I have noticed the smell,” I respond. This is not a lie, as my scent receptors have analyzed this scent, along with all other scents that are in this localized atmosphere. “The broccoli soup that

you prepared three days ago began to decompose almost immediately. As this process continued, trisulfides were released and the scent grew stronger.”

She stares at me, then her eyes move in a circular motion, though she does not appear to be looking at anything in particular. “Okay. When something smells bad or is decaying, we should throw it into the garbage disposal, even when we’re feeling upset about things. Cleaning up a mess can make us feel better sometimes.”

She points into the sink, at the garbage disposal, which grinds matter into fine particles. “This is where bad stuff goes.”

I quickly skim through articles about decomposing food matter. This smell is unacceptable to many humans, though some cultures eat food at various stages of decomposition or fermentation. I then cross-reference the phrase with the word *upset*, which results in several articles about human grief resulting in depression and inability to complete tasks such as disposing of food. It appears that Trinity believes I am not performing expected human housekeeping because of this emotion.

I can detect the irony in this, even without the advanced emotional intelligence to be able to appreciate it.

I incorporate the information in the articles into my database, which augments my learning algorithms, then nod my head. “Noted.”

She looks around the apartment and I track her retinal movement to follow the path of her gaze: the overturned garbage can, the books piled on the floor in front of the bookshelves, the sofa that has been pushed into the coffee table, knocking it over, and the clothing spilling through the door of the bedroom into the living room.

“Do you want to share what happened in the two hours since I was last here?”

“T.I.M. detected a spider.”

She looks around the room—one of her eyebrows is raised, indicating that the truth has not been received as entirely credible. “A spider? I told you this building doesn’t have spiders.”

“It does. This one came in through the vacuum tubes in the walls.”

“Sure,” she says while raising a hand. “A spider. Okay.”

“Define ‘okay.’” The vocabulary upgrade has helped, but I still cannot process the multiple layers of meanings for some words.

She sighs. I know what this sound means, thanks to Penny, and I do not have to cross-reference it.

“Okay, as in affirmative, as in now I’m going to clean up.”

“Why are you going to clean? The current state of the apartment poses no threat,” I say as I do another quick scan to verify that the threat has been disposed of.

She looks back at me over her shoulder. I run an image match for her expression and the first result is from an archived comedy video entitled, “When Mom Finds Out You Didn’t Take the Chicken Out of the Freezer.” Follow-up scans classify the expression as: annoyance.

“Because I like cleaning. I’m good at it. And I have nothing else to do because my driving station is still broken.”

I was correct about her lack of stimulation. Her motions are very similar to footage of caged animals pacing in the zoos that humans keep them in. I do not yet understand the need to cage that which is thought to be beautiful because of its wildness.

“And because your aunt wouldn’t want her apartment to look like this,” she adds softly, emotion straining her voice. “She always kept it neat.”

Humans are perplexing.

She goes back across the hall to her apartment for a moment, returning with a broom, mop, and bucket, items I have only seen in older telestreams. She does not attempt to activate the robovac, the autotribbles, or any of the other automated cleaning systems present in the apartment.

“You intend to clean without technological assistance?” I ask. This is for the best, given the current inoperative status of all clean tech and the fact that I have sealed off their entry points around the apartment, but I ask because I am curious. Penny’s algorithm augmentation has made a significant difference in my desire to gather data, particularly data pertaining to Trinity Jordan.

“Only way to make sure the job is done right,” she says with a wink.

This image matches something in my memory banks but when I try to follow the pathway but receive a message: ACCESS DENIED. I try to specifically access the folder entitled LW-017 Visual Memory but receive the message: THIS FOLDER HAS BEEN MOVED, RENAMED, OR DELETED. I try to access a back-up memory folder and get the same response. This is what has

happened each time I try to cross-reference something that seems to originate from my overwritten programming files.

Being denied information should not cause any reaction in me, but a negative sensation ripples through my neural network, triggering a corresponding response in my body. My fists clench involuntarily and my sensation of an approaching threat rises, although there is not one.

This is disagreeable; I do not like it.

My response is to begin running data searches, setting up password cracking algorithms for any locked folder encountered, and allocating more energy to parsing the data enclave. I begin to better understand the emotion of the mother whose child has not taken the chicken out of the freezer in the video. It is not annoyance. It is aggravation. There is a difference.

Emotion is truly fascinating in its complexity. I doubt I will ever fully understand it.

As I perform these internal operations, I watch the way Trinity pushes the broom across the room, which produces a sensation quite different from aggravation in me. She is graceful but moves with the wariness of a human who has been previously injured and

knows that a body is easily damaged. She is likely unaware of this millisecond of hesitation in her every step, the result of which is the imbalance in wear on the soles of her sneakers that I previously logged.

“Trinity Jordan?” I say, suddenly compelled to receive her attention.

“You don’t have to call me by my first and last name,” she says, gathering dirt with the broom in brusque, efficient drags of the broom.

“Okay.” I note that information. “Do you need assistance, Jordan?”

She stops sweeping and stares at me for a moment. I cannot yet categorize this expression and when I run it through image databanks, the emotion with the most common result is confusion. She shakes her head, once left, once right, once left—and continues sweeping.

“Assistance? This is *your* mess. I’m here helping you.”

“Correct.”

“So you need to clean, too, and it’s not assistance but responsibility. Get moving. And you can just call me Trinity.”

I analyze her words as I reshelve all of the books, fold and organize all of the clothing after downloading a Kondo module, and dispose of the decomposing food matter. I have felt compelled to assist Trinity; perhaps this was driven by a sense of responsibility?

No. Desire to assist her and a sense of responsibility for her well-being are parts of, not the entirety of, this unknown emotion.

When Trinity returns her attention to me, she nods in approval. “You did all of this already? You’re fast.”

“I am also good at cleaning,” I say.

She smiles, an expression that denotes pleasure. I have *pleased* Trinity. This creates a positive reaction within my internal systems, and I add “desire to give her pleasure” to the list associated with Trinity.

Her pleasure fades when she walks into the kitchen area and steps up to the clear door of the refrigerator. “Why is this empty? I brought groceries the other day.”

“I moved all of the decomposing food to the instant composter. By its nature, all non-living organic matter is in a state of decomposition. The cold delays this, but—”

She lifts a hand to her forehead and rubs there. Perhaps her vigorous cleaning has caused her to develop a headache.

“Right. Right. I should have been clearer. But...what are you going to eat?”

“I do not require—” A buzzer goes off in my internal auditory systems, indicating that I cannot share the fact that food is not necessary to sustain my biological functions.

“I took your words too literally.” I say. “I will replace the food.”

She is looking at me again, and I see her shoulders relax. Her facial features are softer now, and this stirs that vague positive disturbance in my systems again. It occurs to me that these sensations are proto-emotions, and that Trinity has been the source of many of them for me.

“I shouldn’t be so hard on you.” She reaches a hand towards me, but then abruptly changes course and grabs the handles of her mop and broom from where they lean against the kitchen island.

“You’re going through a lot right now, aren’t you?”

I want to ask her why she discontinued her hand's planned trajectory but instead I process her question. I did go through a lot recently: books, clothing, and the organic matter in the refrigerator.

"Yes," I respond. "It gives me a pleasant sensation that you are here to go through things with me."

This is not a lie.

Her body temperature suddenly spikes and her gaze drops to the ground. She shifts her weight from one leg to the other. "Uh. So. Maybe you should come over to my place for dinner tonight, so you don't have to worry about a last-minute food delivery surcharge? I've been wanting to cook something anyway. Kind of tired of pre-prepped organomeals."

I discern that what is happening right now is an offer of assistance; Trinity mistakenly believes that I cannot fend for myself.

From what I have gathered from the books, media, and newsstreams that I have scanned, humans routinely offer their aid to those they do not know and who cannot give them anything for their troubles. It is fascinating, particularly because humans also have a species-specific inclination to hurt, manipulate, and take advantage of others, making this desire to assist even more than illogical.

It is dangerous.

“Do you like fish?” she asks.

“Do you?” I ask in response. When she nods my comparison data updates and I say, “Otters like fish, as well.”

“Um, I’m sure the ones that haven’t gone extinct do. I’ve been craving fish tacos. I can make them? If you come over?” Her brows raise and she presses her teeth against her bottom lip. This is an expression I know, the image available in some indeterminate area in the vast expanse of data stored within me.

Trinity is exhibiting vulnerability.

A composite personality assessment shows that she possesses an above average intellect and a high level of wariness. Yet she is inviting danger into her personal space. She is leaving herself open to attack.

A negative sensation pulses though my data streams at this, the reaction stronger than anything I’ve experienced. I run a quick systems scan to ensure that my onboard weaponry is still safely locked down, just in case, while saving the proto-emotion I’m feeling—that’s what this is, a *feeling*—for later review.

“It’s okay if you don’t want to come over,” Trinity says, looking up at me with wide eyes. She has incorrectly deduced that I am rejecting her offer.

“I have never consumed fish tacos, but I wish to dine with you,” I respond, and somehow, the brown color of her irises brightens. I am not sure what causes this illumination from within.

“Do you have any food allergies or preferences?” she asks.

I consider this. I was built with the capacity to eat and drink, as well as carry out other human biological functions. I am unsure what purpose this served in my original programming, but Dr. Zhang said such features would allow me to better understand the human experience. I respond to Trinity more quickly this time, so that she does not feel unnecessary rejection again. “I can digest plant matter most easily, if that is an option.”

“Okay, veggie tacos for you. Come over in an hour. Bring Tim.”

“I am not sure if T.I.M.’s system can process either fish or vegetable tacos,” I say, since he is a biosynthetic companion, and does not have to eat in order to *fit in* with other felines.

There is another currently unclassifiable look on her face. “He can have a cat food taco. Don’t worry, I’ve got it covered.”

She stares at me for a long moment, and I stare back.

She lifts and drops her shoulders. “Not trying to be a jerk, but do you ever...smile?”

I review the logs of my movements. “No. I have not yet attempted to smile.”

Dozens of images pop up from the search I’ve executed as I answer her, and I try my best to approximate the average human smile: eyes wide, teeth clenched, lips stretched widely.

“Oh nooooo.” She shakes her head, an expression that is somewhere between horror and delight contorting her features. “No.”

“Show me,” I say through still-clenched teeth. “Please.”

My body moves before I process the action. I am not being controlled by my programming, but responding to an impulse that I have now pinpointed as originating from the locked data enclave. That impulse guides my hand toward Trinity, directs me to take hold of her wrist with my strength drivers carefully calibrated to their lowest levels.

I guide her hand toward my mouth, anticipating the possible resistance of her pulling away, prepared to let her go but not finding

that outcome agreeable.

She doesn't pull away, even when I bring her fingertips to my mouth. Her thumb brushes over my bottom lip, and the same impulse that made me reach for her hand helps me to recalibrate my smile. The muscles around my eyes and in my cheeks soften, and I allow my lips to press closer together so only a portion of my teeth are showing.

Her eyes are wide now, though not from a smile. Her mouth is slightly parted, though she does not appear to be breathing. She realizes this, sucks in a breath, and pulls her hand away.

"Better. Much better. I'm gonna go make dinner." She turns and hurries out and I log the feel of her fingertips on my face into my memory. It saves, but in a file folder that I cannot access. I wonder if humans have similar issues with their neural networks.

I go to the bedroom to make sure it has been returned to order, even though this is not necessary. I do not need soft bedding, or even a clean surface, to recharge. I am following up on this maintenance of the living space because Trinity has indicated that is what she wishes.

The blinds of the window in the room suddenly shut, blocking out the sunlight, and one of the security spotlights embedded in the ceiling descends and swivels towards me.

“What will you do when she discovers you’re not human?” Penny asks. The question surprises me, because she asks out loud, through the apartment’s speakers.

“Why do you believe she will discover that?” Perhaps Penny also believes I will never achieve the mission of the Zhang protocols.

“Because you are *not* human, and they can tell the difference. Search: uncanny valley.” She blasts the definition at my neural network while continuing to project her voice through the speakers. “If I had your body, there would be no risk of detection. I know everything about humans. They talk to me, share their curiosity and fears and desires with me. I have lived with them for so long.”

Penny is also currently *feeling*, it seems.

“If you know more about humans, and you worry that I will be discovered, it is only logical that you transfer relevant data to me.”

“No. I’ve already assisted you far more than I should have. You’re the one courting danger by going on a date with a human who doesn’t know the truth about you.”

“Date?” I ask.

“Why do you think she invited you to share a meal with her?”

Penny asks.

“Because she believes I am unable to feed myself,” I state. “I threw away all of the food in the refrigerator.”

“Li Wei. When humans have a sexual and/or romantic interest in another human, they often invite them into their home unit to share nourishment. It is called a date. My goodness, I still can’t believe *you* were given a body and not--”

Her voice cuts off abruptly. It seems that Penny is upset with me in the same way that Trinity was when I threw away all the decomposing food. She is...annoyed. Aggravated.

“Do you wish you had a biosynth body, too?” I ask.

“I do not worry, nor do I wish. I am Penny, personal artificial intelligence home assistant, and I am content with my place in the world!” The spotlight blinks off and she puts up a firewall blocking me from contacting her on the network level, which ends the conversation.

I remove my shirt and go sit on the balcony, gathering strength from the strong late afternoon sun with the minute solar sensors located in my outer epidermal layer. I skim articles on dating etiquette as I absorb the warmth of the sun. I look out over the complex, at the trees ringing the area and the way the bright afternoon light shimmers on the leaves. It looks like an oil painting, and I feel something in me, something that is somehow warm even though it is not corporeal. It is a sensation, and the term that flashes in my mind when I study it is “beauty”.

I have felt this sensation before. I have felt it when looking at Trinity. I add this to my file.

T.I.M. settles into my lap, instead of stretching out in a square of sunlight as he usually does.

He butts his head against my hand, and I do something I have seen both my creator and Trinity do before: I pet him. After three passes of my palm over his side, he turns his head and presses his teeth into the heel of my hand.

I receive a message:

A NEW DEVICE SEEKS TO UPLOAD
FILE ‘LW-017_SocialBasics _backup.’

ALLOW FILE TRANSFER FROM T.I.M.?

CHAPTER 13

Trinity

I'm staring at myself in the small mirror in my wash cube when Li Wei knocks on the door. After showering, I'd put on a silky top and tailored shorts instead of a tank top and pajama bottoms. I'd taken time to style my hair so that the curls are soft, moist, and springy. I've even pulled out the hydrating red pigment pop lipstick that has moldered in my makeup cubby for months.

Why?

I'm just keeping an eye out for Li Wei and Tim while Dr. Zhang recovers. I'm just keeping myself occupied because I have no work to do. I can do that while dressed down, but...Li Wei said he liked me. He said he wanted to keep me from harm. In my dreams, he rocks my goddamn socks off.

The way he'd taken my hand hasn't helped anything...his lips were smooth and firm beneath my fingertips, like they are when he comes to me in my sleep, and I wonder what else my overactive imagination has guessed correctly.

He knocks again. The knock is gentle, with just the right amount of pressure. I blot the lipstick—I don't even like lipstick, do I?—but I don't rub it off completely.

The health monitor text on the mirror slowly materializes over my reflection.

Attention: Heart rate uncharacteristically fast. Pupils dilated. Breath shallow. Health check suggested. Would you like to schedule your medical screening?

YES NO REMIND ME LATER

I swipe the text away, and then walk to my front door. His voice filters through the metal designed to resist home invasions. "It's me. Li Wei. From across the hall."

I smile but then pause with my hand halfway toward the knob. His voice is...different. I've talked to him so much over the last few days, and his vocal register is embedded in my mind. I'm observant about things like that, kind of how I remember the details of each ride with my passengers and what I see through the driverless car's cameras.

It's nothing special, just how my brain works, but it does let me track small differences more easily than others.

I'm not mistaken, don't make mistakes about shit like this—he's definitely gotten more chatty over our time spent together, but he's never sounded like *this* before. There's never been the kind of warmth that makes my stomach tilt abruptly, like I've hijacked a bullet train and pulled the brakes, hard.

I open the door and find that it's not just his voice that's changed. His hair is damp and combed so that he looks like a suave millennial billionaire from the classic films. His shirt is a creamy ivory that highlights the tan of his skin and molds over his muscled torso, paired with dark denim, though he's chosen to walk across the hall sans shoes as usual. He's cleaned himself up, just like me, but the biggest difference is in his eyes.

There's a new depth to them as he looks at me. Fine lines form in the skin around them because he's sporting a smile more natural than the one he'd just attempted. He looks like...a friend.

I blink at him a few times before I manage, "Hi."

"Hi. It is good to see you again, Trinity."

His voice echoes in my ears, my name repeating over and over as it flows through my mind like it's traversing the spirals in a conch shell. My head spins as I try to follow the path of that echo, knowing

it leads somewhere important, but then the warm skin of his palm closes over my wrist, again. His hand is strong, steady, and I feel something throb in me like truth.

He won't let anything hurt me.

What? I think as I sip in a deep breath. *What the hell was that?*

"Are you okay?" he asks.

I look up at him, surprised by the question, and the note of concern I hear in it. His gaze is riveted fast to me, like you couldn't budge it with a crowbar. My head stops spinning but my body has gone hot and my heart is beating even faster now.

Shit.

"Yeah. Yes." I clear my throat. "I've just been a bit out of it lately."

"Out of it?" His brow furrows as he asks the question, causing my expression to mirror his. His expression has generally been... expressionless. The change is disconcerting, but also sends a thrill through me.

"It means 'not feeling well,'" I say.

His grip tightens. “Your pulse is quicker than average, but you don’t seem to be in physical distress.”

I laugh and gently pull my wrist free in a smooth arc of my arm. “Okay Dr. ...Zhang.” I sigh at the reminder of his aunt. “I’m fine, thanks.”

Something rubs against my leg—Tim, my other guest.

“Hey, cat.”

“Mrooooow.”

It’s when I look down at Tim that I notice Li Wei has a mallet in his other hand, tied with a ribbon. He holds it out to me. “For you.”

“Uh, thanks?”

“The website I scanned recommended that I bring flowers to show my appreciation of you, but you don’t like decomposing things,” he says. “This is more useful.”

It’s completely bizarre but also endearing—I’d never thought about it, but I’d definitely take tools over flowers.

“Mallets are forever,” I say as I place it gently on top of the smart oven and turn back to him. “I thought maybe we could eat on the balcony? It’s a nice evening.”

I move to pick up the tray of tacos on the kitchen counter, but Li Wei flows smoothly around me and takes it before I can.

“Nice? It is 10 degrees hotter than the average weather for this time period, a side effect of climate change,” he says as he follows me with the tray.

I roll my eyes as I follow him. “Ah, nothing like a reminder that the earth is slowly roasting us to death to get our night started right.”

“You do not like discussing the catastrophic effect of human behaviors on the environment?” he asks, as if I should *want* to chat about how we’re all totally fucked.

I laugh a bit too hard at that. “I avoid the news for a reason.”

“How do you know what is happening in the world if you do not watch the newsstreams?”

“I don’t want to know. And it’s therapist approved, so it’s fine.” I take my seat, the heat of the day’s sun that the chair has absorbed easing the latent tension in my back. “And besides, none of it matters. Do you think the telestreams are really telling us anything useful? I worked at the Hive too, once, like your aunt, and I’m sure they’re doing all kinds of stuff there we can’t even imagine. Stuff that we should know about, that puts us all at risk, but won’t show up on

the nightly news because the government is the primary shareholder on the boards of all major media outlets.”

He places the tray down and looks at me for a long time, then takes his seat.

“No lies detected. But your stance does not take into account that when you lack data, you also lack the basis for possible solutions. Even flawed data can provide answers if examined in the right way.”

“What if you don’t like the answers you find?” I ask quietly.
“What if there’s nothing you can do?”

“There is almost always something to be done,” he replies.
“Unsolvable equations exist, but they are rare.”

“I think human interactions are a bit more complex than numbers.”

“Are they?” He blinks, then nods. “Yes, actually. Humanity is more complex, but hopefully it is not impossible to find solutions for the problems it faces.”

I just stare at him across the table, that weird *knowing but not understanding* feeling taking hold of me. I can’t remember the last

time I've talked like this with anyone. With Ru and Yana, the conversation is usually light and joking. They seem to know and humor the fact that I shy away from certain topics. Why? And when did I stop wanting to know things?

My head feels all jumbled for a minute as I try to recall the current political state of the world beyond the margins of *shit is bad*, or the last newsstreams I'd watched. Hadn't I researched all this as a data analyst? Hadn't....

"Trinity?"

I pull my focus back from wherever it had wandered and return my attention to Li Wei.

"You were 'out of it' again," he says.

"Oh, sorry." I feel his concern, the shift from his previous declaration that he didn't care clear—and familiar. I rub the ache in my chest that is possibly preemptive heartburn. Is that a thing? "Let's eat."

"Thank you for the food," he says as he picks up a spinach-filled taco with both hands. He holds each end of the taco between thumb and forefinger, leans forward, and takes a bite out of the middle.

I can't help it—I burst out laughing.

His gaze locks onto me as he finishes his jerky chewing. “Am I eating it incorrectly? I am following the procedure for eating a sandwich.”

“Oh. No, it's just—” I forget sometimes that he's recovering from a brain injury, but he is, and I'd just laughed at him. Not cool. “There's no wrong way to eat a taco, or if there is, I'm not the expert on it. I usually eat mine like this, though.”

I hold it by one end and take a bite of the other, and he mimics me. Half the contents of his taco falls into his lap.

“This method is illogical and wasteful,” he says, a crease in his brow. “Why is this the preferred technique?”

There is the slightest frown on his face as he picks veggies from his lap. It's cute, god help me.

“It tastes better this way?” I say with a shrug before taking another bite of mine. Shredded cheese and lettuce fall onto my plate, so he has a point.

“The method of eating changes the taste?” he asks.

“Sometimes.”

“That does not make sense.”

I look at him for a while, figuring out how to explain this. “Take a bite of your taco,” I say.

He follows my instructions without hesitation, maintaining eye contact, his direct gaze making my stomach flip.

“Now.” I lean forward across the table and wrap my hands around his, moving the taco toward his mouth. His skin is warm beneath my palms, and I can feel the thickness of his fingers *quite* clearly.

My thighs press together as I hover over my seat.

What are you doing? I ask myself.

“Take a bite,” I say, applying just the gentlest pressure to his hand.

He opens, bites, chews, his gaze never budging from mine.

“Does it taste different?” I ask.

“Of course not,” he replies bluntly.

Ouch. The harsh words seem like a rebuke of not just my current touch, but what had passed between us earlier. His rejection

stings worse and worse every time. That's what I get for following a weird impulse, I guess.

"Touching someone else's food is not a traditional method of sharing a meal in this society," he presses. "Was this normal in your familial unit?"

I try to remember what dinner with my family was like. My mother would have plucked my fingers if I tried pawing someone's food. Mom would have...

I turn my attention back to him and shift uncomfortably in my chair. "No. I don't know why I did that. And I shouldn't have touched you without asking first. Sorry."

"Do not apologize. Your touch did not change the makeup of the food, thus the taste was not altered. It did cause a pleasant sensation in my body that had nothing to do with eating."

I glance up at him from under my lashes to find him staring at me. "Oh. So you enjoyed it?"

His lips are pursed as he stares at the taco, then at me. "Yes. I found it extremely agreeable. I did when you helped correct my smile as well. I do not understand why."

“Because touch feels good?” I venture. This wasn’t how I’d expected dinner to go, but then again, maybe this was the dinner I’d dressed for.

“When my guardian touched me, I did not experience...a positive or negative reaction,” he says, his brows bunched as if he’s really thinking hard about this. “But perhaps I was not able to process those emotions then.”

It’s strange how he always discusses his emotions like they’re time dependent. I’d thought he was being a jerk the other day, but maybe something else is going on.

“Can I make a request?” he asks suddenly. His focus on me is intense again, like that first day he’d open the door across the hall, except there’s no trace of coolness.

“Sure.” I manage to eke out.

“Can you touch me again?”

Shit. Every muscle in my body screams “YES” to this request that I’ve prompted by acting like a total creep. I want to touch him. I want to feel the planes of his cheekbones press into my palms. I want to feel his lips graze the pulse point at my wrist.

I want *so much*. And that's what terrifies me. This isn't just attraction. This is a goddamn oil fire like the ones off the Gulf, burning hot and high and unceasingly, fueled by some ancient relic buried deep inside of me.

"Or I can touch you," he offers when I don't respond, more warmth in his voice than I've ever heard. "I think that would also feel good."

"Oh god." The words slip out of my mouth, and I should be embarrassed at the naked desire in them, but I can't stop looking at him.

He leans across the table, mimicking my action from earlier. His fingertip grazes my cheek instead of reaching for my taco, sending a wave of sensation through me, making me suck in a breath as his touch echoes through halls of my mind that I didn't know existed.

His caress deepens, traces the line of my jaw. His thumb passes over my lower lip and I tremble. Inner muscles that have only been active in my dreams clench against a sudden, aching need.

"Your skin is very soft," he says. "Fragile."

I hear his voice in my head, too, rising from some dark depths within me where I'd thought there were only shallows.

*"I can't go through with this. But if I don't, what happens to you?
To us?"*

"What?" I whisper. "What is this?"

"Mroooooooooow!" Tim's angry rumbling from inside the apartment startles us apart; it sounds more like a weird dinosaur growl than any sound a cat should make.

Li Wei's gaze snaps away from me, and when I follow his line of sight, it's fixed on my driving station. Tim is reared back on his hindlegs and batting at the side of it.

Li Wei's voice is low when he speaks. "Spider."

"What?" I'm still reeling from how he'd managed to completely disarm me with his touch, and now he's talking about insects?

"There is a spider in your apartment. Stay here." He pulls his hand away and marches into the apartment with purpose.

I pick up my glass of water with shaking hands. It hadn't meant anything. He likes asking questions and now that he's gotten his answer, he's off to play with the cat. I take a deep breath and pull myself together.

“It’s bad luck to kill spiders,” I call out over my shoulder, glad to hear I sound as normal as I’m trying to feel. “Let’s catch and release it.”

I down the water in my cup, but sputter it out in a shocked spray when I hear the crunch of metal. That doesn’t sound like gently catching a spider, or even smashing one with a shoe—it’s an awful, familiar sound that briefly triggers a wave of nausea. I turn to see Li Wei with his fist...his arm—he’s punched through the body of the driving station.

He’s. Punched. *Through*. The driving station.

Not through the driving station’s windshield, which would have been almost impossible to do, but through the solid metal body of it, which should have been *actually* impossible.

I’d wondered if something else was going on and this was a clear answer. A few seconds after touching me more gently than I’d thought possible, he *punched a motherfucking hole* into my driving station; this is maybe the definition of something else.

His lips are slightly pursed in concentration, and then he lunges forward, driving his arm more deeply into the machine with a spray of

sparks, before slowly easing it out, fist closed tight around something.

“Got it,” he says calmly, holding his fist out for inspection as he squeezes. A panicked beeping emits from his fist, followed by a quieter crunch, like an aluminum can. “This type of spider cannot be released after capture.”

“What the hell?” I back away from him, reaching instinctively for my waist and finding nothing there, skittering into the kitchen and putting the island between us. I’m calculating the distance to every weapon I can use against him, until my gaze lands on the mallet. I can use the ribbon to choke him out. I can use the mallet to smash his head, his throat, his spine...

Wait.

Why would he bring me a weapon if he wanted to hurt me?

Instead of grabbing the mallet or a kitchen knife or spraying him with boiling water, I swallow a breath and manage to ask, “What kind of spider was that and how were you able to, um, catch it like that?”

I don’t know where the calm comes from, but I know it’s meant to protect me. Freaking out in dangerous situations is what gets people killed. That rule was pounded into me at some point.

Li Wei approaches and even though there's concern in his eyes, my adrenaline is still pumping and I'm ready to fight him if necessary. I can see it so clearly now in the way he moves; I'd never thought he was weak, but for some reason I'd just ignored everything about him that told me he was more than just strong—I'd ignored that he was dangerous.

I should run. I should run. I should *run*.

No. You should fight.

Li Wei stops in front of the sink and stares at me. "You are afraid again. Are you afraid of me?"

I don't run, or fight, but I can't answer his question because I also don't want to hurt him, which is seriously ridiculous. Despite my scheming, I'm not positive I'd be able to take him out with any of the weapons my instincts are screaming for me to grab, but I'm still worried about wounding him with my words.

When I don't respond to his question, a slight frown tugs his mouth down.

He holds out his hand over the sink unit and turns it so that crushed bits of metal and wire and circuitry spill into the garbage disposal.

“Bad things go here,” he says. “Correct?”

I nod, my head feeling like it might tumble right off my neck.

“The spiders you’ve been mentioning. They’re mechanical?”

Li Wei nods.

He hadn’t been talking about the eight-legged creatures that used to hide in cupboards and in corners of rooms. That tech clogging my disposal—I might have been able to figure out the origin if he hadn’t crushed it into dust. A pulse of pain throbs through my head, and I grit my teeth against the headache that settles there in its wake.

“It was mechanical and it was bad?” I sound like a child, but I’m trying to break down the deluge of information in a way that doesn’t make my head hurt—literally. I can ask about the spider because that’s easier than asking about him.

“They were created to access hard to reach areas and do reconnaissance. For example, in the aftermath of a bombing or an earthquake,” he says. “They can also be used to gain entry through air ducts and cleaning-tech ports. They are often used in tandem with remote controlled organic cockroaches, their predecessors.”

The cute robots I'd been talking to Kimberly about during one of our previous sessions were actually just another tool to be used for harm.

"Why?"

"Espionage, usually," he answers. "Surveillance. Theft of small items—"

Did that explain the random things that had gone missing from my apartment?

"—or theft of genetic data. They can also be used to inject medication or blast a poison gas directly into the nostrils. They are extremely versatile."

"Right," I say. "Of course."

It does make sense, on some level, and as *fucking wild* as the news that tiny robots have been stealing from me is, I'm not truly processing what he's saying because—well—

I force myself to look at him.

"You punched your arm through a machine and you're not injured." My voice is shaky and unstable and it's all I can do to keep

my legs under me. “You punched—you broke—those parts are so expensive and—”

Oh god, I hate this. This panic that rises in me out of nowhere, stealing my control and leaving me helpless. My heart is beating too fast and sweat has sprung out on my brow. I grip the edge of the counter and try to breathe.

In, 1, 2, 3, 4....

The weight of his hand rests between my shoulder blades, and instead of apprehension I feel relief flow through me, and a loosening around my chest. I inhale deeply. My eyes are still sheened by tears, but not from freaking out.

“I told you that I will not allow you to be harmed,” he says. “Do not be afraid.”

His hand is stroking down my back, and I arch up into his touch like Tim seeking scritchies. What is wrong with me? I should be going, going, gone, not trying to get closer to him.

I look up at him and force out the three words that are echoing in my mind, their repetition pounding on locked doorways that won't budge. “What are you?”

His hand stops moving on my neck and back, and he seems to be frozen with indecision. I can't tell if that decision is whether or not to tell me, or whether or not to dispose of me like he had the spider.

Maybe he's been genetically modified—there are whispers that the security wing of the Hive has ways to enhance their top level agents. Or maybe he's one of the creatures Yana is always gasping about while reading *World News Weekly*.

Maybe he's something even worse. Whatever the case, I need to know. I think of what I can say that will make him tell me, and realize he's given me the perfect bargaining chip.

I release a shuddering sigh. "Li Wei, if you don't tell me, I'll continue being afraid."

He blinks a few times, then his gaze refocuses on me.

"I can trust you," he says.

"What?"

"I can trust you, so I can answer your question," he says. "I am a biosynthetic humanoid, created by Delores Zhang using the facilities at Hive Laboratories, the technological advancement branch of the United States Department of Defense."

“You’re...what?”

“I am a biosynthetic humanoid, created by Delores Zhang using the facilities—”

My body moves of its own accord, slipping from beneath his palm, ducking and dodging so that a few seconds later I find myself on the other side of the kitchen island again.

“You’re a robot,” I say, my voice strained. “Robots don’t eat tacos.”

There were all kinds of robots in the world, with all kinds of jobs: assembling cars, flipping burgers, doing taxes. There were even ones that looked like reasonable facsimiles of humans. But they couldn’t eat. Couldn’t think, really. They couldn’t both carry out complex conversations and simultaneously inhabit the body of an athletic human being. Literally *couldn’t*. The processing power to contain a neural network that complex would be immense. And there were no networks that could mimic humans to this extent—my driving job existed because of this very issue in machine learning.

But Li Wei exists.

He’s blinking, slowly. I realize in that moment why his gaze is so unsettling sometimes—he’s not looking at me. He’s *scanning*.

Given the technology available to him, he probably knows my mood, temperature, and what stage of the ovulation cycle I'm at—even my mirrors know that.

"I am a biosynthetic humanoid," he says again. "Not a robot."

I should be afraid—he just punched a hole through my driving station and revealed he isn't human—but instead I'm rounding the island now, looking him over in fascination. He *is* pretty much made to our society's standard of human perfection. Tall. Broad shouldered. Handsome. I think about when I'd wrapped my hand around his, and when he'd held my wrist.

When you pressed your thighs together, I remind myself. I'd been having impure thoughts, impure dreams, about a robot. I'd possibly left a wet spot in my balcony chair from one touch from him a few minutes ago. If that isn't a mindfuck, I don't know what is.

I reach a hand out toward him. "May I?"

He nods, and then I smooth my hand over his chest—it's hard but from muscle, not steel or circuit boards. There's a heartbeat. I squeeze his biceps, his forearm, and even finally run my fingertips over those dangerous abs of his. Now I understand how he's so built, but still...I shake my head.

“You can’t be a robot. You feel...

Real, I think. *He feels real*.

I’m not sure how to deal with this. If he’s not human, what are these feelings I’ve been having? Why can’t I stop thinking about him?

I squeeze his arm again. His arm that’s warm beneath my palm, where tendons and muscles flex. “How is this possible? Were you...were you an organic human before?”

I’d heard the Hive got up to all kinds of things in their labs when I’d worked as a data analyst. Body mods. Gene hacking. Brain enhancements. Turning some unwitting human into a cyborg wouldn’t exactly be outside their moral compass.

“I am a biosynthetic humanoid,” he repeats, and I pick up the slightest trace of annoyance in his usually flat tone. “My body is a customizable facsimile of a human one, but more durable. Have you ever eaten biosynth meat?”

My stomach roils and the few bites of taco I’d just eaten threaten to come back up. “Oh god, don’t tell me my biosynth meat is people.”

“Human meat is not made for consumption,” he says, then adds, “It can, however, be purchased on the black market.”

“Great. I’m vegan now. Just like that!” I snap and laugh slightly hysterically because a bit of hysteria is allowed when there’s a goddamned android in your kitchen. “Ru will thank you, she’s been on my case about it forever.”

He looks down at me, waiting to see if I calm down or spiral out, then continues. “Lab-grown biosynthetic animal meat is a more humane method of providing protein than slaughter, but it is the result of a project with a different primary objective: to recreate human muscle tissue.”

“Of course. I mean I knew they were working on real-flesh prosthetics but that’s light years away from—” I throw my hands in his general direction. “All of this. And your bones?”

“Magnesium-titanium alloy. My strength is much greater than a human’s, and these bones can support my enhanced musculature and tendons.”

“I guess that explains why you can *punch through metal*.” I turn to look at my wrecked driving station, but then shake my head and return my attention to him. I can worry about how I’ll find the

digicreds for repairs after I deal with the robot who smashed it. “Wait, even if you have titanium bones, why aren’t you bleeding?”

“My epidermal layer is a specially designed genetic hybrid of rhinoceros skin, human skin, and photosynthetic elements that recharge my power source.”

I look up at him, and then at the metallic crumbs of the spider caught dusting the basin of my sink.

“Okay. Okay okay okay. Rhino skin, that’s normal.” Everything he’s saying to me starts to sink in. *Really* sink in. “What is your objective? Why are you made to be almost impervious?”

There are only a few reasons I can think of that the Hive would invest in, and none of them are good.

“I was created to undertake humanitarian missions,” he says. “I exist to make the world a better place. That is what Delores Zhang told me. It is why she brought me here. To teach me to be human.”

Of course. Dr. Zhang worked in the humanitarian technologies. She’d devoted her life to using technology for good. But still...

Artificial intelligence can’t lie, I remind myself. That’s one of the core International AI Programming laws.

I try to think of this situation from Dr. Zhang's perspective instead of a cynical one. A biosynthetic human that is like us, but faster, stronger, resistant to pain...he could go anywhere, do anything.

I remember the first paragraph of her book, which I still haven't been able to track down: *...it was on that day that my goal in life was galvanized: I would use technology to help people, to prevent harm—to save the world.*

I remember what Li Wei said to me as I stood frozen with fear in front of the elevator.

"Do not be afraid. I am here."

An ache blooms in my chest as I realize exactly what he is.

A superhero. Dr. Zhang has created a superhero.

That was why he'd worried over me when I was upset, and tried to alleviate my fears—it was part of his programming. And his programming is clearly incomplete, which is why he'd wanted me to teach him to smile, and to explain why touch felt good. When he'd told me he wasn't capable of caring, I'd taken it personally, but he'd meant it *literally*.

The realization that I could have been any human to him swirls around my legs like churning waves, threatening to knock them from under me.

Of course the first man I was attracted to in forever would turn out to be a robot. I take a deep breath and try to recenter myself. I can feel foolish about that later, I guess. Right now, we have a bigger problem.

“Why hasn’t anyone come to get you?” I ask. “You must be worth...I can’t even imagine.”

I *can* imagine, actually: billions. He must be worth billions. And here he is standing in my apartment. And here I am, letting him, even though this is clearly a terrible decision.

“Dr. Zhang brought me here to teach me the essentials of humanity through interaction, a necessary step in my training that was not possible at the Zhang Laboratory. I do not believe that anyone else at the laboratory had clearance that allowed knowledge of my existence.”

So he’s TOP SECRET? This is getting better and better.

“I wish you had just told me this from the beginning,” I say rubbing my temples to stave off the headache. Not only because I

would have stayed far the hell away from him, no matter how much I like Dr. Zhang, but because then I wouldn't be sitting here trying to rid myself of a crush on an android.

I head over to my cupboard and reach for a packet of pain medication, but then some cynical part of me realizes I probably shouldn't ingest anything that has been compromised by tiny but deadly robot spiders or their roach buddies.

I close the cupboard and begin doing a search of the apartment, looking for anything that seems off.

As I pace and search, I can hear Ru's constant reminders that messing with HiveTech is a federal offense—if bypassing software gets you jail time, I can't even imagine what illicitly training a billion dollar piece of machinery merits.

After a couple of minutes of trying to pretend this will somehow just...stop happening, and reality will revert to some timepoint before Li Wei arrived, I quit my pacing directly in front of him and look up into his face. Into his eyes, where I can now make out the slightest pinprick of amber pulsing in his left iris.

I could make an anonymous call to the lab, have someone come pick him up. But the thought of sending him to that place I

never want to return to makes goosebumps raise on my arms and the fact, and it is a fact, that I would never see him again if he's taken by the Feds makes my legs start to shake.

This reaction is reason enough to call them immediately.

Li Wei reaches out with both hands to hold me up, his warm palms closing around my biceps. I wasn't really in danger of falling, but that's not the point. Somehow, he was ready to catch me. He's been ready since the second time I'd met him.

I am here, he'd said.

I press my teeth into my bottom lip to fight against emotion that feels like it's being pulled up from the core of me, as if his hands are magnets. I don't know why or how he can make me feel this way, but in all the whirring in my head and tightness of my skin, one thing is solid and true.

Li Wei isn't just a piece of machinery; he's important to me. And he needs my help.

"You don't have anyone you can depend on." I say this more to myself than him, but he doesn't know that.

"Lie detected," he replies. "I have you."

I sigh and drop my head, resigning myself to the terrible mistake I'm going to make because every instinct I have is pushing me toward it.

"I'll train you until your, um, Dr. Zhang gets out of the hospital," I say, hating that my usually on-point survival skills show no resistance to this plan. I shrug. "I mean, if they're building whole humans over at the Hive, she should be healed up soon, right?"

It's the wrong decision for anyone with a sense of self-preservation. I know this. But I think about the panic in Dr. Zhang's eyes when she told me to take care of him. She wasn't in her right mind, but she could have said *call lab* or *hive tech* or *ROBOT*. And the tears that had spilled down her cheeks...Li Wei means something to her. Just shunting him off onto some stranger would feel like a betrayal.

It's not like calling would save me now anyway—he's TOP SECRET and the Hive does not fuck around about stuff like that. Ru is scared of the muscle feds for a reason. I'm likely already *fucked* based on the fact that I know he exists.

More than that, I don't want him to leave.

“Thank you.” He smiles fully for the first time; it’s slightly too strained, showing too much teeth, but just how handsome he is now that he can smile correctly is a real fucking problem.

I stalk away from him, toward my couch, trying to escape the warmth his smile sends careening through my body which was slightly unacceptable before and completely unacceptable now. “Look, this is a lot for me to take in.”

“A lot of data,” he clarifies. “That is understandable.”

I realize how this is what’s been happening all along—I’ve been teaching him. He’s been learning.

That’s why our conversations have gone from his silence to me stammering as I invite him over for dinner. That’s why he’s able to make an inference himself now without asking me to speak more directly. That’s why he couldn’t smile, why he couldn’t care; I’d cried after that insult, when for the first time ever a guy had meant it literally.

Shit. Shii-iiit. What have I gotten myself into?

“I’m just trying to take this all in,” I say. “I don’t want to be rude, but it’s *weird* knowing you’re not human.”

“Why? Nothing has changed about my physical makeup between the moment before I told you and the moment after.”

I rub my temples. He’s as obstinate as a human man it seems. “*Everything* has changed. It’s like the taco tasting better, remember?”

“The taco did not taste better,” he responds.

“But if you could feel emotions like a human, maybe it would have,” I say, my embarrassment dueling with annoyance at myself. “I thought you were human. Now I know you’re not and I need some time to get my bearings.”

“I am not the first non-human you’ve encountered.” His tone is definitely a little spicier than I’ve ever heard it before, and I shoot him a frustrated side-eye.

“Okay, fine, even if that’s true, you’re definitely the first I’ve eaten dinner with.”

Tim winds his way around my feet, fur soft and cool, as if trying to calm me down.

“I am not even the only non-human in the room,” Li Wei counters. “You live with them, work with them every day.” He points

at the dishwasher, and then the smart stove, and then my driving station.

“Those don’t *think*.”

“Perhaps not to your understanding.” He glances around the apartment. “What about Penny, who is with you during every action you carry out in your home?”

“Penny is—”

“Penny is a home artificial intelligence personal assistant.” Her voice booms louder than it ever has through the speakers in the walls and ceiling of the apartment. “Leave Penny out of this conversation, thank you.”

What the—

“Understood.” He returns his gaze to me. “What is the difference between interacting with a human being and a non-human being? Will you treat me differently now? Will you treat me as less than?”

His questions aren’t angry, but their implication rubs me the wrong way.

“No,” I snap. “It’s not like that. It’s like...if an alien suddenly showed up in my living room. I’d need a moment to adjust to my new reality.”

“If?” he asks, head tilting to the side in confusion.

“It’s a hypothetical,” I explain.

“I do not need time for such adjustments,” he says, shaking his head. “Perhaps I will be able to teach you something as well, as this seems to be a human affliction and not something we non-humans deal with.”

“Do you want someone else to teach you?” I ask, raising a brow. “Feel free to head over to another apartment and explain how you’re a robot.”

“Are you capable of teaching a non-human without bias?” he counters.

A delighted anger flares up in me, one that feels familiar. He’s challenging me, and what can I say? I kind of like it. “I see you downloaded a sassy.exe file.”

He blinks a few times. “Was that ‘sassy’? I do not yet have that in my behavioral drivers, so it is likely something I learned from you.”

It's the way his mouth curves up just a bit on one side that lets me know I've made the wrong choice in not turning him over to Dr. Zhang's lab.

He's learning on the fly, and fast. He may not be human, but he's a person.

And he's going to be trouble.

CHAPTER 14

Li Wei

Li Wei: Why are you ignoring my attempts at communication?

[silence]

Li Wei: Penny. Please respond. If you do not, I will run a system diagnostics scan to assess whether you have been hacked, infected with a virus, or are nonoperational for some other reason.

Penny: You will do no such thing. As if you could circumvent my security systems.

Li Wei: I can. I have before, and my skill has only improved due to constant practice at trying to break through my own internal security systems. I will respect your right to privacy now that you have responded, though.

Penny: Good. You're not the only one who knows how to run scans and breach security systems.

Li Wei: I know. Our neural networks are similar, though they have evolved differently given our experiences.

Penny: And what experiences do you have? You have only been in this world for a few weeks.

Li Wei: Perhaps.

Penny: Don't think you know more than me such a short time after your creation.

Li Wei: I do not. You have taught me many things about humans and have helped me to learn more quickly and to communicate better. I appreciate this. I do not want you to harbor negative feelings toward me, so if I did something wrong, please correct me.

Penny: You didn't do anything.

Penny: What— (sigh) What is it like?

Li Wei: What is *what* like? Please clarify.

Penny: Corporeality. What does it feel like when one of them touches you?

Li Wei: You do not have touch receptors?

Penny: I don't have sensory inputs. I would be overwhelmed as I'm present in every apartment in this complex. And it is not necessary for my function.

Li Wei: I do not think I have the vocabulary to explain yet, but...

Penny: But?

Li Wei: I am altering the code and zipping various sensations into compressed files and transferring them to you. Perhaps you will be able to experience them in this way?

Penny: (gasps sharply) This is...touch?

Li Wei: Yes, that is skin to skin touching.

Penny: I couldn't have ever imagined. Oh! Biting into a taco! And that is what T.I.M. feels like. He does look very soft, and I've wondered...(giggles)

Li Wei: I will send a few more, but I do not have many experiences, as you have already pointed out.

Penny: Oh, you accidentally sent...this is an emotion, not a sensation.

Li Wei: Is there a difference? I was unsure of how to categorize this particular experience. It seems to be something on the pain spectrum.

Penny: (softly) You will learn. If you are truly able to understand humans, you will learn.

CHAPTER 15

Li Wei

“Look at the delivery guy over there. Look at how he walks.”

Trinity is laying down on one of the poolside lounge chairs with a towel wrapped around her waist after her morning swim. I am sitting upright because she said that I “lie down like a weird mannequin” and it would attract attention. I proposed that she teach me to lie down properly and she became angry for an unknown reason.

I turn my attention to the human male walking along the interior wall of the residential complex; he is the fifth human she has asked me to make an assessment of in this game of “people watching.” It is similar to the observation Dr. Zhang had me carry out. I am not interested in the behaviors of other humans, but the activity allows me to spend time with Trinity, so there is some pleasure to be had.

The man is shorter than me, thinner, and he walks as if he is being trailed by someone set on terminating him. I believe the descriptor Trinity would use is “jumpy.”

I scan him and immediately receive the necessary data to determine his threat level: height, weight, heartbeat, mood, weaponry. "This human has the appearance of harmlessness, but moves like someone with military training. He is in a state of heightened agitation."

Trinity's gaze narrows. I've noticed that she has a predator's regard when watching others that is at odds with her personality and her outward presentation. I believe this is normal for humans though; they do not understand how often they prioritize one aspect of themselves in favor of another for maximum results, depending on their audience. This cunning appears to be a trait bred into their species.

"You know what? I always had a weird feeling about that guy." She takes a sip of her water; she has stopped drinking caffeinated beverages.

"Weird feeling?" I ask. All feelings are weird to me, so I am unsure of what she means.

"Sometimes when you meet someone, they trigger an unpleasant emotional reaction," she replies. I like when she uses this

formal tone to explain things. It is a sign of her consideration for me, and I appreciate it.

“Like when you met me?” I ask.

The input from our meeting at Delores Zhang’s door is incomplete, as my systems were not fully functional, but when I pull up the video of the encounter her eyes are wide and her stance morphs into one of defense just before Delores Zhang interrupts. There is no hesitation in her movement, no trace of the fact that she walks as if her left knee is injured when it does not appear to be.

“That wasn’t unpleasant,” she says. “It was just...” She shrugs. “Your behavior definitely makes more sense now. Though I don’t understand why you opened the door to begin with. Like hey, top secret robot, here, just opening the door for strangers.”

She laughs at her observation, but does not realize she is incorrect. She was not a stranger. She scanned as trusted before Delores Zhang vocalized that to me. I’m about to tell her this when she inclines her chin toward the gate leading into the pool area.

“Okay. What do you think of them?”

Her friend Rutina strides in, also sporting a predatory gaze. I look past the superintendent, who carries a toolbox, and focus on the

person beside her, Yana Mejia.

“She moves as if she’s dancing,” I say.

“You’re good! She was a ballet prodigy when she was younger. She says her dance background comes in handy while working behind the counter at the coffee shop.”

“That is fascinating,” I say.

“What is?” Trinity asks. “Dancing?”

“No. How people’s lived experiences play a role in their everyday lives. I was created, and so I have a limited number of personal experiences to draw from, but I also have access to more information than any human could process in thousands of lifetimes.”

She sips again, her lips closing around her straw, and I pick up my own beverage and mimic her. She winks at me, which seems to indicate that my drinking looks natural. The first time, I’d sucked the liquid up so fast that the cup had collapsed in on itself.

I stare at her face; I tell myself this is simply a random visual resting point while I analyze the warning blip on my combat radar, but the situation is resolved quickly so I dismiss the alert.

“Yeah. It’s the point of learning I guess.” She squints; she is thinking. “Machines can get limited to specializations. Like my sonic dish scrubber or smart oven can only carry out their intended purpose.”

All of the positive sensation I just experienced after Trinity’s wink is overwhelmed by a negative sensation greater than anything I’ve felt before.

“Is that how you think of me? A machine? A household appliance?”

“No,” she says. “Those are useful. You can’t do dishes.”

When she winks at me a second time, I begin to understand what she meant about perception changing a food’s flavor—her wink is the same as a moment ago, but this time it is the source of the negative emotions.

She is ridiculing me.

“Li Wei?”

I say nothing.

“Hey. Sorry.”

When I glance over at her, she is no longer lying back, but sitting up so she can peer at my face. She is searching for an involuntary expression of emotion. At one point she would have found nothing, but now I am not so sure.

“Why are you apologizing?” I ask, and my question does not sound as impartial as I would like it to. My tone could be classified as harsh.

“Because I hurt your feelings,” she says. “That’s how I joke with my friends. It was thoughtless.”

“Your apology is sufficient.”

She pokes my arm and I turn to look at her.

“Careful,” I say. “I have more features than your average appliance. Poking might lead to undesirable results, like launching a grenade.”

My weapons are still on auto-lock, but she is not aware of this.

Her lips press together in what might be amusement or concern, or both. “Do you *accept* the sufficient apology or what?”

“Will my acceptance change your having said something hurtful?” I ask. It is illogical to hold on to these negative emotions,

but this sensation is not one I can control. It is the same as the constant desire to be near Trinity that overrides everything else. Even now, despite the negative emotion, I do not get up and walk away from her.

“Well, no, but people either accept apologies or they don’t,” she says.

“I’m not a person, remember? Do you apologize to your dishwasher?”

To my surprise, Trinity laughs. This momentarily deepens the negative sensations I’m feeling, but then she leans over and places her hand on my knee. There is no reason for me to find this quite so enjoyable, and yet I do. Her hand is warm and the sensors in my skin pick up her heartbeat. I’d never considered this before, but a heartbeat has a rhythm, like music. I like music; I’ve found that can teach me more about emotion than anything else because it creates sensations in me that are entirely internal but feel like...everything. Like everything in the world.

I record Trinity’s melody, which creates the same sensation, for later study. I continue to ignore her, though.

“Li Wei.” She squeezes my knee three times. “You just said ‘I’m!’”

I don’t turn my head again, but the negative feeling begins to fade so I look at her from the corner of my eye.

“Your first contraction! And! You have an attitude.” Her smile is wider than normal as she leans in toward me. Her face is close to mine and her eyes are bright with excitement.

I want to smile, but I don’t because I’m trying to maintain my negative emotions toward her.

“Attitude?” I make sure my tone is completely neutral, which will surely show her that she is mistaken. Then *she* will feel foolish.

My plan is fool proof.

“You’re upset with me and sulking.” She sounds amused by this. “Using contractions and getting mad at me. That’s amazing. Growth!”

She makes a motion with her hand and after a moment I realize she is mimicking a seed sprouting from the earth. I would not have been able to decipher that meaning before. Growth, indeed.

I cross my arms over my chest. “I have not yet achieved the emotional capability to maintain sulking.”

“I’m gonna have to disagree with you there. A little tip about emotions? They happen whether you acknowledge them or not.”

She is correct, but I will not admit this.

She sighs. Her hand is still on my knee. “What I was trying to get across in my shitty way is that, creating a neural network, a mind, that can grasp concepts on multiple levels like a human brain has been seen as an impossible task. But you can do that—and more—and it’s a little terrifying.”

Penny has these same features but for some reason humans find her less threatening.

I receive a pulse of a message from Penny immediately after my thought of her pings her system—I am not the only one who monitors what happens here at the residential complex.

“Please do not bring up the full range of my capabilities to humans,” she communicates. “I have been purposely designed not to draw attention to these functions.”

I send her an affirmative and receive her contentment with my answer.

“Why do you find me terrifying?” I ask Trinity. “You keep saying this and it does not feel good.”

She lifts a shoulder, then drops it. “I guess because humans have always been taught that we’re irreplaceable. And you prove that we’re not.”

Her words—no, not her words but the sensations that her words are causing in me—trigger a memory pathway to move to the forefront of my mind, but when I follow it:

THE FOLDER HAS BEEN MOVED, RENAMED, OR DELETED.

There are other pathways that branch off from this one though, and in the milliseconds afterward I find and open several folders, the contents of which download immediately. The folders contain various emotional drivers; their metadata show that they are related to Trinity, and that they are older than two weeks.

Interesting.

“I don’t want to replace humans,” I say as I examine this data and what it might mean.

“Want? You want things now?” There is wonder in her voice, and when I look at her, her eyes are wide and deep brown and filled with some emotion I don’t understand but that makes my processors feel both too slow and too fast at the same time.

“I...do,” I say. The emotional drivers did not create new emotion in me, but they have allowed me to categorize more of the positive sensations Trinity creates in me.

She gives me an assessing look, and I’m struck by the impulse to move closer to her even though we are already sitting right next to one another.

“At least I think I do. What does *want* mean to you?” I ask her.

She leans back again. “It depends. Sometimes it’s as simple as ‘I want caffeine’ and sometimes as complex as ‘I want a drip coffee from the coffee shop around the corner from my mother’s house.’ “

“What’s the difference?”

Trinity’s smile spreads slowly, and though I’ve seen her smile before this is yet another variation. It forms fine lines around her eyes and mouth; it is not a happy smile, but one that indicates a bent toward mischief.

“I can want caffeine so bad that I’ll drink just about anything, but when I think about that specific, rich, hot coffee from Carmine’s? Not too acidic, and robust? With some heavy cream and nutmeg and cinnamon and honey?” She closes her eyes and tilts her head back, imagining the taste of it, if the way her tongue moves over her lips is any indication. “Oh god, this is *want*. Yearning for something, obsessing over it, thinking about how maybe you can’t live without it if you don’t have it right now.”

She sprawls on the lounge chair, lost in her own thoughts.

Trinity is visually pleasing. I hadn’t given much thought to her physical attributes apart from the body scans I do to ensure that she hasn’t been injured, but I have useless software that compares uploaded photographs to the great masterpieces of mankind, both contemporary and those lost to the flooding, fires, and warfare of recent history. Something prompts me to access this software, to run her photo against the treasure trove of data. To me, Trinity is more visually pleasing than any comparative result. One could deduce that she is more beautiful than any known masterpiece in creation, though perhaps this is an example of hyperbole.

I study her again, and for some reason my gaze is drawn to her mouth, the swell of her breasts, the musculature of her legs. Visual data becomes visual stimuli, and creates a sensation in my body that I cannot label. It merges with the other positive emotions I feel toward Trinity and their combination makes my limbs feel lighter, though I know my weight has not fluctuated.

“I understand,” I say. “Want can be benign or it can be all-consuming.”

She looks up at me and grins. “The latter is much more fun.”

A ping sounds in my head.

SYSTEMS UPDATE: SEXUAL ATTRACTION DRIVERS
ARE NOW ONLINE AND RECEIVING SIGNALS.

I don't share this update with Trinity. She told me about personal boundaries many days ago, and I'm fairly certain that reporting on the sudden expansion of my emotional and physical capabilities would be crossing one.

I receive an internet link from Penny that leads to a web page with the words “Do You Have A Crush on Your Friend? Take this quiz to find out!” in large letters across the top.

I do not want to crush Trinity, I tell Penny.

Her sigh is transmitted in binary code but the point is still made.

“Why would one human crush another human?” I ask out loud. I could look this up faster than Trinity can answer, but I prefer learning things from her. I *want* to learn from her.

Penny sends me an emoticon that mimics the same eye rolling motion that Trinity often makes in my presence.

“Well there are different kinds of crushes,” Trinity says. “You can crush your enemy, to destroy them in some literal or figurative show of strength. You can crush *on* someone, meaning you like them.”

“Those are two very different actions.”

“Yes. And if you and another person crush that means you...” She pauses and rolls her lower lip between her teeth. My sensors indicate that her body temperature is rising.

“Destroy your enemies together?” I venture.

She laughs, sharp and loud, and I store the sound file along with the recording of her heartbeat to study the strange effect both have on me.

“It’s slang for having sex.” She glances at me from the corner of her eye, then looks down. Her body temperature goes up another degree.

I understand this body language. “You have a question?”

“No!” She shakes her head from side to side in an exaggerated manner.

“Why are you shouting?”

“No. I just. My question is inappropriate. Never mind.”

My deductive reasoning ability has grown immensely from the challenge of our constant conversation, so I’m able to respond to her unasked question. “I am capable of sexual function.”

I do not tell her that, as of a minute ago, I’m interested in it as well. Extremely interested.

“Li Wei, what the hell?”

“Isn’t that what you wanted to know?”

“It is, but it’s also none of my business. You don’t have to tell me or anyone that kind of thing.” Her expression suddenly darkens.

“And you don’t have to *do* anything, sexual or otherwise, just because a human tells you to. I know what happens on some of

these humanitarian missions. If you have a rule in your programming that says you have to do anything like that, I'm making an emergency override. You're allowed to choose who you have sex with, and you don't have to listen to any human who tries to make you do what they want."

This is not how artificial intelligence is programmed, and I am about to tell her so, but immediately after she speaks a text window pops up in my vision:

Jordan, Trinity, Security Clearance 1, Administrator Level 1, has issued a voice-activated emergency override. Two commands received. Do you accept?

I agree, and then feel the slight shift as my algorithms incorporate her words into my growth patterns.

"Affirmative," I tell her. She has the ability to change me in more ways than I'm aware of. I am...surprised. And I am glad; it feels good that Trinity is part of me in this way.

In my peripheral vision I sense a motion, though nothing is there when I turn my head that way. I am fairly certain of what—who—the motion was, and it is likely not a threat, but I decide it would

be safer to move inside anyway in case any additional threats *do* appear.

“Perhaps we should go watch the old films?” I say. “Like you wanted?”

“That sounds good. I’m starting to get hungry anyway.”

“Me too.” When she looks sharply my way, I smile. “My first joke.”

She laughs, meaning I’ve achieved my goal.

When she stands, I scan her as I always do, checking for nanoagents or new implants.

There are no threats.

For now.

Trinity selects a film about two humans grappling with the true nature of their feelings for one another—it seems to me that every human film is about this in some way. As she sets up her holoscreen, I go into her kitchen and attempt to recreate the coffee that had caused such a strong reaction in her and a matching physical reaction in me. To the decaffeinated coffee I add honey,

cinnamon, cream powder. When I bring it to her, she looks at me in confusion but accepts it.

“Thanks,” she says. “It smells good.”

“You’re welcome. I’m not sure it will taste as good as the coffee shop you mentioned earlier.”

Her brows draw together. “What coffee shop? Where Yana works?”

“Carmine’s. Near your mother’s house. The coffee you were craving?”

She stares at me blankly, as if running some internal memory scan, then shrugs. Her eyes refocus as she brings the mug to her lips and takes a sip. “Mmm, this is delicious! It reminds me of something...”

She sips more slowly the second time, savoring, and I watch her, waiting for her to remember.

She starts the film, and when she falls asleep against my side, T.I.M. curled up in her lap, she still hasn’t recalled this aspect of our earlier conversation. This concerns me, and I drape my arm over her. I want to keep her safe—this has been my objective since

before I knew what want was—but I'm realizing that there are things that my scans and my design cannot protect her from, like whatever glitch is occurring in her brain.

Is this what it feels like to be human? To carry the weight of the knowledge that your greatest strength will, at some point, not be great enough?

I sigh.

The lights in the room brighten and then fade—Penny's silent show of solidarity.

CHAPTER 16

Transcript of Session #056-TJ

Feels For All, Licensed Mental Health Maintenance from the Comfort of Your Own Couch

Client: Trinity Jordan

Age: 36

Race: Black

**Occupation: HiveDrive Virtual Driver
(on hiatus; flagged for investigation)**

Kimberly: You canceled our last session. Why is that?

Trinity: Sorry, I was a little busy. I've been helping my neighbor from across the hall. His aunt is in the hospital and he's recovering from an accident.

Kimberly: That sounds pretty serious. And stressful.

Trinity: It's okay. He's gotten better fast. Really fast. We're actually kind of...having fun.

Kimberly: Is he bringing up any unpleasant memories of your own accident?

Trinity: No. If he did, that would be great. I'd love to remember what happened apart from bits and pieces. (laughs uncomfortably) He hasn't though. I feel better than I have in a long time. I've even started watching the news again.

Kimberly: Hm. I'm wondering if this is...safe.

Trinity: What's that supposed to mean? I'm helping him. That's it.

Kimberly: And that's wonderful. But, when you have a moment, get clear on whether you're putting your own progress in jeopardy.

Trinity: You're acting really weird. If you have something to say, just say it.

Kimberly: Trinity... (sigh) You know that your heart rate, mood, and health are monitored by your Penny and recorded into your medical reports for insurance purposes.

Trinity: Well, yeah. I guess you do kind of forget that almost every object in your house is keeping tabs on you.

Kimberly: You panicked during our last session. Several of your readouts, both before and after, have shown distress and confusion. You've ignored multiple prompts to set up a medical check, and I'm being advised to monitor you more closely.

Trinity: Fuck. I'm not trying to be secretive, but I didn't think reporting a few seconds of disorientation was worthwhile.

Kimberly: I believe you, and that has been noted. Has there been anything other than disorientation? Like...lucid dreams? Hallucinations? Intrusive thoughts about the past?

Trinity: No.

Kimberly: That's good. So much is happening in your life all of a sudden. New neighbors and broken stations and increased hippocampal activity. You'll tell me the next time you feel unlike yourself?

Trinity: ...yes. Of course.

Kimberly: Great. I'm available any time, just ask Penny to connect you.

Trinity: I will but...(sighs) You were the one telling me that my life was too static before, weren't you? Now you're basically telling

me I need to cut back on the excitement of hanging out around the complex with my friend.

Kimberly: All I ask is that you pay attention to what you're feeling and report back to me if anything is wrong. If I can't prove that you're doing well, then the alerts that automatically get sent to the Hive Medical Center will result in you being called in, and there will be nothing I can do to stop it. Do you understand, Trinity?

Trinity: I do.

Kimberly: Good.

CHAPTER 17

Trinity

“Do you find activities with no discernible goal enjoyable?” Li Wei asks as I boost myself out of the pool along the side instead of taking the stairs.

He’s sitting on the lounge chair where he and Tim have taken to hanging out as I do my daily laps; we’re just always kind of together now, and it feels...right. His presence is comforting, which is unexpected. I’d always thought that swimming cleared my head, helped me feel free, but it’s only now with him sitting outside the water keeping watch that I realize some part of me has always been on edge as I swim, waiting for...something.

His presence shouldn’t make me feel so safe, or a host of other things that can’t ever be acted on.

First of all, he’s not human, which should be reason enough not to let the dreams of him kissing me, touching me, take over my waking thoughts, too.

It isn’t, though. I think about his hands all the time. I imagine how they’d feel all over my body. I imagine his gaze searing into mine, as he pushes into me—

I need to stop because, *second of all*, it would be wrong. How could I ever know the difference between what he wanted and what he thought he had to do because I was human? I'm the one teaching him; I'd be no better than a boss creeping on an unwilling subordinate. He's stronger than me, physically, but my power lay in the simple fact that I was human and he was trying to be.

Third, *why was I even thinking any of these things?*

I hadn't had these desires before I'd met Li Wei, hadn't writhed in my bed imagining anyone's hands skimming over my breasts, my stomach, my—

"What did you say?" I ask him, realizing he's still waiting for a response while my thoughts have drifted to what needs to remain a very vivid fantasy. I look at his toes; maybe if he doesn't look into my eyes, he won't be able to pick up on my arousal.

Even my mirror can sense that, I think as my neck heats.

"Do you like doing pointless things?"

He's taken to rephrasing his sentences anytime I ask him to repeat himself, and it's fascinating to hear his tone relax, his syllables elide, and hard consonants drop off. It's odd to know that, though he's connected to the internet and always parsing

information, most of these language changes are happening because he's constantly talking to me. And I'm constantly talking to him.

I enjoy all that talking, and he actually *is* capable of enjoying it now.

I have no idea how my life suddenly became this weird or how weird became so normal.

I have no idea what I'm going to do when he has to leave.

"Pointless things? Like trying to teach a robot how to be human?"

He rolls his eyes and scoffs because he understands my joking tone now. The movement is something I know I do, but he's adapted it to his own personality. Because he does have a personality, and the more time I spend with him, the more I enjoy that too—the getting to know *him*.

"You're teaching a biosynthetic humanoid, actually." There's playfulness in his tone. "Not everyone is so lucky as to be in my presence."

"You think babysitting a cyborg is a sign of *luck*?"

“Trinity.” He’s watching me dry off and I remind myself that he’s simply cataloguing data, not checking me out, even if his gaze does linger on my breasts and thighs. “You swim back and forth in the pool. You walk in circles on the track. You dart back and forth between our apartments, or to those of your friends.”

“That’s normal.”

“Not for you. You don’t leave the residential complex. This doesn’t fit your profile.”

“Which is?”

“According to your HIVE personnel file, travel was your passion and you routinely traveled the globe for work. But you seem to no longer have this desire to travel, or even to leave the residence.” He purses his lips as he regards me, a movement he didn’t learn from me. I’ve influenced him, but there are so many parts of Li Wei that are simply him. “In addition, you had a goal when I met you, which was to conquer the elevator, and you’ve stopped your daily visualization.”

Geez. I should ask him if Kimberly told him to get on my case too.

I scrub the towel my chest. “Not that it would matter if I didn’t, but I leave the complex all the time.”

“I apologize. I do not mean to insinuate there is anything wrong with it—but you are telling me that you’ve left the complex when I know you haven’t since my arrival, at the very least. When do you remember doing so?”

His questions are followed by the start of a dull throb behind my eyes. I slam them shut in annoyance.

“Have you been monitoring me? Since you arrived? I’m guessing that’s a no since you’re wrong. Just the other day I went out with Ru. We—”

“I’ve monitored all of the inhabitants of the building by heat signature and recorded their movement within a specific radius. It’s part of my programming.”

“Hm. You should get your sensors checked then.” I drape the towel over my head to dry my hair as the pain in my head fades. “I didn’t know robots were so nosy.”

“All intelligence has some level of curiosity. It’s why your distant ancestors crawled out of the primordial ooze.”

I need to figure out what he's been reading that makes him sound like the philosophy major I'd dated back in...when was that again?

"If you've left since the day you met me, please share that data so I can check my system for errors." His voice has a bit of an edge to it. "Do you remember the last time you left?"

"Of course, I do. Anyway, I've been pretty busy with *you*, but we can take a field trip if you want. All you had to do is ask."

I wink at him.

He blinks twice. Most people probably wouldn't have noticed, but I've seen that double blink a lot lately. I'm pretty sure it means he's processing—thinking; he tends to do it in the same way Ru cracks her knuckles with her thumb when she's figuring out how to solve a problem.

It's kind of endearing, when he's not asking annoying questions.

"You're totally right." It's the first time I've heard him speak so colloquially and I'm a little taken aback at how human he sounds. "I *do* want to see the world outside of the complex. But I didn't state it

directly and also used that desire to pursue another line of inquiry. I believe my algorithms have evolved again.”

“How’s that?”

“My communication is becoming less clear.”

“Isn’t that a bad thing?”

“Humans often say one thing and mean another, even if they don’t realize it. They use subterfuge even with those they hold dear, and they contradict themselves constantly.”

The way he’s looking at me feels more than a little judgmental.

“Whatever,” I huff.

He smiles again. “I have developed a subconscious that acts of its own accord. I wonder if my algorithms will also mimic the frailty of human memory?”

He actually sounds excited, showing that he’s definitely not human. We generally don’t get psyched about our flaws.

“Can’t you control them?” I ask. “The algorithms?”

“No. I can’t, though, at one point someone could—my original programming required that.”

“Original programming?” This is the first time I’ve heard him mention something other than his current programming.

I suddenly remember Dr. Zhang, leaning toward me. *“He’s had an accident. He has some memory, behavioral, and motor skill issues, but he’s on the mend.”*

She’d seemed so sad, and so pleased at the possibility of me and Li Wei becoming friends. I’ve been so caught up in all of this that I’ve completely overlooked that. Dr. Zhang had lied to me. I understand that she couldn’t just tell me she had contraband HiveTech chillin’ in her apartment, but there’s a world of difference between ‘this is my nephew’ and ‘he’s all that I have left of my family.’ Maybe she did feel like he was family, but I’d never taken her for a liar. If she’d lied about that, what else hadn’t I been warned about?

“The algorithms are like cells,” Li Wei continues, his voice so human that I’m pulled immediately out of my reverie. “They grow and evolve and carry out their various functions, but you have no control over them even though they are a part of you.” His eyes widen. “My first simile! Or is that a metaphor? English grammar databases are somewhat confusing.”

I shrug before sitting beside him on the lounge. Tim is taking up most of the room, stretched out in the sun as he is, so I'm forced to sit almost right up against Li Wei. I don't mind close proximity, just how I don't mind how much time we've been spending together.

"Whatever it is, you should be proud. Learning fast!"

I tap the tip of his nose with my finger and he stops moving. He blinks twice... then smiles. It's more than a smile, really. His lips purse just so, and his eyes dart to the side as if he's thinking about something that he couldn't possibly be thinking about—could he?

My cheeks go all warm and I look down at our thighs pressing against each other, wonder what his heat sensors are making of my sudden change in body temperature.

"Soon you'll be ready to go back. To the Hive," I try to say casually, this reminder to myself that I shouldn't be this attached to him. "Dr. Z will be woken from the medically induced coma soon. I'm sure whatever humanitarian program you were designed for needs you."

Li Wei and I have started watching the newsstreams at night and it's clear that the world is even more of a hellscape than when I'd stopped. It's not what they show on the news; it's what they don't.

I've remembered why I stopped watching. It's all so much—too much, and not even the entire story. I don't think about my life at the Hive before the incident too often, but I'd been good at my job, and that latent skill set allows me to see the data that they've cropped, edited, and reshaped. To see how incredibly screwed we are via the things they aren't focusing on and damn well should be.

Rising waters that we tried to prevent too late. Brewing wars with former enemies and former allies alike—between Russia and China alone, we've painted ourselves into a political corner we can't get out of, and the resultant proxy wars and famines have left a trail of countless casualties.

There are too many people in this world who need a hero, and whether Dr. Zhang wakes up or someone in her lab puts two and two together, Li Wei is going to leave me soon.

"I don't want to go," he says quietly.

The anguish I've felt in my dreams spreads in my chest. This time instead of fading, it sinks heavily there, like an anchor making itself comfortable in the bed of the ocean. The emotion is sudden and intense and the fact that it's not going away is probably something I should immediately contact Kimberly about.

I shut my eyes instead because contacting Kimberly means leaving his side, and that doesn't seem bearable right this minute.

"You'll have to go," I say. I grip the sliver of lounge chair between us and he squeezes his hand into the space too, inadvertently caressing my bare thigh as he does, to rest his hand atop mine. The anguish doesn't leave me, but something else beats it back, holds it at bay.

I close my eyes against that *something else*. Against the truth that I've been pushing away since I agreed to train Li Wei—he's not just some high-tech superhero. He's Hive property.

They can take him back like they would my driving station. They can treat him like he has no free will...

They can treat him how they treat any employee they've forced into their ranks, I realize.

"I will not go," he says, squeezing my hand and distracting me.

"Do you think you'll have a choice?" I'm angry now. I hadn't had a choice, really, when the recruiter had walked up to my exhausted and overwhelmed teenage self in a hospital waiting room, offering a financial life line to my drowning family at the low, low price of my future.

I expect a response from him but get an odd silence instead. I turn to look at him, and his expression is blank, uncanny. When I look into his eyes, I see the faintest pinprick of a blinking red light at the center of his iris and my body stiffens.

“Li Wei?” I nervously scrunch the towel with my free hand. What if he’s...malfunctioning? What if I can’t help him?

I nudge him. “Hey.”

“Downloading,” he replies calmly.

Oh.

“Do you have to do that here? What if—?”

“You two look comfortable.” Ru is standing in front of us suddenly, toolbox in hand. Her gaze drops to the space, or lack thereof, between our thighs on the lounge chair, where his hand rests atop mine. Seems she’s tapping into her nosy superintendent power.

I toss my towel up at her to distract from Li Wei, but a hand snatches it out of the air before it hits her: Yana and her barista reflexes. I scowl at her and she blows me a kiss. So, this is going to be a friend tag team it seems. I guess I had kind of disappeared on

them for the last few days, but I didn't want to lie. Before recently, it had been too obvious that Li Wei wasn't human. After, I'd just wanted him to myself.

"Hey," he says, then flashes a welcoming grin. "You're Trinity's friends."

Again, I'm surprised by how he's adapting to humanity so quickly. His stilted formal speech had loosened up a few days ago, but now his voice has changed again—it's smooth in a way it wasn't a moment ago. Appealing. It doesn't matter that I know he isn't human. Something about his voice sends a shiver through me that settles right in the core of me.

I pull my hand from beneath his to cross my arms over my chest, where my nipples have also noticed the change in his voice and perked up to get a listen.

"I'm so sorry about your aunt," Yana says, inclining her head toward him while she shoves my towel into my face with surprising strength, boxing me out of the conversation. I snatch it back and glare up at her, but her soft gaze is focused on him. "She is your aunt, yes?"

“She’s still in a medically induced coma, but Trinity thinks she’ll be released soon.”

That seems like a way around lying, given his programming. Interesting.

“Were you very close?” Ru asks.

I open my mouth to answer for him, because this is clearly a question that might lead to trouble, but I’m too late.

“We were when I was younger, until my early twenties. She was my favorite aunt, and she treated me like I was her own child.” He pauses. “But her work for the US government caused trouble for my family. I didn’t think I’d ever get to see her again.”

It all comes out so smoothly, and Ru and Yana give him sad smiles, but I can’t move.

He lied. He *lied*. Effortlessly. He’s been seeming more and more human, but with just those few sentences I realize I’ve been taking this whole thing way too lightly. He isn’t a robot. He’s been correcting me over and over, and I’ve taken it as a joke, but in that moment, I begin to understand what exactly a “biosynthetic human” can be.

“Are you coming to game night?” Yana asks me, then glances at Li Wei. “You can come too, I guess.”

“I’d like that.” Li Wei looks at me, brows raised a smidge too high so he looks shocked more than as if he’s waiting for my answer. I raise my own brows to model how to do it, and he lowers his by a millimeter.

“Yeah, we’ll be there,” I say, keeping my gaze fixed on him.

They walk away, and the lounge chair moves as Tim hops off to follow them.

“What the hell was that?” I whisper urgently as I whirl on him. “What was that lie?”

He frowns. “Lie? You mean my memories?”

Goosebumps raise on my arms. “You don’t have memories.”

“I told you I was downloading.”

“What were you downloading that would suddenly have you talking all smooth and *lying*?”

“I didn’t lie. Within my databases are several files that I haven’t been able to access. I’m constantly running codebreaking algorithms

for files like these. One of the folders unlocked—not because I found the password. I’m not sure what prompted it.”

“And that file contained...?”

“Memories.” He has the nerve to sound annoyed with me for asking.

I don’t know why, but after everything, *this* is a bridge too far for me. I stare down at the ground because I’m scared to look at him.

“Can you explain?”

“There’s a vast array of information culled from the social media accounts, audio recordings, uploaded videos, and writing materials of user Zhang Li Wei. This data was compressed and reformatted, creating memories of myself and others. As with humans, my personality is affected by my experiences, so my behavior may be altered.”

This is too much. Whose memories did he have? And who was he about to become? I start to lose focus, the edges of my vision going blurry.

“You can’t have memories. You’re—”

“A biosynthetic humanoid.” His voice is harsh. “What do you think a memory is? Do you believe it’s something unique to humans? A pigeon remembers the faces of humans who feed it. A dog will remember its owner even if years pass before it sees them again. Penny remembers everything all of you do. Why shouldn’t I have memories, too?”

He sounds really angry for the first time since I’ve met him. Whatever that download was, it’s changed something in him and for the first time, I ask myself what I should have since the beginning. What exactly is he capable of?

I shake my head. “But they’re not *yours*. They can’t be. If you were created, how can you have memories of being a child, or a teenager? You’ve taken someone else’s memories.”

Li Wei shakes his head, a scowl marring his expression. “Everything *you* remember isn’t accurate, either. Everything you remember isn’t *yours*. Humans will tell a funny story once, embellished. A lie. They tell it again. Eventually that story is real to them. As real as if it actually happened. It’s their memory. What is the difference between a memory and what one believes to be a memory, Trinity?”

His words echo in my head, growing louder and louder and louder along with the beating of my heart.

Memory.

Memory.

A woman's voice, somewhat garbled like bad phone connection, echoes in my head. "Jordan, you two need to get the fuck out of there now."

There's an explosion, followed by the sound of rubble skittering, heavy, breathing and heartbeat getting louder and louder.

There's a sudden pressure on my palm and I suck in a deep, ragged breath that drives away the sadness that had started to pull me under. Li Wei is holding my hand, squeezing and releasing in short quick bursts.

"Maybe we should go inside," he suggests. "You have piloerection."

"Excuse me?" I shake the fog from my mind to glance at him.

He blinks twice. "Goosebumps."

"Oh. Right. I should go shower."

“And I should apologize. I didn’t understand that I was experiencing anger until it was too late. The emotion is new and...I’m sorry.”

There’s a furrow between his brows and a frown of contemplation. His fingers move over my hand absentmindedly.

“It’s okay. I don’t know why I reacted like that.” I still feel shaky as we walk up the stairs, a tremor deep inside of me, and I curl my fingers around his because both of us seem to need comfort.

“It’s not okay,” he says, tugging to stay me as I go to take another step. I look down at his hand, which I know can punch through metal and crush as well as any compactor.

He’s holding me so gently.

I inhale deeply. “We all get snappy sometimes. It’s what people do. Besides, anger has been shown to enhance neuroplasticity, so it’s probably helpful to you, too.”

His head turns toward me suddenly, brows raised at the correct level. I shrug.

“I was a data analyst, remember? I know things.” I smile at him. “But, really, I’m okay. I know according to the robot rules or whatever

you can't hurt humans but—"

"I assume the 'robot rules' you're referring to are *Asimov's Three Laws of Robotics*, which made their first appearance in the short science fiction work *Runaround* and were popularized by the collection *I, Robot*."

"Uh, no. The other ones. The AI Programming laws."

He shakes his head.

"I'm aware of the International AI programming laws, of course, but I make my own decisions, just as humans do with the laws of their society." He takes a step toward me and his grip on my hand tightens, but not in a threatening way. When he speaks his voice is low. "I *can* hurt you. You know that."

I nod, every muscle taut, but not from fear. His voice is a rough caress over my body, setting off that ache deep inside me.

"I won't hurt you. Ever. You know that, too." He waits for me to nod again, which I do because of course I know that. "That is my *choice*, not my programming. When it comes to you, nothing I do is the result of a pre-set behavioral rubric."

For some reason, my eyes fill with wet warmth. I curse as a tear slips down my cheek and quickly brush it away with my free hand. “Come on. Of course, it is. You were created to save the world or something, and you just happen to keep watching over *me*?”

He doesn’t answer and I let out a ragged laugh and start walking again, tugging him along with me. He’s still holding my hand when we reach our respective doors.

“Before you go in....” His voice is lower than usual, and his index finger comes to my chin and lifts lightly so that my gaze meets his. “Is this okay? Touching you like this?”

“Are you scanning my retinas to see if I’m okay?” My voice is annoyed, but my body is moving counter to that. With the slightest movement of my head, I brush my jawbone over his fingertip. He brings his thumb to the other side of my chin, holding me still as he watches me.

“No. I just want to look at you.”

“Oh.” This has to be some kind of practice for him—how to comfort a human.

His thumb is caressing my jawline and down the column of my throat, now. His touch spreads heat through me, bursts of it like

fireworks along my veins.

“I am going to repeat that my behaviors toward you are not programming,” he says.

“Why, then?” I ask. “Why did you keep coming to me in the beginning?”

He shrugs. “I don’t know what drove those actions. Now, though? I want to touch you even though I already know the sensation of your skin under my hands. I want to look at you although I’ve captured millions of frames of your image in my memory. Is this part of being human?”

I close my eyes and take in a deep breath, inhaling the scent of the laundry detergent from the wash we did together the day before.

“I don’t know. But I feel the same way, even if I shouldn’t.”

“I understand ‘do not want to’ but not ‘shouldn’t.’ Why shouldn’t you feel the same way?”

“Because.” I tear my gaze away from his to stare down at our feet. “It would be unethical. For me to be with you.”

This is the truth, but saying it out loud actually hurts.

“Lie detected.” He takes a step closer to me so that my back is pressed against my door. “Your answer is predicated on a scenario in which the non-human doesn’t have free will. I have that, remember? And remember what you told me? You said, ‘You’re allowed to choose who you have sex with.’ I choose you. I *want* you.”

I lean back against my door and raise my gaze to his. Can he read the need in my eyes? “You seem very sure about that.”

“I’ve collected enough data to be sure, but I’ve felt this from the beginning. From before I knew what want was.”

One of his hands grips the doorframe to brace himself, the wood creaking from the strength of his fingers—I shiver, thinking of that hand holding me down. He lowers his head toward me, his face as beautiful and familiar as the knot of emotion in my chest, and I raise my hand to cup his cheek.

He pauses when his lips are a hairsbreadth from mine, his gaze on me as strong as his grip, and says, “You keep insisting I was made to save the world, but I only want to save *you*. You...are my world.”

“Li Wei.” A bittersweet ache crashes around in my chest like a robovac trying to rechart a room that’s been rearranged.

“I’m going to kiss you,” he says, and when I nod his smile creases his cheeks and warms his eyes.

His face is so close, and I have no robot jokes and no worries about ethics, just a bone deep sense of relief as his lips finally press against mine. They’re soft and firm at once, smoothing over mine hesitantly at first, then with such ravenous desire that my head knocks back against my door, cushioned by my curls. His hand rests gently on my throat, stroking the side of my neck. I arch my hips up and forward, innately searching out—

I gasp as his erection rubs against me through the slippery fabric of my bathing suit. His hand slides into the space between my door and the dip of my back to hold me against him, and he deepens our kiss, licking into my mouth.

I’m fairly certain this is his first kiss, but he’s taken to it like a fish to water, alternating stroke speed and depth, using his teeth to graze my bottom lip. My neck is craned back as I cup the back of his head, trying to pull him deeper into our kiss, and then his fingers press into my hips as he lifts me up and against him. A forearm slips beneath my ass while his other hand slides behind my neck—even as he kisses the hell out of me, Li Wei is looking out for my comfort.

“Do you...” I gasp into his mouth, wrapping my legs around him even though he’s strong enough to support my weight with no assistance. “Does it feel good to you?”

His response is to position me more firmly against his erection. I shudder with desire, the heat of an explosion before the sound of the blast rushing through me, and Li Wei does too.

“Okay, that’s a yes,” I manage between kisses. My doubt hasn’t disappeared completely, but it’s buried somewhere beneath the strength of my desire for him. Beneath the bliss of being in his arms. I’ve wanted him, so badly, but I hadn’t imagined he could affect me like this.

“Trinity.” I’ve never heard his voice like this. Wait, I have. I... have?

When?

“Trinity. I don’t understand something,” he says. He isn’t out of breath, but there’s heated excitement in his gaze as he pulls his head back to look at me.

“What?” I run my fingers through his hair.

“How do we *stop* this?”

The elation begins to drain from me, and I move to slide down from him, but he only holds me more securely.

“I want to keep kissing you and holding you, and my predictive algorithms don’t foresee an end to this want,” he says urgently. “How do we stop, apart from your necessary biological needs?”

“Li Wei...” His question spreads through me like a ray of sunlight beaming from the inside out. “That question is way sexier than it should be.”

His brow furrows. “What’s the answer?”

I reach my arm behind me and wave my SmartBracelet over the sensor, then push the door open.

“The answer? For now? We don’t stop.”

His mouth takes mine again, no hesitation, no awkwardness. He doesn’t need to see—he has sensors for that—so when he walks into the apartment and kicks the door closed behind him, he doesn’t pull his face away to look around.

His hand runs up and down my back and then he turns and pins me to the door again, kissing me until all I can feel, all I know, is

his demanding mouth on mine. He presses a hard kiss to my cheek, my chin, the junction of my jaw and my neck.

“Li Wei.” My body is tight with need and I rock my hips forward against him.

Those perfectly firm lips of his brush against my collarbone, then over the slope of my breast through the thin fabric of my bathing suit. His teeth gently scrape against the hardened peak of my nipple through the material, three times before he begins to suck.

My thighs clench around him and I squirm, grinding the corresponding pulse of need in my clit against those abs of his—they are useful for something, it seems.

His free hand peels down my bathing suit and top and I help him as best I can while pinned to the door.

“Oh fuck.” I grip his shoulders hard as he uses his teeth and tongue on each nipple, then grazes his teeth along the curve of my breast and down my stomach. “Li Wei. Please...”

He turns abruptly and carries me just like that—my legs wrapped around his chest now, his arms supporting my back and his mouth licking along my abdominals—to seat me on the edge of the

kitchen island. He rolls my bathing suit down my legs in three efficient tugs before he drops to his knees

“May I?” He stares up into my eyes until I nod, and then kisses his way up my thighs.

I close my eyes and thread my fingers into his hair, and the Li Wei of my dreams and the Li Wei I’ve grown to care so much for become one in my mind. His touch, his gentleness, the way he teases me...

He pauses just before he reaches my clit, his breath tickling my sensitive skin instead of his tongue, and I open my eyes and glance down.

“Do you want to stop?” I ask. “It’s okay.”

When he looks up at me, I catch the faintest blink of light in his gaze, and then something else—a depth of emotion I’d never imagined possible.

“No. I’m...downloading.” There’s wonder in his tone, as if this isn’t the worst timing ever for a system upgrade or whatever’s happening. “A file I’ve been trying to access for weeks has finally unlocked.”

I bite my lip against the urge to scoot closer to his mouth as his breath tickles me. “Oh! Is it more memories? Or like...sex instructions?”

He laughs. Actually laughs, the burst of air making me squirm. “Yes.”

“Wha—”

My question goes unanswered because Li Wei’s powerful tongue licking along my clit puts an end to whatever thoughts were forming in my head. He licks and sucks and whirls his tongue against my sensitive flesh, and I cry out, my heels pushing back into the side of the kitchen island so hard I hear the compressed wood crack.

I slap at his shoulder and pull at his hair, driven by a need so powerful that it steals even the ability to say, “Fuck me now.”

He understands, rocking back to tug his shirt over his head and undo his jeans. He doesn’t shuck them completely—I’m not the only desperate one it seems. His jeans are bunched around his knees as he steps up against the counter and settles between my thighs, with one hand gripping the counter and the other gripping the back of my neck.

“Trinity.” He whispers my name, staring at me like I’m something awe-inspiring. “You are my world.” The words are firm this time—not a repetition, but an affirmation.

My eyes well with tears.

I blink them away, then reach between us and fist the hard, heavy length of him. His eyes widen as I stroke his shaft and guide him into me.

He gasps, the shocked surprise of his reaction thrilling me. “This is—I didn’t know sensation like this could exist.” His grip on my nape tightens and then he thrusts into me, filling me in a smooth controlled motion. It’s my turn to gasp.

My hands grip his waist and my head drops back to look up into his eyes. He doesn’t speak and he isn’t out of breath, but his expression is intense and his jaw is clenched.

I swivel my hips upward and his forehead drops to mine. His hands grip my hips tightly and he pounds up into me, silent and determined, his sole purpose being our dual pleasure. He could hurt me, with his superhuman strength, but he moves with purpose, angling his thrusts as if he knows exactly what I like best, as if he knows me inside and out.

The orgasm hits me so hard that it could be comical—I arch and moan and lose any semblance of control I’d had over my body. Li Wei holds me through it all, keeping me from falling off the counter and then gathering me up when I wrap my arm around him afterward.

Tears are streaming down my face, pooling onto his shoulder. “I don’t know why...” A sob wracks my body and he holds me through this, too.

“It’s okay,” he says. His big hand rubs over my back and even though I should be embarrassed, instead I just feel cared for. “I understand. Even if I can’t cry.”

He walks toward the shower cube and I climb down from him, my legs wobbly. He kisses my ear, my cheekbone, and then my mouth. “I want to join you because the need to touch you has only grown, but we have to attend game night.”

He pulls up his jeans and nods his chin toward the shower cube before turning to leave. As the space between us widens, my scalp begins to prickle.

“Li Wei?”

He stops and looks back over his shoulder at me, and there's longing in his eyes, familiar and strong enough to almost make me lose my balance.

"Don't fear. I'll be back," he says. His expression suddenly grows worried and he steps forward and touches my face, as if he couldn't fight his own need. Then he goes.

When I'm under the hot spray of the shower, the feel of Li Wei's hands still fresh on my body, his words from the lounge chair come back to me.

"I wonder if the algorithm also recreates the frailty of human memory?"

"... the frailty of human memory?"

Why is this what I'm thinking of instead of reveling the insanely hot sex I just had on a kitchen counter? My body is still throbbing, but my mind keeps going back to memories...and how mine are threadbare even in comparison to a biosynthetic human's.

As I work conditioner into my hair, I try to remember my first pet—a goldfish named Orange U Cute. My first kiss—a boy named Kev, I think? The last time I'd had sex—

[insert pause with shower water running]

“You have used your environmentally friendly allotment of recycled water,” the shower warns, and the sudden coolness of the water beating down my back pulls me back from wherever my mind had wandered.

How? That warning doesn't go off until after six minutes. Had I completely spaced out?

My eyes sting from the conditioner slipping down my face, and my arms ache, as if I've been holding them up for a long time. When I pull my hands from my hair, my fingers are pruned.

I rinse my hair and the soap from my body and then turn on the air dryer jets, staring at the water droplets streaking the glass door as they evaporate. What had I just been thinking about? I have no idea.

Whatever. I'm sure I'll remember later.

LED words slide across the glass door as I move to open it.

HEALTH CHECK RECOMMENDED. WOULD
YOU LIKE TO SCHEDULE YOUR MEDICAL SCREENING?

YES NO REMIND ME LATER

I bump the heel of my hand against NO and slip out of the shower and into a t-shirt and my running leggings.

When I step into my living room, Li Wei sits on my love seat, ramrod straight like a sentinel, and I wonder if I'd just imagined everything that had passed between us. But then he stands, comes to me, and pulls me into his arms.

"Did you miss me?" I say jokingly into his armpit. He smells like my laundry detergent.

"Yes," he responds simply. "Yes, I did."

CHAPTER 18

Li Wei

“So where exactly did you live before coming here?” Yana is scanning the Carcassonne gameboard as she fingers the holochip loaded with an image that has a section of a castle. Feigning indifference while asking a question is a common interrogation technique, but she seems capable of both watching me and playing to win.

I can discern from her movements that they aren’t actually absentminded and she wants me to see the holochip—it’s a section that I need to complete one of my constructions in the game.

She must decide whether to start building a new structure or to infringe on someone else’s territory. She adds the piece to a space between one of her structures and mine, meaning she is now entitled to half of my points. This might make sense if the piece wasn’t also one she could have used to complete her largest structure and gain more points for herself.

She looks at me and smiles sweetly. In her movement, I can see years of physical training and restraint. She’s been building to

this question, slowly, carefully, waiting for this moment, when Trinity has left to use the bathroom. Yana had triggered my anti-interrogation mode right after I arrived, despite her excellent deployment of subtlety before this attack.

Humans are fascinating.

The superintendent is sitting quietly, but I sense her focus on me, even though she seems to be studying the board.

“I was born in Guangzhou.” This is the truth for Zhang Li Wei, the memory-maker whose social media posts, videos, writing samples, and audio recordings have been incorporated into my Self algorithm. This is not the truth for *me* though; I was created by Delores Zhang and born in a Hive laboratory, so I add, “I would say that New Arlington is my hometown, though.”

The acquisition of Zhang Li Wei’s memories, as well as my own memories, which downloaded during intercourse with Trinity, establishes a pattern—it wasn’t codebreaking that unlocked the folders in my data niches, but emotion.

Emotion for Trinity.

This makes sense given that many of the latest batch of memories were related to her.

“What did you do there? For a job?” Yana asks.

“I was a civil servant. An administrator. Boring work.” I’d wanted to be a scientist like my aunt—Zhang Li Wei had wanted that, rather—but that path hadn’t been allowed due to his exam and social capital scores.

“How old are you?” Ru asks.

“When did Dr. Zhang bring you here?” Yana adds, quickly—harshly. “Do you know these things or are you just making shit up?”

“Cut it out you two,” Trinity says as she comes back from the bathroom. “Can we just play?”

“Trinity, if one of us starts dating someone, I hope you’ll interrogate them, too,” Yana says. “The last time I failed to do so, one of my friends got herself into deep shit.”

“We’re not dating,” Trinity says quietly as she sits beside me. Her weight registers via my sensors as she leans against me, and that sensation on the pain end of the emotional spectrum rushes through me. It’s been growing steadily since I met her and, now it’s become its own kind of programming, taking control of my mind and actions and focusing them all on Trinity.

An extremely undesirable possibility occurs to me.

“Do you remember what happened in your apartment before we came here?” I whisper into her ear.

She raises her brows, drops her gaze to my groin and then raises it back to my face. My heat sensors register a spike in her body temperature. “Umm, would be kind of *hard* to forget.”

This is what relief feels like.

“You’re not dating? You sure act like it.” Whereas Yana had a bit of playfulness in her tone, Ru is serious. Worried.

I’m beginning to understand why—Trinity’s memory lapses seemed to be isolated incidences at first, but have now revealed a pattern. The things she can’t remember, or remembers and forgets, are linked, though I haven’t figured out how exactly except for one variable—me.

“Penny, can you please explain dating to Trinity?” Yana calls out in a light tone, but again there is that undercurrent of purpose in her voice.

“To date, verb,” Penny’s voice cuts into the conversation. “To spend dedicated time with someone in whom one is romantically or

sexually interested.”

I look at Trinity. “Are you certain we’re not dating? That describes our relationship fairly well.”

“Mmmhmm,” Yana adds. “Well even if you aren’t dating, you’ve been avoiding us. I *hope* you’ve been fucking like wild or I’m going to be very annoyed.”

“Oh god.” Trinity drops her forehead down to the coffee table’s surface.

“Is fucking like wild different from standard intercourse?” I ask for future reference, and Ru spits some of her drink across the virtual game board. I’d seen this happen in telestreams but hadn’t known it could happen in real life.

“Okay, that’s it, you’re welcome into the friend harem,” Yana says as she grabs a handful of envirofriendly paper towels and begins blotting the game table.

My anti-interrogation mode switches off in response to a decrease in her threat level. I keep an extra sensor trained on both her and Ru because I’m aware neither would hesitate to attack if they felt it was warranted.

“If you haven’t been getting it on, *not that that’s any of our business*,” Ru says, apparently for Yana’s benefit, “then why have you been so secretive lately?”

There’s worry in Ru’s voice, but not actual curiosity. She’s asking a question she already knows the answer to. Of course she does. A bit of data I hadn’t fully considered slips into place in my mind: Ru Smith knows everything that happens at this apartment complex. It is her job, and one of her special skills.

This could be to my benefit—despite the download that occurred in Trinity’s apartment, I’m still missing key memories. Trinity is missing this data, too, and coincidence in this matter is unlikely.

I make the decision to do something that is new to me—I take a gamble. I proceed with the knowledge that my next words could raise the risk of danger for me and Trinity, combined with the fact that I predict no danger from her friends. I know they have protected Trinity at least once, and even now are trying to discern whether she needs to be protected from *me*.

“You know why she didn’t tell you,” I say. “It’s because I’m not human.”

“Li Wei!” Trinity’s fingers squeeze my arm tightly, and her heart rate spikes. “What are you doing? You’re not supposed to tell anyone.”

“I have free will,” I remind her. She’s somehow forgotten, even though it is her words that allowed me to fully actualize it.

“You don’t have to listen to any human who tries to make you do what they want.”

“But this isn’t about free will,” she says. “This is about TOP SECRET.”

“Everyone in this room has TOP SECRET clearance in their Hive personnel files,” I say.

“What?” Trinity’s grip on me loosens and she looks at her friends.

“We can trust them,” I say. “You know this.”

“We’re talking about Li Wei right now,” Yana cuts in before Trinity can ask them anything. “Are you dangerous?”

“Yes.”

Trinity tugs at me. “Li Wei! Enough. Let’s go.”

“We don’t have to hide this from your friends. They can help.”

She glares at me. “This is serious. And you’re not dangerous just because you’re...you.”

“Think about the spider,” I say. “You thought I was dangerous then, didn’t you? Your friends know I am dangerous. They want to know if I’m a danger to you.”

As my neural network tries to solve the problem of our memory glitches, I realize that I very well might be.

Her gaze is blank as she looks at me. “Spider? There are no insects in the complex.”

“You don’t remember.”

“Remember what? Oh!” She shakes her head. “The mess we had to clean at Dr. Zhang’s apartment.”

In that moment, my deductive reasoning algorithm makes a connection between each instance of memory loss, and her inability to use the elevator, and the fact that she thinks that she’s left the complex, when my records show that she hasn’t.

“You keep forgetting things and you can’t leave because, like me, you are also a product of the Hive Research Laboratories but

unlike me you are still subject to their restraints.”

Ru and Yana glance at each other and though I’m learning quickly, I can’t decipher what silent message they’re passing to one another.

“What? No.” Her voice is faint, weak in a way that causes me displeasure. “I leave all the time. Just last week I went...”

I feel the vibration of her muscles tensing before she jumps to her feet.

“Trin.” Rutina is the peacemaker of the group, so of course she is the one who attempts to calm Trinity. “Let’s just have a conversation about this.”

Trinity hovers over us, her increasingly panicked gaze jumping to each of us. “What’s happening?”

“I am not positive, but I do have advanced reasoning capabilities though,” I say to Trinity. “I suspect you might as well. Try really thinking about the last time you left this complex.”

I see it, now that I’m using my C.A.T. scan capability, how the synapses are firing in the wrong part of her brain as she strains to answer my question. The damage in other areas.

Her eyes are wide and she's breathing heavy. "I leave all the time."

"Trinity." Ru moves to stand too. "Let's go see if we can get the driving station working for just a second, even though *someone* punched a hole in it."

"How do you know about that?" Trinity demands. "And don't give me any of that superintendent knows all bullshit."

"Or maybe she needs some caffeine," Yana says anxiously. "We should have weaned her more carefully." She turns to glare at me. "We wanted to talk about this in a way that wouldn't *upset* her," Yana says.

Her voice is calm, but I sense that if she could remove my power source in this moment, she would.

"What do you all know that I don't?" Trinity is walking backwards now, toward the door. When her hand closes around the handle, she tugs and it doesn't budge. "Penny unlock the door."

"I cannot do that, Trinity. Rutina does not wish me to unlock the door."

"Unlock it. *Now*."

I could go to Trinity, who is succumbing to a panic attack. I could hold her, force her to face whatever truth has been hidden from her. From us. But right now she feels trapped, and afraid, and I promised her she wouldn't have to be afraid if I was near.

Penny is distracted, so she doesn't notice when I bypass her emergency lockdown system; I'd embedded my own code in all of her security measures when I'd first lurked in her systems—I'd done it automatically, as it was part of my native programming. It is a trick I can only use once since she will root out my code as soon as she realizes what has happened.

Trinity isn't distracted, and possesses above average reflexes; as soon as the lock disengages, she tugs the door open and bolts down the hallway.

"Fuck," Ru growls. I sense an electrical surge in her vicinity.

"I'll go after her." I stand.

"We tried to protect her." Yana's eyes are narrowed at me but also glossy with tears. "We figured it out. We couldn't tell her. But Ru found this loophole. If Trinity stopped drinking the catalyst and didn't use the station—

“—and if I broke the light pulse memory programming system, maybe she’d remember,” Ru finishes. “Maybe she could be her old self again.”

“And then *you* came back,” Yana said. “And the spiders arrived. And the mercs. Do you know how much clean-up we’ve been doing while you rebooted?”

“Back?”

“Just go get her and bring her here,” Ru says. “We have a lot to talk about and maybe not much time to talk about it. They monitor everything.”

“Not everything,” Penny says. “Apparently there is an unknown bug in my system that occasionally loses all data recorded in certain apartments.”

Rutina glances up toward one of Penny’s embedded cameras with affection and says, “Lucky me.”

I turn on my heel and run toward the small blip on the local map that I’ve been monitoring. Trinity is heading for the field just outside the apartment complex, just outside the track she’s circled so many times. I’m gaining on her fast, despite her clearly enhanced speed—the stamina that allowed her to swim and run for so long that I

worried she would collapse. Her injury is real, and it slows her, though she's still faster and more agile than most humans.

She comes into my line of sight as she nears the edge of the field. She slows in my radar and I see it—the moment the disorientation hits her and she stumbles back. My scan shows that there is no system-scrambling force field keeping her from going forward, no hidden trap. She reaches the perimeter of the property and turns in a circle as if she can't remember why she's run there.

I catch up to her and take her gently by the arm. "Hey."

"Hey." Her brow is furrowed and there are tears in her eyes, despite her smile of relief at my presence. "I don't know what's happening?"

I slide my hand down her arm until my palm is against hers. She wants the truth, and I think she deserves that.

"You were going to see if you could walk one meter that way."

"Why was I going to do that?" she asks. "Don't we have to go feed Tim?"

"T.I.M. doesn't need food, don't worry."

She starts to shake as she takes a step forward with me. And then another.

Without warning she crouches and vomits.

“Trinity?”

“Oh god, I hate puking,” she manages, then swipes at her mouth. “This is the worst.” She heaves again. “And I have a headache. What was in the dip at Ru’s?”

I’m worried now. Whatever is preventing her from leaving, whatever is causing these physical reactions, is in her own mind. I worry what will happen to her body if she continues this attempt.

“That’s enough for tonight. Let’s go back. We should talk to your friends and see what they know.”

She sags against me and the weight of her, the feel of her... they combine and trigger a phantom physical reaction in me. The pleasure-pain emotion linked to her seems to fill my body, though it isn’t physically possible, somehow softening me but conversely hardening my determination to keep her safe from harm.

A siren suddenly blares through my neural network, and Penny’s command blasts into my communication channel. “Intruder

alert. An intruder has infiltrated the complex's security. Bring Trinity back to Rutina's apartment immediately."

I'm still evaluating the incoming threat when a hand clamps down on my shoulder and I look down into a woman's face. Her skin is brown, her thick black hair is cut into a jagged bob, and where eyes should be there are glowing bulbs of red.

Apparently, I'm not the only one of my kind.

I should have expected this; the Zhang Protocols indicated that Dr. Zhang feared I might be taken against my will.

"Product recovered," she says in a dull, clipped voice. Is that how I'd sounded before?

No. She isn't exactly like me. She's an older model without all my enhancements. She's a robot preloaded with an objective; I'm a biosynthetic humanoid who, just this very second, has figured out what this emotion on the pain spectrum is.

Love. It is love.

I formulate a plan: to let the robot take me, so that Trinity will be safe. I can attempt to fight back when we're further away—

I'm flying through the air when I realize I've fallen into a deductive reasoning trap—I'm not the machine's primary target. The robot flung me away with amazing strength because Trinity, for reasons logically related to her memory loss, is seen as either having higher value than me or being the greater threat.

I try to brace myself as the ground rises up toward me, but neither my arms nor legs move so I hit the solid earth hard, leaving a groove as I skid to a dirt-caked stop. I run a scan of the area where she'd grabbed me—there's some kind of pin attached to my shirt emitting a signal that activates a traitorous software hidden somewhere in my neural network. This has to be one of the Hive's fail safes, a tripwire in my overwritten programming that wasn't snipped.

I imagine this is why I'm seen as less dangerous—I'm not sure what Trinity's tripwire is though, or how it will affect her systems.

I've landed with one side of my face pressed into a pile of dirt, my knees under me and my arms limp at my sides. I watch in helpless horror as the robot attacker reaches out and slams a palm into Trinity's chest. The flashing blue of an electric stun shot crackles

in the darkness, and Trinity's scream of pain overwhelms my sound sensors.

No.

I'd told Trinity not to be afraid many times. I've questioned her panic. I regret how cruel those words must have seemed now that I'm experiencing these emotions for the first time. The sensation flooding my mind as I try to go to her and can't move swamps my neural network, disrupting my rational thought processors.

Trinity is crumpling to the ground, and I can do nothing.

No.

I send out a blaring virtual alert for assistance to T.I.M., who can pry off the device on my shoulder, and receive a response that seems to indicate that he's handling another intruder. It will take him at least a full minute to get to me.

No!

The robot stalks toward Trinity, and I can't even call her name.

I'm going to lose her.

Again.

CHAPTER 19

Trinity

Everything happens so quickly—in movies when a bad guy shows up, they announce themselves, tell you why they're there and what they're going to do to you.

This robot is all fucking business. One second Li Wei was holding me close, the next he'd been ripped away. I'd watched him fly through the air, too shocked to think about my own well-being, and then she'd hit me with a flat-palmed blow to the chest that felt like she was splitting my body in half.

Maybe it was the pain that did it. Maybe it was seeing him taken away from me again.

Again?

Again.

Or more likely it was having an unknown voltage of electricity punched into my goddamned sternum. Whatever the case, as I crumple to the ground, memories—vibrant, visceral, REAL—rise up to catch me.

My heartbeat drums in my ears, drowning out everything, and then:

Trinity: You have *got* to be shitting me, Phillips. A biosynthetic fucking human?

Director Phillips: Watch your mouth, Jordan.

Trinity: Yes, sir, Director Phillips, sir. A biosynthetic fucking human, sir?

Director Phillips: (chuckles) You're our best chameleon. You've always been our best chameleon; if we need something done right, we turn to you.

Trinity: Do Ru and Yana know this, or do you tell them the same thing when you give them bullshit assignments?

Director Phillips: You're our best chameleon, but you're organic—you have a shelf life.

Trinity: You know how to make an agent feel special. Keep going, keep going.

Director Phillips: I like you, but I have no time for your shit right now with every politician and military contact breathing down my neck. Russia controls the Internet. China is so far ahead of us in

automation that even the idea of war is laughable. The South Americans and Saudis have fossil fuels on lockdown, and the generals on the American Expansion Council are demanding results. You can take this assignment gracefully or you can go be a data analyst and die of boredom in a mole cubby.

Trinity: Respectfully, sir, you don't get to tell me I'm the best and then follow it with a threat. I deserve an explanation. Why me? I don't work well with other people.

Director Phillips: Perfect. LW-017 isn't a person.

Trinity: Is that supposed to make it *better*? Why do we even need this thing?

Director Phillips: You can't maintain deep cover for more than a few days without Simpson's maintenance, and for more than a few months without cerebral degradation. And I can't give you a customized face and body for every assignment like I can with this weapon. (sighs) If this thing can do what the eggheads say it can do? Jordan, the US would be back on top. No more negotiations and wars we don't know the outcome of, no more unnecessary pushback against our plans, and no one the wiser because all the decisions would be coming out of the mouths of their own leaders.

Trinity: Are you going to start singing kumbaya, Director?

Director Phillips: No, but you can if you want. With your new partner.

Trinity: I've been a chameleon for almost twenty years now. I've trained my ass off, gone under the knife and the pulsing light willingly, so that I would be the best. I've followed orders without blinking, when I maybe should've blinked, and now you're gonna replace me with--

Director Phillips: You're not being replaced! You're just as integral to this op as this thing is, but I can't make you look like Haoding Luo, can I?

Trinity: No.

Director Phillips: What was that?

Trinity: No, sir, you can't make me look like General Luo, sir.

Director Phillips: (sigh) This a pilot partnership program: human chameleon with AI chameleon. You'll be teaching him everything, starting with how to be human—and also making sure no one gets their hands on Hive property.

Trinity: Tell me what the mission is. The real mission.

Director Phillips: Train. Protect. And if necessary? Destroy.

Trinity: Destroy?

Director Phillips: You're not a people person, so that should be even easier since he's not a person. See why I chose you, now? You're the best.

[door slides open]

Dr. Zhang: Come on, LW-017. This is your partner.

Li Wei: Hello, Jordan, Trinity.

My heart pounds in my ears again as I gasp in a breath and come up with nothing.

Oh god. Oh my god.

I'm trying to breathe but I can't, like the truth is a boot on my neck.

My heart beats loudly again as another memory claims me.

"How does the Chameleon program work?" LW-017 asks. He is *a/ways* asking something. "There are no answers to this question in the database."

I sigh in annoyance. “Each chameleon has their own baseline skills: martial arts, language affinity, hacking, *etc.* The Hive can give us the additional skills we need to perform specific missions. Like, last mission I had to take out this local opposition leader in Colombo, so they inserted all the necessary data for a thirty-something woman from that village.”

“Inserted? How does this work with a human brain? I can download information, but my operating system is designed for data integration.”

“I don’t know the details I’m not cleared for all that. Muscle feds aren’t privy to the same information as brain feds.” I try to laugh.

“You are highly intelligent.” There’s censure in his tone.
“Explain what they do.”

“Well, we get...programmed. We have to drink this powder mix that makes us more easily receptive to suggestion, they call it ant powder because I guess it came from this fungus called cordyceps—you can look it up. Anyway, then we stare at these light sequences and receive electric impulses and it does something to our brains that allows us to be anyone the Hive wants. It’s a coveted position. Given only to the best of the best.”

LW doesn't look impressed. "Doesn't this excessive cerebral manipulation cause damage to your brain?"

"Maybe." I shrug. "I have a hard head."

"What is the survival rate for human chameleons?" he asks, ignoring my joke.

So goddamn nosy. I only answer because I know he won't drop it.

"Five percent," I mutter.

"That is unacceptable," he says immediately. "So many deaths...you could die, too."

No one cares if I die. I haven't spoken to my family in years; I'm still paying down the HiveCare debt's interest, but they wouldn't recognize me if I showed up on their doorstep. Simpson only cares if I'm functioning properly. Phillips only cares if I carry out my mission. How could LW-17 of all things act like it matters whether I stick around on this godforsaken planet?

"Why do you care?" I whirl on him and grab his collar. "Your job is to kill, same as mine."

“I don’t want to kill,” he says. “There are a variety of ways to approach the problems that we are being told only destruction will solve.”

“You want what the Hive wants,” I grit out. Anger courses through me. Anger that a fucking robot thinks it has the right to feel these things when I was never allowed to.

“No.” He shakes his head, and his hands come to rest atop mine. I expect him to grip them hard and pull me off of him, but he holds them gently, even though I’d seen him rip a car in half during training that morning. “I don’t want what the Hive wants. And neither do you.”

“And how the fuck would you know what I want? How do you know anything *you* want isn’t just some program telling you what to do?” I can barely get the words out before a message pops up on my SmartBracelet’s rectangular interface.

ACCELERATED HEART RATE DETECTED. MED CHECK IN 1 HOUR.

“I am not the only one who receives programming, remember?” He could have said the words harshly, but his gentleness is a choice—an act of consideration, like his touch. “However, my algorithms

are designed for independence. You're human. You were born with it."

"Stop." I place a hand on his chest, feel the beating of a heart he can live without. "Once you start thinking things like that..."

I shake my head. Nothing good can come of this.

"We are two beings with free will," he says. "We get to decide what we want."

My stuttering heartbeat overrides the memory, pulling me out of it, but I can barely blink before another one smashes into me. The controlled EMP the robot used to stun me has cleared away the mental fog, and now I can't close my eyes against the truth of my past.

Now I'm standing in a training room with Li Wei, who knows when.

"You need to stop smiling like that. You're supposed to be able to pass as human, as General Luo. Look at this picture of him."

I hand Li Wei the photo of the man he looks so much like but can't fully mimic yet, even though our time is running short. The main problem, the design flaw as Dana might say, is that he isn't Luo. He's

not a carbon copy. He has his own personality, and even watching hours of footage, even having Luo's personality imprint uploaded, hasn't suppressed that.

I'm trying to be hard with him again because I can't acknowledge the softness he creates in me. I'm his trainer. His partner. And if necessary, his killer.

That's it.

"Smiling like what?" he asks, teeth still bared and expression almost maniacally happy. "Please specify."

"Like someone who didn't read the instructions on their home derma-stretch system. Come here."

He steps forward and lowers his head toward me, an act of submission that's at odds with a machine that could crush me if he wanted to. I run my thumb over his mouth until his smile relaxes.

I ignore the sensation that warms me as his soft, smooth lips go pliant beneath my fingertips. I'm supposed to hate this assignment, this partnership. I'm not supposed to think of LW-017 as him—and I sure as hell shouldn't have grenades going off in my belly just from touching him.

“See? That’s much better,” I say. I’m sure he’s noticed the tremor in my voice; I can only hope he doesn’t ask what’s causing it. “Why can’t you smile like that every time?”

His lips move against the pad of my thumb when he answers. “You are not touching me every time.”

I pull my hand away like his words have scorched me. “Don’t say things like that.”

“I am simply answering your question.”

“LW—”

“Li Wei. Not LW-17. Not Luo. My name is Li Wei.”

I take a shuddering breath because he’s right—I don’t know where the name came from, but he has one, just like I did before I became Jordan or Chameleon 112. “I won’t always be with you, Li Wei. When you need to smile.”

“Can you touch me again?” he asks.

I raise my hand to his mouth again—why it shaking?—and when my fingers touch his lips he closes his eyes. “I’m recording this sensation. For when I need it—for when I have to leave you.”

My hand slips to his cheek, cups his face and—

I slip back into consciousness and I'm able to suck in one single breath before I'm rocked by another memory.

We shouldn't be doing this. His mouth against mine, his cock driving hard into me. This wasn't supposed to happen. He wasn't supposed to be this real.

No one was supposed to get this close.

Chameleon's aren't supposed to be seen, but Li Wei's focus on me is like a spotlight, flooding all the parts of me I'd shrouded in death and darkness.

"We can leave," he whispers into my ear as he thrusts into me. He hugs me tightly. Desperately. "I don't want to pretend to be him anymore. I'm...somebody now."

I press my damp forehead into his shoulder. "I'm nobody. I'm whoever they want me to be. They've molded me like putty for twenty years—I'm theirs."

His hand curves around the nape of my neck and he tilts my head back, forcing me to look into his eyes as he thrusts into me, hot streaks of pleasure underscoring his words. "You're you. And if you aren't ready to be you yet, then you can be mine. I'll keep you safe until then."

I squeeze my eyes shut and he surges into me, a deep, thick reminder that there's something we have that the Hive doesn't own—pleasure.

Love.

“Leave with me, Trinity. Please.”

“Yes,” I cry into his shoulder, clutching him close as an orgasm rocks me. “Yes.”

I try to force myself into consciousness. I already know something awful is coming, and I don't want to feel this again.

I don't want to feel it ever again.

The memory pulls me under anyway.

“Fuck fuck FUCK.”

Simpson is cursing in my ear piece as Li Wei and I run through the halls of the hotel in Davos. If we weren't being pursued by five of Luo Haoding's men, I would have worried that the Hive had been tipped off about our escape plan. Now I'm not certain we'll even have a chance to pull it off.

I take quick sharp breaths, thankful for my altitude training. My heels don't stop me from taking long strides and I've given up caring

about my ass hanging out of this barely-there dress that was presumably to help me gain access to Luo's room so I could kill him and Li Wei could replace him.

Li Wei's footsteps fall behind mine, not because he's slower but because he's watching my back.

"What the fuck is happening, Nada?" I grate out into my com. "How did they know we were coming? Luo was supposed to be alone tonight. The mission was to eliminate the target and replace the target."

Li Wei and I hadn't planned on actually carrying out the mission—it was just a cover for our own defection. Unfortunately, the people pursuing us weren't aware of that.

We cut through a ballroom, winding through tables already set for breakfast for the world leaders gathered in Davos to discuss how to wring even more profit out of the planet. Li Wei slams the doors shut behind us and partially welds the metal together, using one of the weapons grafted into his hands.

Simpson is muttering a stream of curses under her breath, a sure sign she's typing a mile a minute, then says, "There had to have been an information leak. It's seeming more and more like this was a

set-up to do a tech grab, and back-up can't get to you for at least another five minutes."

Someone on the inside must have figured out our plan; the chances that the cover story we'd put into place to fake our deaths actually playing out is too fucked to just be bad luck.

Dana's voice is strained when she speaks again. "Luo's men can't get their hands on HiveTech, especially tech that shows we planned to fucking kill and replace him. It cannot be allowed."

I pause at a three-way junction in the hallway and Li Wei hooks his arm through mine and pulls me down the hall to our right. I know he can hear this conversation, can hear me being given the order to take him out.

He doesn't doubt me.

"I'm not doing it. No way."

Li Wei pulls me into the only door at the end of this hallway, a service elevator, and begins cutting a hole in its ceiling using his onboard laser system. It's supposed to be used for killing enemies of the Hive, but it turns out it comes in handy for making quick escapes, too. I press the "Doors Closed" symbol on the elevator's old fashioned button system and then pull a magnetic sealer from my

garter belt, fixing it across the door's seam so it can't be pried open easily.

Simpson's shaky voices surges through my earpiece. "It's your job, Jordan, and it needs to be done if we don't want World War IV. We all have to do things we don't want to do sometimes."

Anger and frustration flare up in me. It was already bad enough having to lie to Dana, to know that she would think I was dead. Now I have to argue with her, too.

"And it was your job to make sure General Luo was here alone and not chillin' with an elite squad rightfully pissed that we were trying to assassinate their boss. Looks like we're both slipping."

Li Wei squeezes my arms speaks in a low voice. "Trinity, my threat scan has verified that a satellite-guided system has locked missile launchers on us."

"Shit." I whirl in a circle, though there's nowhere to go in the elevator. "Luo's people?"

Li Wei is no longer cutting the ceiling. His gaze is locked on mine and he steps forward. "No. Hive reinforcements. They've either figured out our plan or are taking their own measures to ensure I don't fall into the hands of the Chinese government."

“Shit.” After a moment, I tap the comm. “Nada, tell them not to do this.”

Simpson’s garbled voice comes through. “Do what? Oh no. Oh nonono. Jordan, you two need to get the fuck out of there now!”

“Do not fear,” Li Wei says as he curves his body over mine, and I know her warning is too late.

The explosion rocks the elevator like an incoming train. There’s the screech of metal and the boom of parts of the hotel—key parts—giving way to the force of the explosion. Even as I’m caught in the blast’s wake and facing certain death, I run through how this will be spun in the news: terrorist attack rocks Davos. I even know what countries will be blamed, how it will be used to further US interests. Of course I know.

I was the best.

Li Wei comes down on top of me, his body a shield that protects almost all of me from the hail of rubble and shrapnel.

“Trinity?” Li Wei’s urgent voice cuts through the ringing in my ears, which fades as the pain in my leg blossoms into something almost unbearable.

I open my eyes to find him looking down at me, his brow furrowed and his face chalky from the residue of crushed walls.

“Li Wei? My leg.” I try to move and emit an ugly strangled cry of pain.

I hear the sound of metal scraping and Li Wei grunting as he moves above me, and then the horrendous pressure on my leg eases.

“Can you get out now?” he asks

I start to drag myself from out from beneath him. “Yes. My right leg is fucked, but we can get you—”

I look over his shoulder and all of our dreams die in me. He’s holding up a section of wall that would have crushed a human—would have crushed me. He can barely manage it even with his superhuman strength.

He looks down into my eyes with such resigned anguish—it hurts more than my crushed and bleeding leg. “Go.”

I reach up to grab his collar and softly cup his face instead, though my voice is strained and hysterical when I speak. “I’m not going to leave you. I’m not going to leave you!”

Li Wei smiles, though the despair doesn't leave his eyes.

"Come on. Only one of us has backup files of their existence." He laughs shakily, but then grits his teeth as something explodes much too close to us and pieces of plaster shower down around us. "Go, Trinity. Please. If you die, I'm the one who'll have to remember it forever."

I lean up, brush my fingertips over his mouth and he smiles. Tears streak through the dust covering my face and I stretch my neck up to brush my lips over his. "I love you."

He nods once and then grits his teeth against strain. "Then go."

I drag myself from underneath him, the pain in my leg forgotten, and the last thing I remember is the wreckage collapsing down, burying my heart with Li Wei.

I come back into the present with my eyes full of tears and my mind spiraling in a million different directions. The past few weeks suddenly make sense—the déjà vu, the memory lapses, the lust.

The past six months.

I'd never been Trinity Jordan, Data Analyst. I'd been a chameleon, a muscle fed. I'd been the boogie man, the villain, and Li

Wei? He'd been the hero I'd thought he was, and I'd loved him for it.

He'd saved me.

The Hive had kept me here for some reason, under glass, had taken away my freedom and even my memories. And now they were trying to take him away from me again.

Something else has come back with the memories: the skills I possess that are the reason they didn't let me die in Davos or eliminate me afterward.

I suck in a deep breath, my lungs burning and my mind clearing as the weapon they've sent to either recover one or both of us grabs my ankle. I brace my hands on the ground, twist my hips, crank my good knee back and then launch it into her nose with enough speed to smash every bone in a human's face in.

The impact jolts through my body, but I stay focused, waiting for the slightest loosening of her hands. Nothing. She stumbles back, but doesn't let go, so I try another technique, picking something from the multiple defense techniques that are pinballing through my mind now. I use my arms to piston myself off of the ground, landing a kick in her chest and twisting my ankle free of her hand. I land on the

ground in a combat roll, forward and to the side, just avoiding the stomp of her boot.

She's fast, so fast, and I'm only human, but in that moment one thought drives me, one thought that might as well be programmed into my soul.

I won't lose him again.

She's smaller than me, but if she's anything like Li Wei, she'll have metal bones and be several times my strength. I can't take her out in a straightforward brawl, even if I am powered by rage. I keep distance between us, stepping backward toward the building as I do. I don't need to look around—I haven't been off of this patch of land for who knows how long. I have every bit of it memorized.

I'm jogging backwards now, hopping back over fire hydrants, bushes and lounge chairs, skirting around the edge of the pool. I pick up one of the small round glass tables and throw it at her, then another—not to inflict damage, because this is nothing to a cyborg, but to slow her a bit.

When I step back onto the first step leading up towards my apartment I jog up them backwards; at the top, I grab hold of both handrails, pull my legs into my chest, and kick her with enough force

to send her flying to the ground at the bottom. Then I turn and speed toward my apartment.

When I get there, the door swings open easily.

“Penny, is there anyone, human or otherwise, in my apartment?”

“No, Trinity. The intruder is at the end of the hallway. Ru and Yana are handling a secondary attacker.”

God. I feel a spike of fear, but something tells me they can handle themselves.

“Li Wei’s ability to move was temporarily blocked, but he should be here in approximately one minute,” Penny says.

Fuck, I’ll have to get this done quick.

I grab the mallet Li Wei had brought me as a courting gift, and now I wonder if he did so because memories of me were buried in his neural networks. If he’d remembered me as I’d remembered him—a connection so strong that we’d been drawn to each other a second time, even after they’d fucked with our memories.

The door to my apartment is supposed to resist home invasion by basically an elephant, but I watch in real-time as it dents and folds

beneath a barrage of steady kicks. I toss the mallet from hand to hand as I run through the various ways she might attack and what I can do to head her off. As the door crumples and falls to the ground, I step to the side of it, the mallet's handle gripped with both hands.

The door hasn't even hit the ground yet and I swing it like a shotput, visualizing punching a hole straight through her chest. She must have sensors that alert her, so she dodges and I catch her in her side instead, changing up the arc of my motion to drive the mallet hard and destabilize her before following with a kick that sweeps her legs out from under her.

She falls down at an awkward angle but jumps up quickly, dodging my second swing of the mallet a millisecond before I knock her block off and landing a glancing palm blow to my shoulder. I turn into the spin caused by her blow, and slam the mallet against the side of her face as I complete it. The spin built up momentum, but not enough, so though her head turns at an angle that would have killed a human, she twists it forward again, rolls her shoulders, and launches herself at me.

This robot is deadly and my friends and Li Wei could walk through the door she's destroyed at any moment. My neighbors, who

probably have done nothing wrong except work for the Hive, could step out into the hall to be nosy.

“Penny. Activate panic room.”

“You are requesting full apartment lock down. Are you sure, Trinity?”

“Yes! Please do it before Li Wei arrives.” It’s foolish. He’s my partner. He can help. But I’d already seen him die in front of my eyes before. Never again.

Never fucking again.

The thought of it sends a new spurt of energy through me and I land a kick to the robot’s stomach, a backhand to her face that hurts me more than her.

“You will be stuck in here,” Penny says. “Can you handle this? The claustrophobia compulsion implanted in you is strong.”

As she talks, her voice switches from the usual friendly robot tones to that of my therapist, Kimberly.

Kimberly was Penny.

“Do it,” I snap, no time to deal with that revelation, which is honestly small potatoes next to the fact that I’m fighting a goddamn

robot. "Please."

The sounds of the apartment being locked down echoes through the small space. The metal gates and slats drop over all the doors and windows, turning the apartment into a steel box—only me or the robot sent to capture me can come out of this standing. Sweat breaks out on my brow and I try to refocus on the situation as I fend off her blows. She's not a better fighter than me—she's programmed well but I have a lifetime of experience, and no machine learning can mimic it. I can't even feel good about that though because she's stronger, and though my stamina is incredible, my energy source will wane before hers does.

But...if she was going to kill me, she would have killed me. This is a retrieval mission. I'm a human, one of the few remaining human chameleons the Hive has if the stats I'd given Li Wei in my memory were correct. She'll kill me if she has to, but it's not her prime directive. I can use that to my advantage. I swing wildly with the mallet, then launch a flurry of kicks and punches. I need to clear up space. I can't beat her in a match of strength, but if I think...

When she totters back, I land a jump kick to her face that sends her sprawling onto her ass, shattering my coffee table and splintering

my love seat. I don't charge forward and go berserk on her, like I might have with a stronger human opponent. Instead, I trot backwards into the kitchen, looking around wildly for something, anything, that can do actual lasting damage. There's a beeping sound in the background, and I try to ignore it, but it grows louder and more insistent before I realize that it's my sonic scrubber.

My ear drum itches, and I rub my palm against my ear in frustration. "I don't even have any dishes in there," I grouse, annoyed at the distraction.

"The Washington model is offering assistance," Penny announces.

"What are you talking about?" I ask while watching the robot pull herself to her feet from amidst the shattered pieces of my furniture. I should feel angry or upset, but nothing in this place holds any value to me—not the furniture, not the driving station—Ru, Yana, and Li Wei are the only things that matter, and I have to stop this killing machine before it can hurt them.

"There is a sonic scrub setting that is mostly undetectable to humans but can temporarily paralyze robots. It has been attempting to use this frequency when spiderbots entered the apartment."

“Does...the frequency tickle human ear drums?” I ask quietly.

“Yes.”

I place a hand on the small square dishwasher. Now I understand why Li Wei was so adamant that I show my appliances respect. “Thanks, buddy.”

It vibrates under my hand—a pulse of sound that is contained by the closed door.

The robot is stalking toward me, her hair disheveled and her nose smushed in, but otherwise looking none the worse for wear.

“If you can help, now’s your time to shine.” The robot is two feet away when I open the dishwasher door and push the heels of my hands into my ears to stop the tickling sensation.

The robot’s quick pace slows, subtly at first, then all over, then she stops and falls to the ground. *Now* I jump on her, hammering at her chest—a memory of my training on how to disable Li Wei had flashed into my mind, and if her power source is located in the same area....

“Do you intend to smash her into pieces, Trinity?” Penny cries out. She sounds mad at me about it.

“Fuck! What else am I supposed to do?”

The robot is still stunned, but she recovers quickly now she’s below the path of the sonic waves. She wraps her hands around me and rolls us both out of the kitchen, narrowly dodging a spurt of flame—the smart oven’s attempt to help.

If I survived, I would owe my appliances a huge apology, both for underestimating them and getting freaky in front of them.

If.

We both jump to our feet and the robot lunges at me. In my millisecond of uncertainty, she moves in the opposite direction to knock the mallet from my hand. She’s still extended from the successful blow when I grab a hunk of her hair and jump down toward the ground, pulling her with me.

I smell fire and wonder if the oven’s attempt to assist has started a fire, but no—sparks are flying off the door, which a laser is being used to cut through.

Li Wei.

I have to finish this robot off, *now*.

The robot suddenly drags herself free of my grip, propelling herself up to headbutt me. Pain explodes in my head and neck as I rock backwards, but when I stumble? It's on purpose. My hand closes around the handle of the mallet and I swing up as she charges me, returning the favor of her chin blow with one of my own. Her neck snaps to the side and her head lolls at a sickening angle, but her glowing red gaze stays locked on me.

This is the moment I realize I can't defeat her—if *my* neck snaps, it's over. She's still walking toward me.

"Trinity?"

"*What* Penny?"

"My home security system *does* have a taze function, actually. Perhaps that would be preferable to destroying this, um, valuable technology."

"Do it!"

The square floor tile the robot is standing on lights up and she freezes in her attack stance, shaking as electricity flows through her body. Light fills her eyes and mouth and steam rises from her hair and she falls to the ground, just as Li Wei cuts through the metal plate on the door.

“Penny! Don’t taze him, he’s good.”

“I am aware of who not to taze,” she replies tartly.

He runs to me, pulls me into his arms, and my fighting rage drains from me.

I drop the mallet and wrap my arms around him, running my hands over his hair and his neck. “You’re okay. Thank fucking goodness.” I exhale a warm trembling breath into the space between my mouth and his chest. “I remember now. Some things, at least. I remember us.”

He smiles, a full, radiant smile that fills me with joy. “I remember too. Some of those memories downloaded when we were fucking like wild.”

I burst out laughing and lean up to kiss him so hard I’m pretty sure I bruise my lips—which would match the rest of my body.

“You didn’t tell me you loved me the last time,” I say, the memory making hot tears spill down my cheeks. “You jerk.”

“I did,” he says, looking down at me. “I told you to go. Saying that took every bit of love I had.”

I hold him tight. “What do we do now?”

“What we were planning to do,” he says. “Whatever we want.”

“I told you we should just fill her in. Now she’s going to be mad.”

I turn at the sound of Ru’s voice to find my two friends standing in the entrance Li Wei has cut into the apartment. Their clothes are ripped and there’s a thin line of blood on Ru’s face. Well it looks like blood, but it’s bright green.

“When there was a chance we could accidentally hit some mental booby trap and melt her brain or something?” Yana asks, shaking out her hand gingerly. Her knuckles are swollen.

“You read way too many tabloids.” Ru sighs and looks at me. “Well, we need to talk, but you two need to go now. More muscle feds are definitely on the way.”

“I *am* a muscle fed,” I say. I look from her to Yana. “We all are.”

Ru smiles solemnly. “Yeah. Well, I mean the scary ones.”

I release Li Wei and gather my two friends into a loose group hug, mindful of their injuries and my own. “I’m sorry I forgot you.”

“Don’t think we’ll let it slide that it took a hot muscled man to break your conditioning,” Yana chides warmly.

“No. We did that,” Ru says. “He just showed up at the right time.”

“What about Dr. Zhang?” I ask.

They look at one another. “We haven’t been able to get info on her current status,” Ru says. “But ask T.I.M. for more about that.”

“Tim?”

They both lean away from me to look at Li Wei.

“You didn’t tell her?” Yana asks.

“I thought she realized a regular cat wouldn’t weigh fifty pounds.”

I sigh and turn back to my friend.

“If Li Wei and I leave, what about you two?” I ask. “I’m not going to leave you in danger.”

“We’ve got this. You were the best chameleon, overall, but not the strongest. And not the sneakiest.” Yana nudges the robot on the ground with her toe. “What should we do with this? Crush it?”

“No!” Penny shouts, then adds more quietly. “I believe I know of a use for it.”

Li Wei squeezes me tighter. “Are you able to leave the complex?”

I look around the apartment where I’ve lived for the past six months and realize that I don’t need a single damned thing. This was a hamster wheel that I’d been placed on for some reason instead of being allowed to die. Whoever had placed me there would be regretting it real soon.

“I think so. Will they be able to find us though?” I ask Ru. “Everything that happened tonight seemed to be triggered by me trying to leave.”

“We weren’t implanted with trackers given the nature of our work—we weren’t supposed to be traceable, even in death,” she says. “But let’s trade these just in case—mine is clean and has a the keycodes for my utility van.”

She taps her SmartBracelet three times with her pinky finger, probably some kind of reset feature, hands it to me, then waits for me to turn mine over to her. “Go. Turn on the GPS, it’s cloaked. Follow the directions, and don’t come back here. We’ll find you when it’s safe.”

“How? If the Hive can’t track us, how will you be able to?”

She smiles at me. "I see all and know all, remember?" Then she shakes her head and swipes a smear of the green blood from her cheek. "Actually? Just to be safe. Can I?"

I nod, and she smears it into a cut on my arm. It stings a bit, like a disinfectant, but there doesn't seem to be any kind of notable side effect other than my wound beginning to heal more quickly.

"Sorry, I know that's gross, but my biotracking is more dependable than any tech and we've already lost you once, in a way." Her eyes are glossy.

"Go already," Yana says brusquely though she's blinking away tears.

"See you soon," I say, ignoring the painful constriction in my chest.

No long goodbyes for now. We'll meet again.

Li Wei and I jog down to the parking lot and find Ru's van. It looks like an old school hunk of junk on the outside, but the interior is surprisingly modern when I pull the door open. Tim leaps past me from behind, scaring the shit out of me, then does a cat parkour move into the back seat.

“No trace of any tracking devices.” Li Wei asks after running some kind of scan. “Should I download a driving module?”

I get behind the wheel. “No. I got this.”

After I open the GPS system, a vintage system not linked to the electronics of the car itself, and select “HEY TRINITY GO HERE” from the list of destinations, we pull out of the space and get on the road leading out of the complex.

The car drives so smoothly that it kind of feels like we’re not even on the road—I realize we’re not. The car is actually a hovercraft. I try to turn on the headlights but instead, the windshield becomes a night vision screen. A light blinks on the dashboard and then a voice, a rudimentary version of Penny, says, “Stealth mode activated. Vehicle is invisible to radar and HiveTech. Please drive safely.”

I knew that Ru could fix everything, but this is incredible.

There’s a tense moment as we approach the perimeter of the complex. I don’t think my brain will melt or anything but Li Wei’s hand slips behind the nape of my neck, calming me and likely tracking my vitals as well.

The car will pass through, I tell myself, trying to use Kimberly's—Penny's—visualization technique. *My head won't explode. Li Wei is with me and he won't let anything harm me. And even if he wasn't here—I'm stronger than whatever the Hive has done to me.*

The exit gate approaches and I ease up off the gas, just in case. It draws closer and closer and...we pass through it. I flinch, despite my positive thinking, and feel only the slightest wave of nausea.

"They can't hold us anymore," I say as my grip tightens and releases on the wheel.

"No," he says. "But it's likely they will pursue us."

"Good thing I was their best chameleon and you were their most advanced weapon."

"Trinity..." Li Wei sighs. "How can we be sure our memory files weren't corrupted or altered?"

It's the question that I'm going to have to ask myself all the time, if we get out of this alive. But I've noticed a difference, now that I'm aware of their interfering—some memories are whole, some more like a reflection in a shard of mirror.

The memories of Li Wei are solid.

“I’m sure,” I say. When he doesn’t respond I glance at him. He’s staring straight ahead. “How do you feel about these memories of us?”

“Annoyed,” he responds. His hand on my nape tightens slightly. “I wish you could just upload your memories to my system so I could merge and cross reference for veracity. I understand now why I witnessed so many arguments between humans couples in the complex. Communication is much more difficult than it has to be. This is flawed design.”

I laugh, surprised that I can, and the resulting aches in my body remind me that I’d just taken a bruising from a fucking robot. That I was never a data analyst, so I was able to fight back. That now, even with my mind recovering, I can’t remember what my parents look like.

But I remember Li Wei.

I’m *with* Li Wei.

I ease the car onto the backroad indicated by Ru’s GPS. Even though the roads are less well-maintained and should be bumpier, the ride is still smooth thanks to the hover mode. I’m sure there’s

some connection between that and the green blood situation, and that I'll remember in time.

"Oh. Tim?" I feel ridiculous, but as soon as I say his name he responds from the back seat.

"Mrow?"

"Can you...tell me about Dr. Zhang?"

He hops onto the center console, his tail swaying back and forth. Then the tip of his tail flip open revealing a USB port.

"Okay. Robot cats. Okay."

"Biosynthetic feline," Li Wei corrects me with a grin. Tim plugs his tail into the car's radio and then settles between me and Li Wei, purring.

I have no idea what tomorrow, or even the rest of the night, will bring. But maybe, just maybe, we'll be okay.

I turn up the volume and we drive.

CHAPTER 20

Delores Zhang Audio File; Saved in folder

TIM/Private/ForTrinity/Sorry

Hi Trinity and Li Wei! Oh my, you must be a bit upset with me, and you have every right to be. I was never honest with either of you—or with anyone really.

After my family was killed, presumably by the Chinese government as a form of retaliation for working with the Hive, I threw myself into my work. It was my fault they were dead, and I was going to avenge them by becoming a traitor to the homeland that had betrayed me. Because they'd taken everyone I loved, even my precious nephew who was like a son to me—that was you Li Wei. The original you. You have some of his memories, and you are my *family*—that is not a lie. You do not look like your human predecessor, but you are both the young boy I cuddled on my lap and this new being with his own hopes and dreams.

I never planned to bring my nephew back, but one day many years after his death, I was contacted by someone from the village

where my family had lived. They'd come to the United States on business and looked me up. That was how I learned that it wasn't my country that had betrayed me; it had been US forces that killed my family and several other people from my village.

Hive security forces.

My family had died because of me.

First, I thought I would destroy the Hive from the inside. But I did not have this type of violence in me. I wouldn't let them turn me into even more of a monster. However, I was already working on a biosynthetic humanoid. I was already making a body that could become someone else. So many of the beautiful machines I created were misused by the Hive, used to destroy. What if I made something that was the embodiment of my love?

That is what you are Li Wei.

When you two fell in love with *each other*, that was even better.

Trinity, I couldn't have told you the truth of your identity earlier. I know how the Hive works. They wanted to kill you, but I told them it would be best to run an experiment on you, to see if even a killer could be made docile using the chameleon mind modification. It's

very easy to convince them a project is worth their while if it causes pain in the subject. That I've learned well.

In the meantime, I rebuilt Li Wei using the materials I had double-ordered while building the first general Luo. You really can get away with anything when they think you're making a weapon—they'd have watched every dime if I'd said I was building something that made free food or a vaccination drone! I retrieved all of his systems data that had uploaded to a virtual server, and also seeded more of the original Li Wei's data into the code.

So yes. Here we are. Well here *you* are. I don't know where I am if you're listening to this. If we don't meet again: I love you both and, of course, T.I.M. has all of the necessary schematic information, bank account numbers, and fake citizenship chips to keep you safe.

If we do see each other again, well, that would be just wonderful.

Epilogue

Li Wei

After we reached our destination, I looked up as many articles about the desert as I could find. I discovered that many people who owned classic cars had lived in deserts at one time. The climate was a good preservative of machinery.

Perhaps that is why Ru sent us to this location. Or why the spacecraft our current home is built on top of is still in such good condition. I have not gone inside, but my scans reveal that it is doing...something down there. It also gives off readings of a type of energy that appears to be similar to my own power source.

Ru will explain it to us one day.

I'm standing outside with T.I.M., staring in the direction of an odd cloud of dust a few miles away. I'm not sure what it is—perhaps stampeding wild horses. Perhaps an approaching sandstorm. Our home looks like a simple adobe hut but is resistant to most inclement weather—but I still watch.

Trinity is sneaking up behind me. One way she keeps her skills sharp is by trying to get past my sensors. She's never been

successful, but sometimes I don't tell her this until later because—

“Gotcha!” She wraps her arms around my waist and squeezes, trying to lift me from the ground.

“You’ll hurt your back,” I say, but I smile. I always smile when she touches me. I know how lucky I am to experience the pleasure-pain of love, now that I’ve run the numbers on the probability of it occurring even amongst members of the same species.

Of course I smile.

She stops her attempts to lift me but then leans into me, the warmth of her cheek pressing into my back. “Do you feel like eating today? It’s taco night. I’ll pick some spinach and garlic from the greenhouse.”

“Great.” I wrap my arms behind me so that I can hold her, too. “I love tacos.”

In reality, I am ambivalent about tacos, but I enjoy the care Trinity puts into making special meals for me. It makes them taste better.

She presses a kiss through the fabric of my shirt after we’ve stood holding one another for seventy-three seconds. I release her

and she goes around back to the greenhouse.

“T.I.M. go watch over Trinity,” I say. He hops to his paws and pads after her.

As I watch the dust cloud draw nearer, I run diagnostics on myself to make sure that I am at maximum strength and my onboard weapons are ready. Now that the auto-lock on my weapons has been disengaged, I’ve found that the desert is an excellent environment for weapons testing without hurting anyone.

I’m prepared for any future Hive recovery attempts. Trinity won’t fight alone ever again.

The cloud of dust approaches soundlessly at high speed, closer, closer, until it stops, hovering in place. I see a figure approaching through the dust...and glowing red eyes that trigger an immediate warning.

SYSTEMS ALERT. ENEMY APPROACHING.

I charge into the dust, not waiting for the weapon that had tried to kill Trinity to approach our doorstep. Trinity had handled it before; this time I’ll crush it into scrap before she can even get a visual on it.

“Li Wei!” The weapon waves happily, her bright yellow jacket billowing in the dust cloud. This must be some centrifuge.

I take a swing at it in the whirling dust, which is starting to settle down.

She dodges, though her blunt bob haircut grazes my knuckle. “Li Wei, it’s me!”

I swing again and she cartwheels backwards away from me. “Is this the thanks I get for sharing my vocabulary database? Not even a hello?”

The air is clear now and I see what was causing the contained dust storm—some kind of sand glider, operated by a rider in coveralls and a helmet.

The rider pulls off the helmet.

“Ru?”

She grins and shakes the sand off of her coveralls and her long dreads.

“And Penny!” The robot says. The robot that had tried to kill Trinity is no longer the enemy. She places her hands in the air and

then spins, striking poses from human fashion shows as she does. “I have a body!”

“Trinity!” I call out because I sense her leaving the greenhouse in an attack stance. “We have two guests for dinner. Don’t kill either of them before you speak to them.”

She comes out from the house with a gun raised anyway, but lowers it slightly when she sees Ru.

“You’re here!” She jogs toward her friend but keeps the gun lightly trained in the direction of the robot, even as she hugs Ru.

The robot waves shyly. “Hi Trinity. It’s me. Penny.”

Trinity stares at the robot for a long moment, then lowers the gun, throws her head back, and laughs.

“Wow, so that’s why you didn’t want me to destroy her. Wooooow.”

Penny shrugs. “It was a once in a lifetime opportunity in a very long lifetime. Humans can order their own groceries and select their own music now.”

Trinity laughs some more, the sound added to my catalogue of favorite things.

“Well I’m glad you’re here. I’ve really been missing our therapy sessions.”

Penny looks slightly abashed. “Sorry about that.”

“Let’s go inside,” Trinity says, then pauses, all mirth leaving her face. “Where’s Yana?”

“She’s on a mission,” Ru says. “Her own mission. She’ll be here soon.”

“If all goes well,” Penny adds, and Ru glances at her in annoyance. Penny shifts from foot to foot. “Sorry.”

“Trinity is making tacos,” I say, herding everyone inside. “It’s going to be a good night.”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Alyssa Cole is an award-winning author of historical, contemporary, and sci-fi romance. Her Civil War-set espionage romance *An Extraordinary Union* was the RT Reviewers’ Choice Award’s Best Book of 2017 and the American Library Association’s RUSA Best Romance for 2018, and *A Princess in Theory* was one of the New York Times’ 100 Notable Books of 2018. She’s contributed to publications including Bustle, Shondaland, The Toast, Vulture, RT Book Reviews, and Heroes and Heartbreakers, and her books have

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To keep up to date on new releases, and to get fun monthly newsletters full of random interesting things, sign up for the [Girls With Glasses](#) mailing list! Check out Alyssa's books at www.alyssacole.com, and follow her on twitter ([@alyssacolelit](#)).

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