

~ The 'Kimi' Quandary ~

by D. J. Belt

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Disclaimers: ALT, if labels be needed. No graphic sex; some drug use, mild profanity and reference to sexual matters (rather like the halls of Congress, I imagine.)

Comments: Feel free to write me at dbelt@mindspring.com.

Misc.: This was written for The Athenaeum's first ever writing contest. It's set in a North American city a couple of hundred years in the future. Read along as psychologist Amanda takes a job and discovers both the professional challenge and the love of her life. Enjoy!

"Mister Miguchi will see you now, Doctor Livingston."

Amanda's pulse began pounding. She rose from the divan and pressed her thin leather briefcase to her chest beneath crossed arms. "Thank you," she said. She took several steps, then halted by the secretary's desk. "And I'm Ms. Livingston, not Doctor Livingston." Amanda attempted, in spite of her nervousness, a smile. "I'm a psychologist, not a psychiatrist."

"Oh. Pardon me."

"No problem. Doctor does have a certain ring about it, doesn't it?"

"Yeah. A pretentious one," the secretary joked. "Say, what's the difference between a psychologist and a psychiatrist, anyway?"

"About fifty dollars an hour."

The secretary laughed. "I'm sorry for you. First door on the left," she said.

"Thank you." With that, Amanda wandered down the polished hallway and stopped at the first door she passed. The sign confirmed the name. She knocked. The door buzzed, then slid open, revealing a spacious, tidy office. As she entered, she silently speculated that the sense of immaculate order probably reflected the nature of the occupant. The size of the office reflected his importance. That made her all the more apprehensive.

She had been on several interviews during the last six months, but the experience she'd gained made her no less nervous. She could feel her armpits sweat, and she dabbed at her face with a folded handkerchief. As an afterthought, she brushed at a stray piece of lint which clung to the front of her dark business suit. She looked up when a voice addressed her.

"Ms. Livingston, I presume?"

She'd heard the joke before, but appreciated the attempt at humor and smiled at it. She was also suddenly glad that she wasn't a doctor. She'd have heard the joke a lot more. In short order, Amanda found herself seated at one end of the conference table which occupied a corner of Mr. Miguchi's spacious office. As he tapped a button on his desk and spoke in a low voice, she used the moment to orient herself.

The office was immense and immaculate, modern in every respect. She saw no wood anywhere. All was gleaming metal and glass-like plastics, and everything was in its place. Along the entire length of one wall, floor-to-ceiling windows looked down upon the expansive city. It was definitely the office of an up-and-coming CEO in an even more up-and-coming industry. She felt herself sweating again, and she wondered what she was doing here. She felt overwhelmed. She swallowed her sudden, panicked impulse to flee from the room, breathed deeply and occupied herself with assessing her host.

She had expected a staid, conservative, middle-aged man of Japanese descent in an expensive business suit. Miguchi was instead young and modern, dressed casually in a hip, urban manner and radiated barely-repressed energy. His eyes sparkled with intelligence, and his manner was one of constant motion. Even when he seated himself at the table, he couldn't remain still. His foot tapped on the floor and he fiddled with the very expensive wrist-watch on his left arm. "I've asked for coffee," he said. "Please, relax and be at ease. There's no need to be nervous."

"Thanks, Mister Miguchi. I'll try. Interviews always do this to me." She smiled nervously and cast a look his way, then lifted her chin and considered him fully when she realized that her head was bowed. Show no fear, she reminded herself.

"Gosh, you are having a hard time with this," he said. "Relax. And please call me Mike."

"Mike?"

He laughed as his foot kept a rhythmic tapping on the floor. "My first name is too difficult for all but Japanese-speakers, so I go by Mike. May I call you Amanda?"

"Of course." Slowly, she felt herself relaxing, warming to the interview. She realized that she was still clutching her leather case to her chest, and placed it aside, on the table. "I'd like that."

The door slid open, and a young woman wearing a bodysuit with the Miguchi Ltd. emblem at one shoulder entered with a tray. She placed it on the table between them, then stood aside. "Do you need anything else, Mike?" she asked.

He smiled up at her. "No, thanks. Kimi, this is Amanda."

Amanda glanced up. The young woman was considering her; her head tilted ever so slightly, then she smiled. "I'm pleased to meet you, Amanda. Is there anything I can get for you?"

The pleasant expression and Kimi's Japanese features and flawless Asian skin caught Amanda's

attention. For a moment, she allowed herself to be fascinated by it, then recovered herself and felt her cheeks heat in an unintended blush. "No, thanks. It's kind of you to ask, though."

"Not at all. Ring if you need me, Mike." With that, she glanced in Amanda's direction. "It's a pleasure meeting you, Amanda." With that, she turned and walked through the door.

Amanda's eyes followed her as she left the room, then turned back to Mike. His expression was one of intense amusement, as if he were reveling in some private joke. "Kimi's a sweetheart, isn't she?" he said.

Again, Amanda felt the heat of blush. "Um, yes. She seems a very nice person."

Mike poured her a cup of coffee. "So, Amanda. What's your diagnosis of me?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"Me. What do you think? Speaking as a psychologist."

She smiled. "The excess energy? The intense focus? The extremely ordered surroundings? Your reputation for productivity and creativity? Hypomania, I'd guess."

"Very good," he said. "And what do you recommend? Can I be cured?"

"Nope." Amanda sipped her coffee. "Not that you'd want to be cured. Most hypomaniacs are intensely creative, productive people. With discipline, they consider it a gift, not a curse."

"Right again. I sleep four to five hours a night at most. I get more done in a week than most of my vice-presidents get done in a calendar quarter. And I revel in it."

"But the downside?"

"I drive everybody crazy. No woman can put up with me for more than a couple of months. I drive them crazy, too."

"Somehow," Amanda ventured, "I don't think you have a problem finding replacement women."

Mike laughed at the observation. "I don't." He stirred his coffee, then left it aside as Amanda sipped hers. "But we're here to talk about you, not me. I see that you're seeking a position as a psychologist."

"Yes. I've finished my military obligation to Space Fleet, and-"

"And you need work? Wonderful."

"I'm sorry?"

He laughed. "I mean that this is a time of immense possibilities for you. Tell me, what is your dream job?"

The question surprised Amanda. "Um, I suppose it would be a job that feeds my need for creativity. I find general practice psychology to be a bit, ah-

"Boring? Unsuitable to your temperament and personality?"

Amanda nodded. "Well, yes. That's why I was hoping for something unusual, something where I could fashion my own path. Research, perhaps."

"You're uncomfortable in general practice because you're an introvert, aren't you? My guess is at least a third-degree introvert."

Amanda blinked in surprise, then nodded. "Fourth-degree, to be exact. How-?"

"And you have unresolved issues of extreme shyness in addition to that. How uncomfortable you must have been to have faced a steady stream of patients at all hours of the day and night in Space Fleet, crowded aboard ships. Introverts need their solitude, their private time. My guess is that you didn't get that very often."

"I didn't. Privacy was my dearest wish." She glanced up at Mike. "You should be the psychologist. Yes, I hope for a work situation that gives me the periodic retreat from humanity and the creative possibilities I crave. What a pipe dream, huh?"

Mike beamed. "You're in the right place. Do you know what we manufacture here?"

"Sure. Androids," Amanda said. "Very high-end androids."

"Right. Ours are the Rolex, the Rolls Royce of androids. We don't do store clerks or assembly line workers here. Ours are much more specialized."

"Such as Disney?"

"Well, yes. Disney is a prime customer of ours, as are the major movie studios. But there are other customers, as well. Ones that prefer to remain anonymous." He watched Amanda's eyebrows raise, then laughed. "Oh, yes."

"Why?"

"Tell me, Amanda. How can you tell an android from a human?"

"Easily enough. Their movements are very humanlike, but their skin is plastic. They have no discernable personalities. And their thought patterns are predictable. When faced with an unusual set of circumstances, they are baffled. That's why they must be closely supervised by humans in their work."

"Exactly." Mike's eyes narrowed, and he studied Amanda hard for a second as she shifted uneasily in her chair. Finally, he spoke. "Could you tell that Kimi is an android?"

"What?" Amanda sat up in her chair. "No way. She's human. She's got beautiful skin, and her manner, her movements, her speech, all are entirely human. There's no way she can be an android."

"Nevertheless, she is." He rose and strode to his desk. "Kimi, would you come in, please?" As he leaned against his desk, the door slid open and Kimi entered. He motioned toward the chair. "Sit, please, and visit with Amanda."

She walked across the room, seated herself in Mike's chair and watched Amanda silently, awaiting her thoughts. For almost a minute, Amanda considered Kimi intently as Mike paced around the table, enjoying the scene. Finally, Amanda ventured a question.

"May we speak, Kimi?"

"Of course. What would you like to speak about?"

"You. How old are you?"

"Eight months. I was manufactured here, at Miguchi Ltd."

"Are you really an android? This is not a joke, right?"

"I am an android, model AFX-42." At Amanda's raised eyebrow, she continued, "The letter designation refers to 'Asian female experimental'. I am the forty-second prototype."

Amanda's jaw dropped. She glanced over at Mike, who was enjoying the scene to no end, then back at Kimi. "How did you know I was wondering about that?"

"Your facial features registered a state of intense question when I mentioned my designation. Therefore, it was proper that I explain it to you."

"I see." She considered Kimi again, then asked, "May I touch your hand, your wrist?"

"Yes." She extended her hand and rested it, palm up, on the table. Amanda held the hand, then pressed her fingertips into the wrist. After a moment, she looked up at Mike.

"There's a radial pulse. The skin is warm. I can see her chest rise and fall with her respirations. Kimi's human. Is this some kind of joke?"

"It's no joke," Mike said. "Test her."

Amanda blinked at Mike, then returned her attention to Kimi, who sat silently, brown eyes fixed

upon Amanda's face. After a moment, she said, "Kimi, I want you to answer me with total honesty."

"Of course."

She placed her fingers on Kimi's wrist once again, felt the telltale pulse beneath it, and counted the throbs. Then, she looked directly into Kimi's eyes and asked, "How do you feel? What is your emotional state right now?"

The rate of pulse did not change. Kimi's pupils did not dilate or contract. Her expression did not change. She said, "That is meaningless for me."

"Are you human?"

Again, the pulse did not change. The pupils did not dilate or contract. "No," she replied. "I am a Miguchi Ltd. android, model AFX-42."

"Well?" Mike asked. "What's your verdict?"

Amanda huffed. "She's got to be a sociopath to lie that convincingly."

Mike chuckled. "Still not convinced, huh? Okay. Kimi, enter sleep mode."

"Entering sleep mode," Kimi echoed. She sat straight in the chair, focused her attention in front of her, rested her hands in her lap and became motionless. Her eyes closed. Amanda watched her, then touched her wrist. There was no radial pulse. She stood, approached Kimi and touched her neck. There was no carotid pulse. Her chest had ceased rising and falling with her respirations. Amanda slowly turned and stared at Mike, who was delighting in the scene.

"Convinced now?" he asked.

"Yes. This is incredible."

"A triumph of engineering!" Mike gloated. "This is android technology at its finest, and we did it. The Japanese have led the world in android science for two hundred years, and Miguchi Ltd. is light-years ahead of anybody else." He laughed. "Great-grandfather would be very proud."

"This is all incredibly thrilling," Amanda said, "but what does this have to do with me?"

"Ah," Mike said. "I read your graduate thesis on android-human relationships. And yes, I found the implications of it fascinating. Tell me, do you really think that humans can develop emotional attachments to machines?"

Amanda shrugged. "Yes. It's been so throughout history. For instance, sailors have for centuries loved their ships, imbued them with personality. They refer to them as 'she'. They've even insisted that their ships had a soul."

"Yes!" Mike seemed triumphant. He danced a few steps, then approached Amanda, who cowered back from him a pace. "And what is a soul, Amanda? You, as a psychologist, deal with this every day. The complexities of the human soul. What is it? What makes you or me different from Kimi?"

"She's a machine. We're human."

"We're machine. Our bodies are biochemical, but we're a machine. A marvel of engineering, even self-repairing to an extent, but we're a machine, working according to principles of chemistry and physics. Made of the same elements in different proportions than Kimi, but still machine. Even Shakespeare said it: 'What a piece of work is a man! How noble in reason, how infinite in faculty. In form and movement, how express and admirable! In action, how like an angel! In apprehension-' He paused and considered the android. "How like a god!" Well, that's Kimi too, wouldn't you agree?"

"I would have to," Amanda said. "She's a beautiful piece of work, in every way."

"Okay. So, here's the rub. What makes her different from us? What does she lack that we have that makes us uniquely human, uniquely alive?"

The answer hit her like a fist. "A *psyche*. A soul, if you want to call it that."

"And what constitutes human soul? What attributes, what talents, what indefinable spark of individuality constitutes soul?"

"The creative impulse," Amanda ventured. "The spontaneous expression of emotion. The ability to reason abstractly. A unique personality, shaped by genetics and life experiences. All that, and more."

Mike seemed jubilant. "My dear, you simply must come to work here."

"And do what?"

He pointed toward Kimi's silent form. "Endow my creation with a soul."

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Rachael seated herself at the restaurant table and shot a twinkling grin at Amanda. "Hey, doll. Sorry I'm late," she said. "Oh, you sweetheart. You ordered me a stiff drink. Thank you." She sipped it, then looked at Amanda. "How'd the interview go today?"

"I don't quite know where to begin," she said. "It still seems like a dream."

Rachel studied Amanda's face intently, then squealed in delight. "You got the job! So, are you going to be shrinking heads at Miguchi Ltd.? Oh! Did you see Mike Miguchi?"

"I interviewed with him for almost an hour."

Rachael's jaw dropped in theatrical surprise. "Oh...my...GOD! Is he what the business magazines say? Is he really that brilliant? Is he really that hot? Did he make a pass at you?"

"Yes, yes, yes and no." Amanda snickered. "Down, girl. He changes girlfriends about once a month."

"Honey, book me for one of those months. I'm available. I know, I know. You don't care about guys. Ever since that chick what's-her-name swept you off your feet in high school and made you realize that you were multi-orgasmic..."

Amanda's cheeks turned scarlet. She glanced around, then whispered, "Rachael!"

Rachael laughed at her reaction, then leaned forward. "So, you're doing industrial psychology? Counseling factory workers and such? Sounds just like what you were doing at Space Fleet. Boring."

"Nope. Research." She shrugged. "And some counseling on the side, just to keep my skills up. But mostly research and development."

"What kind?"

"Not allowed to talk about it, except to say that it deals with the formulation of android, ah... personality."

"Huh? Androids don't have personalities."

Amanda couldn't hide a sly smile. "Not yet, they don't."

Rachael studied Amanda's expression, and her eyes widened. "Oh...my...GOD! Are you serious?"

"That's all I can say." She sipped her drink, then glanced up. "I have to process in tomorrow, then start in earnest on Monday. Can I crash at your place again tonight?"

Rachael nodded. "I was hoping you could."

"You can spend the weekend at the mountaintop with me if you want."

"Sorry, honey. Got a hot date Saturday night." She rolled her eyes in thought. "I'm anticipating hot, anyway, so I'll bring my toothbrush."

Amanda smiled in amusement. "That's my Rachael. Always got a hot date."

"Being divorced is so much more fun than being married." Rachael studied Amanda. "You

remember hot dates, don't you? I think you had one a couple of decades ago. Jeez, Amanda. You're thirty years old. Get with the program and get a girlfriend, will you? I'll bet you haven't gotten laid since you left Space Fleet."

"I know. I'm just not as wild and crazy as you are, I guess. That's okay. At least I can live vicariously through your adventures."

"Now that you have a job, you'll maybe meet somebody. Oh, I forgot. You're in research. You'll be surrounded by nerds. They don't get laid, either."

"I happen to like nerds."

"You would." Rachael held her drink over the center of the table. "May you find the nerd-girl of your dreams at Miguchi Ltd."

Amanda laughed, then clinked the rim of her glass to Rachael's. "I'll drink to that."

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Behind Amanda, the city skyline grew smaller in the distance and haze. Beneath her two-seater aerocar, the dwellings gave way to forest and field. And ahead, the foothills of the mountains heralded.

She gazed toward the ground. The land-based traffic on the interstate, little two-and-four-occupant cars gliding along the asphalt and the metal rails, seemed like so many toys beneath her. Her own car, able to fly, occupied the airspace above the highway system and zipped along at several times the ground traffic's speed. She was glad she'd purchased the aerocar and earned the advanced license to operate it. It had been worth the extra money, and it made getting to her mountaintop refuge quick and painless.

Ahead, she could just barely spot it. Nestled on a small dot of open ground at the summit of a mountain, it promised her solitude and quiet. She had inherited the mountaintop dwelling when her parents died. Her older brother had gotten the city house. She was content with the cabin.

She glanced over her instrument panel one more time and saw that all was well. Her aerocar was pulled along in column with many others, altitude and interval between them kept constant. When it came time to exit the air-lane, she would drive the car herself. She enjoyed that.

A light flashed and a signal sounded, and she gripped her steering wheel and placed her feet on the pedals. The numbers counted down, then the aerocar slid to its right and exited the traffic. A gentle tweak on the wheel dropped her altitude to just above the trees, and she pointed the car at the distant cabin and followed the contour of the mountainside.

The car hovered to the ground on her cabin driveway, and she eased it into the garage. A moment later, Amanda was standing on the walkway in front of the cabin, stretching and breathing deeply of the clean mountain air. She loved it.

A dog's distant barking roused her attention, and a golden retriever bounded through the forest's edge and halted near her, tail wagging, tongue lolling. Amanda knelt, ruffled the smooth fur along the dog's neck, and laughed as the dog licked her cheek. Then, she stood and collected her bag. "Come on, Sammie," she said. "It's time to go in."

With an agreeable bark, the dog bounded up the front steps, across the spacious covered porch and entered the electronic dog door. Amanda trudged up the steps and touched her palm to the lock. "Open, please," she intoned, and the lock beeped, allowing the door to slide open and admit her.

After an adjustment on the climate control, she showered and dressed in soft lounging pants and a tank-top, then checked the food pantry. The store had delivered her groceries; the box sat just inside the delivery door. She rummaged through the packages, set something aside for dinner and mixed a stiff drink before heading to the front porch to relax on the double swinging chair and experience the sunset.

The human soul, she thought, as she watched the sky change color. Define the indefinable and endow an android with it. Can it even be done?

After a second, another thought struck her. Should it be done? Is it right, what I'm going to attempt to do? She sipped her drink, then dismissed that thought. The fundamentalist religionists of the world had long been opposed to androids, deeming them 'Frankendroids', unholy copies of humanity. In an attempt to garner their favor (meaning their votes and campaign contributions), many politicians sided with them, at least publicly. Business, on the other hand, loved androids. They didn't need vacation, sick time or pay, and they worked ungodly hours without weariness.

Amanda snorted at the controversy. She held no attachment to the ancient religions. She considered herself a Deist, believing in a Creator, but not in the doctrine of organized religion. She believed that reason was the ultimate guide to Truth, not blind adherence to dogma. Androids had a definite place in the world, and among human society.

And God? The Creator? She considered the mountain scenery around her. Conceived by an unimaginable creative genius and forged by unshakeable will, the immense beauty that exists around her-and herself, too-came into being. What a work of art, she mused, by the Consummate Artist. And we have that spark of creative genius within us. And I'm going to try to give it to Kimi. I get to create life, too. How much more godlike can one get?

Is that what I would be doing? she asked herself. Creating life? At what point does a machine cease to be a machine and become a sentient being? Amanda sipped her drink and studied the distant valley in the dusky twilight. After a while, her smile betrayed the thrill she felt in her chest.

I guess, she thought, that I'm going to find out.

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Monday morning, Kimi led Amanda through the labyrinthine corridors of Miguchi Ltd. to the

Research and Development, Special Projects Section. Kimi's touch upon the security panel opened the door, and they entered. In a few seconds, they were confronted by a middle-aged man with a shock of salt-and-pepper hair and about two week's worth of facial stubble. "Kimi!" he exclaimed. "How good of you to visit!"

"Good morning, Albert," Kimi said. "May I present Amanda Livingston?"

He turned to Amanda and pumped her hand. "Delighted, my dear. Albert Kellar, chief of the X-42 project. I understand you're to be working with us."

"I hope that's quite all right," Amanda said.

"Nonsense. Delighted to have you," he said. "And you're to do some counseling, too? Wonderful. This bunch of misfits around here has more unresolved issues than a dog has fleas." He roared at his own joke, then motioned for her to follow. "I'll show you to your office. It's ready for you."

"It is? I mean, thank you." She turned to Kimi, but found that the android had quietly departed. With a blink of surprise, she gathered her wits about her and followed Albert. He opened a door, tapped on a light, and entered a small room.

"It's been arranged according to Mike Miguchi's instructions," he said. "I hope it suits you."

"Oh, gosh. It's-I mean, it's lovely. This is perfect."

The office was small, but it suited her perfectly. In one corner, a desk and chair sat, a computer screen centered on the table. An elevated area, raised about a foot off the floor, occupied the center of the room, covered by a cushion of exquisite material, and the far corner held two comfortable chairs with an end table between them. The floor itself was covered with soft carpeting. Amanda placed her bag aside and ran her hand along the padding of the raised platform.

"Mike said that you liked to meditate. Hence, the meditation platform. And the little consultation area in the corner is for when you feel moved to counsel somebody in your capacity as a psychologist. I hope it suits you?"

"It's delightful," Amanda said. "And the colors are perfect. And I've even got artificial sunlight." She motioned toward the frosted glass panels.

"There's probably a message for you from Mike." He pointed toward the desk as he retreated through the door. "Take your time. When you're ready, look me up. I'll show you around." He left, and the door hummed shut.

For some time, Amanda stood silently and enjoyed the feeling of the room. She liked it. It felt right. Her space. Over the next few days, she'd have to add those little touches which made it her second home. After all, she'd be spending much time here. Finally, she seated herself at the desk. The screen blinked on and a voice intoned, "You have mail."

"Open, please," she said.

Mike Miguchi's face appeared on the screen. "Good morning, Amanda. I hope your office fits you. Here's where you start flexing your creative muscles. I've already given you your mission parameters, but I'll state it again: you're to endow my creation, the X-42 series, with a soul. How you do that is up to you. I'll check in with you periodically to see how things are going. Also, you're to provide some psychological counseling when it's needed down there. I've found that the brightest among my people often have the most unresolved issues. Help me care for them, will you? Oh, and I hope you like the hot tea machine. It's the latest gadget." He winked at her. "Now go wild, will you? And have fun." With that, the message blinked off.

Amanda sat quietly for a moment, then swivelled her chair around to face the wall behind her. "A hot tea machine?" she said.

"On," a panel said. "Please state your preference."

"Chamomile, please." In a few seconds, a mug of steaming tea emerged. As she raised it to her nose to inhale the fragrance, she said, "Oh, yeah. Now this is a job."

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"Albert, how many X-42s are in existence?"

He scratched his chin stubble. "Oh, we've got twenty-three in various stages of completion now. There's probably another forty or fifty out there in service. Some, as you can see, are AFX's. This one here is a CMX."

"CM, meaning Caucasian male?" Amanda studied the android. "It's a beautiful piece of work."

"Thank you, my dear. We're very proud of what we've done here. The X-42 series includes both genders and several ethnicities." He motioned to another work station, an area forested with monitor screens. "And here is the programming area. Patsy is among the best and brightest of our programmers. Patsy, say hello to Amanda."

A young woman glanced up from her monitors. "Oh, hey. You must be Freud."

Amanda blinked in surprise. "I beg your pardon?"

Patsy giggled nervously as she cracked her knuckles. "That's your nickname around here. I mean, you're going to tell us how to make a soul, right?" She shrugged. "You're Freud." She tugged at the braids of hair which touched her shoulders. "I'm Patricia VanLandingham, but you can call me Patsy." She stuck out her hand.

"I'm Freud," Amanda said with a grin, "but you can call me Amanda." She shook the hand warmly, and noticed the bright smile which flitted across Patsy's face before she resumed her nervous, unsure countenance. "And I'm also a licensed psychologist, Patsy. If there's ever

anything you want to talk about, my door is always open."

"Oh," Patsy said. "I look nuts, huh? I guess I am nuts. I mean, everybody says I'm nuts, so I must be nuts. Hey, it's all right to be nuts. I'm a genius. I'm nuts. It's a trade-off. I'm okay with it." Again she shrugged, and began pulling at a braid of hair. "At least I'm sorta cute, huh?" She snickered nervously. "I mean, in a weird, nerdy way?"

"Patsy, you're an absolute doll. I love you already," Amanda said. "It's going to be fun around here with you."

"Gee, thanks!" Patsy flashed another big grin, then pointed at her monitors with one hand as she pulled at a braid of hair with the other. "Got to, um..."

Amanda pointed at Albert. "Yeah. Me, too. Meet me for lunch, Patsy?"

She froze for a moment, her eyes wide, then nodded enthusiastically. "Yeah! Sure! Wow! Thanks." She bounced over to her monitors, pausing halfway there. "Later, gator."

Amanda smiled at her as she followed Albert. They walked silently for a moment, then he halted and turned to her.

"You hit it right off with Patsy," he said.

"She's a darling girl," Amanda noted.

"She's also a genius, like she said. She graduated from M.I.T. at nineteen. Been with us for four years." He smiled painfully. "She's an intellectual and creative marvel with a childlike innocence about her. It's a beautiful quality, but it leaves her thin-skinned and deeply wounded by other people's nastiness. More than once, I've found her curled up in a corner and crying her eyes out."

"Hm. Let me work on it with her. Now, sit with me. I need to learn from you how you program behavior into these androids."

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The days passed in a blur. Amanda immersed herself in the intricacies of android programming, set time aside to meditate on the question of soul and began seeing some co-workers for counseling. Albert was more right than he knew about his people's unresolved issues.

Patsy did not avail herself of the counseling. She did respond with eagerness whenever Amanda offered her a bit of time and attention, so she contented herself with that for the moment and attempted to lavish both on the young woman.

Because her days became long, she stayed at Rachael's place in the city during the week. Opposites that they were, she and Rachael nevertheless did love each other's company, and the rent money which Amanda offered helped Rachael's budget. And on Friday afternoon, Amanda would fly her aerocar to the mountain-top, where she'd relax, unwind and think about the week's

events. Most of the time, Rachael did not accompany her. She found an overnight at the cabin quaintly refreshing, but a weekend insufferably boring. She was just too much the extroverted girl-about-town to abandon the city for very long. She craved the glitter and excitement of the city. And Amanda was too much the introvert to stay in the city any longer than absolutely necessary. It was the contemplative quiet of the mountains which refreshed her.

She also began dressing much more casually. No business attire here; here, no rules applied. Miguchi Ltd. was a world of immense freedom, and she loved it.

About three weeks into her job, she got a mail from Mike Miguchi. She blinked in surprise at it, then immediately heeded his request to visit him at his office.

He collared her as soon as she walked through his office door. "Amanda, thanks. Sit."

She eased herself onto a couch and watched him as he bustled about his office. Finally, he seemed satisfied with whatever he was doing, and he plopped down on the other end of the couch. "So," he said, "how's it coming along?"

"Great," Amanda replied. "I've gotten a crash course on android behavioral programming, and I've given some considerable thought to the nature of a soul." She paused a beat, then said, "I really think it's doable, Mike."

"Yes!" He gloated for a second, then re-focused his attention on her. "Tell me how."

"Well, it all hinges on the creative impulse, spontaneous emotion and free will. The X-42 androids already have the ability to learn at a frightening speed. What they need now is the ability to put that knowledge together in original ways and the free will to decide how to use it."

"Wait a minute. Free will?"

"Yes. Is that not part of a soul?"

"I can't give my androids free will. They have to be kept under control. They have to be totally focused on their specific mission. How does one do that if they have free will?"

"How do humans stay focused?"

Mike shrugged, as if the answer was self-evident. "On a higher plane, they're proud of a job well done, proud of their work. On a more elementary level, it's survival. They need the money and behave accordingly."

Amanda raised an eyebrow. "Exactly. On the higher plane, reward is internal. Emotion, Mike. The ability to experience emotion is essential to soul. We do good, we feel good. We do poorly, we feel shame. We crave the approval of those around us, and that keeps us focused on our work."

"And this creative impulse?"

"It's uniquely human. Some people never awaken the creative impulse within them. To me, that's a tragedy. But once we indulge that creative impulse, we thrill in it. We can't *not* do it. It becomes an obsession with us. On a higher level, that's why artists paint and writers write. The main rewards are intrinsic; the external rewards are secondary. It's great if an artist makes money, but even if he's starving, he'll still paint. And on a more elementary level, the creative impulse allows us to solve problems, to 'think outside the box', as the old saying goes."

"Okay." He leaned forward. "So, how do we instill all this into our androids?"

Amanda shrugged. "I have no idea yet," she said.

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No sooner did Amanda return to the X-42 area than Albert was rounding up all his people for a conference. As Patsy scurried by Amanda, she tugged at her arm. "Come on, girl," she said. "Meeting. Mike's just lit a fire under us. We have a new mandate."

It was exactly what Amanda expected. When she entered the conference room, Albert's staff was gathered, sitting on floors, tables, chairs, anything that held a butt. This is the first time that she had seen them all together, and she cast a curious eye around the room. Then, she smiled.

The staff was about equally divided between males and females, and most were under the age of forty. Many were decidedly very young. Africa, Europe, Asia, the Americas; all were represented. Mike obviously recruited the best and brightest from all over the world. And yes, many of them were almost stereotypical nerds. Wild hair styles, clothes that were crazily eccentric, it was all there. And she could feel the creative energy in the room. It hung heavy in the air, an electric charge just waiting to be directed. Amanda leaned against a wall as Patsy sat cross-legged on the floor, and Albert took control of the meeting.

"I just got word from Mike," he said, "to concentrate our efforts on providing a soul to the X-42 series androids."

A hand shot up. "Al, just what the hell is a soul, anyway?"

After some laughter and a chorus of 'You ain't got no soul, baby' remarks, Al waved the noise to a halt. "Amanda will describe the essential qualities of the soul. We will modify programming to accomplish that. That's simple enough, right? Amanda, do your thing." He waved a hand toward her, and every head turned in her direction.

Amanda swallowed hard. Suddenly being the focus of the attention of an entire group almost overwhelmed her, gave her a sudden, panicked urge to flee the room and cower in a closet somewhere. A moment's silence reigned until Patsy suddenly rose and began dancing in the middle of the room. "Let's hear it for Freud! Give it up for Freud! Yay, Freud!" she shouted.

The entire room began clapping and shouting, "Yay, Freud!" The goofy release broke Amanda's

tension; blushing crimson, she snickered and shot a big grin around the room.

The bedlam finally quieted, and Amanda fanned her face to ease the heat of her blush. "Wow. Thank you. I guess that really is my nickname around here, huh? I thought Patsy was joking." A smattering of good-natured laughter encouraged her, and she could feel herself relaxing. "Okay," she said, "here, as far as we can determine, are going to be the essential qualities of the X-42's soul..."

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Late that afternoon, Amanda walked through her office door, then collapsed onto her meditation platform and lay on her back. She was drained. The meeting had erupted into a lively, enthusiastic discussion between a score of very bright people and had lasted the entire afternoon. The energy in the room had crackled. It invigorated most; it exhausted her. She kicked off her shoes, groaned, and lifted her head when somebody tapped at the door. "Enter," she said.

The door slid back, and Patsy bounced into the room, then stopped. "Oh. You're tired. I'm sorry. Yeah, I should have thought...never mind. It can wait. I mean..." She began pulling furtively at one of her long braids.

"Patsy honey, it's all right. Come in and sit."

"You sure? I mean, I can, like-" She motioned toward the door.

Amanda rose to a sitting position and tapped the padding on the meditation platform next to her leg. "Sit. Let's talk."

"Um..." Patsy pulled at her braid for another few seconds, then nodded brightly. "Okay. Thanks." She plopped down on the platform next to Amanda.

"No. Thank you, Patsy. You were a life-saver today."

"I was?"

"The way you gave me a moment to recover when everybody suddenly focused on me. That was so neat. Thank you."

"Um, sure. I could feel that you were uncomfortable."

"More than that. I was in a panic."

"Yeah. You were. I could like, feel the vibes from you." Patsy thought about that, then began pulling at a braid with both hands. "Shy, huh?"

"Deeply."

"I so get it. We've all got something going on with us around here."

"You're a sweetheart to be so understanding. Now, what can I do for you, Patsy?"

"Oh, yeah. I was wondering-" She giggled nervously. "If you would like, teach me to meditate. I mean, you love it and you seem so calm and maybe it would calm me down. I drive people crazy around here, and they're always telling me to chill out or to go away or shut up. But everything's like buzzing around me all the time, you know? I mean, like this place all day long and even when I go home, the city is just buzzing around me. I can't seem to calm down, ever." She stopped and studied Amanda. "You know what I mean?"

"I do. You live in the city?"

"Yeah." She began pulling at her braid again. "I mean, I share a flat with two other girls and we each have our own room, but they're party girls and they're always playing music and yakking on their phones and even arguing sometimes. And then they bring their boyfriends over and I can hear them partying and laughing and talking through the walls of my room all night long and sometimes I can even hear them like, having sex, and..." She looked at Amanda. "Do you know what I mean?"

"I know exactly what you mean," Amanda said. "You don't ever get quiet time."

"Huh." She twirled a braid around her finger. "I guess not. What's quiet time?"

"Do you cook for yourself? Fresh foods and such?"

"No. I mean, I'm busy. I just eat whatever when I'm out." She cast an embarrassed look Amanda's way. "Mostly crap, I guess."

"You, Patsy, are in desperate need of a weekend in the mountains."

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That Friday, the aerocar zipped along its designated path above the interstate. Usually, during this portion of the trip, Amanda would read. Today, she was delighting in Patsy's reaction to the trip. Her guest was tugging at her braids nervously as she attempted to watch the ground-based interstate traffic below them.

"Oh, cool! Look at that. How high are we? This is like, radical. How fast are we going, anyway?" She leaned toward Amanda and glanced at the instrument panel. "Two hundred and twenty kilometers an hour? This is so cool!" She cast a glance at Amanda. "So, when do we get there?"

"You can just see it, there. To the right. That little cabin on the top of that mountain."

"Whoa! That's yours? I mean, this is great. Thank you so much for like, inviting me. I-" A signal began sounding. She stopped, and her eyes grew wide. As she watched Amanda place her hands on the wheel and her feet on the pedals, her hands tugged ever faster at a braid of hair. "Oh, shit! We're not crashing, are we?"

"No, dear. We're about to leave the air traffic." The aerocar's voice counted down, and the car began sliding to its right. Amanda allowed it to slow and lose some altitude as it left the traffic, then zipped it along the treetops toward her cabin.

"You're flying this thing? That is so kickin'! I think I'm gonna pee my pants." She glanced over at Amanda and snickered self-consciously. "Not really. I just say that sometimes. I mean, I have no idea what's going to come out of my mouth when I'm excited, you know?"

Amanda shot a grin her way. "I understand perfectly."

"Yeah." Patsy giggled. "Of course you understand. You're Freud."

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That night, Amanda collapsed into bed. The week had more thoroughly drained her than she'd imagined. And then there was Patsy.

Her company, although delightful, had proven very high-intensity that evening. The girl thrilled at being in the mountains, at the sights and smells and sounds of nature, at the forest surrounding their yard-even at the lush grass which surrounded the cabin and garage inside the forest's edge. The city didn't have any of that.

And Sammie, the resident golden retriever, had taken to Patsy instantly. Actually, it seemed mutual; Patsy loved the dog, too. Pets didn't do well in the city, so they weren't a part of Patsy's world. Pets were a country or a mountain thing. Patsy had kept up an excited chatter and a torrent of questions, wanting to experience everything in an instant. Finally, she'd collapsed on the sofa, and Amanda had herded her into one of her two guest bedrooms before retiring in her own, familiar bed. Tomorrow, she'd start teaching Patsy how to relax. Tonight, it was enough for her to relish the soft bedding, fresh air and intense quiet of the mountains.

Amanda woke slowly the next morning, turned over and glanced at the clock. The sun was up. The climate control had opened the windows, and the soft morning breeze whispered through the house, along with the sound of birdsongs. It was time to rise. When she shuffled into the kitchen, she saw Patsy sitting cross-legged on a huge living room floor cushion with Sammie's head resting in her lap, a coffee mug by her knee and an electronic reading tablet in her hand. Whatever she was reading held her in rapt fascination; she did not move, except for the absent-minded scratching of Sammie's head with one hand while the thumb of her other hand periodically pressed the button to cycle the pages of the book. Amanda had to smile at the sight. Patsy seemed calmer already. Bringing her here was the right thing to do.

As she sipped her coffee, she studied Patsy, then focused on the hand holding the reading tablet. For the first time, she realized how rapidly she was cycling the pages. It had to be once every twenty seconds or so. She watched in awe; finally, Patsy sighed deeply, stretched, and placed the reading tablet aside. She sipped at her coffee, then made a face. "Ick," she muttered. "It's cold."

"I'll get you a refill."

Patsy looked up. "Oh, hey, 'Manda. G'morning. Yeah, I need more." She made a move to get up.

"Relax. You two look so comfortable." She crossed the living room and lifted Patsy's cup from her hand. "Creamer and sweetener?"

"Yeah. Lots of both?"

"You got it." As Amanda fixed Patsy's coffee, she cast a glance toward her. "What were you reading that had you so fascinated?"

"Oh." Patsy giggled. "I found it in your library. I hope you don't mind. Wow, you have a ton of books here. I just picked one at random like, and started reading." She picked up the reading tablet. "Mary Shelly. *Frankenstein*. It is so way cool." She placed the tablet aside. "I just finished it."

Amanda's jaw dropped. "How long have you been up?"

"An hour. I don't know. You were still sleeping. I didn't wake you, did I?"

"No." She handed the mug back to Patsy. "How long did it take you to read that whole book?"

Patsy looked at her wrist watch. "Seventy-four minutes." She shrugged apologetically. "I read fast. I'm just totally weird that way." She giggled. "A real freak show. That's me, huh? Sorry."

"Don't be sorry. Good God, I wish I could read that quickly. How do you do that?"

"I don't know. I've always done it. It used to freak my parents out. They thought I was like, possessed or something."

Amanda seated herself by Patsy. "And during the whole time you were reading, you didn't move a muscle. You were totally involved in the book. You didn't talk, you didn't fidget, you were incredibly focused. I saw you. Patsy, you were so calm!"

She beamed in delight. "Radical! I guess I was, huh?" She sipped her coffee, then asked, "So what are we going to do today?"

"I thought after breakfast, a hike in the mountains. And later, you can learn meditation."

"Do you really think I can? Learn it, I mean?"

"Yeah." Amanda patted Patsy's hand. "After all, that's what you were just doing."

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Patsy paused in the center of the mountain path and studied the valley below them, a hand

shading her eyes from the noon sun. She tapped her walking stick rhythmically on the ground as she squinted into the distance. "This is like, so neat. Look, you can see forever! And way in the distance, you can just barely see the city."

"There's an even better view ahead." They resumed their hike, walking side-by-side along the trail as Sammie ran to and fro in the distance, and fell silent for some time. Finally, Patsy ventured a thought.

"Is it right, what we're doing?"

"What, hiking?"

"No. I mean trying to instill a soul into an android. Reading *Frankenstein* got me to thinking."

"Great books do that. What are your thoughts?"

Patsy pointed a finger at Amanda. "I asked you first."

"So you did." Amanda smiled, then pondered her answer. Finally, she said, "Yes."

"Yes, what?" Patsy asked.

"Yes, it's not wrong."

"Huh?"

"It's like this: you guys built the functioning body. That wasn't wrong, was it?"

"No."

"Okay. Now we're going to build the *psyche*, the unique personality which inhabits each one."

Patsy huffed, then gave voice to a breathless stream of thought. "But we can give each one a separate personality. I mean, that's easy money. But to give it free will? And creative impulse? That's like, some radical programming, huh? It's never been done before. And emotion? That's like, how do you program that? I mean, we can program into them the outward appearance of emotions, and give them a set of parameters so they know when to be happy or sad or whatever. Hell, that's nothing. We do that already, androids displaying emotion. But it's fake. They're not really feeling those emotions, you know what I mean? They're just displaying the outward signs of those emotions in response to the proper stimuli. Androids are all about being fake. They're fake! But if we give it like, free will and make it feel emotion and want to be creative and such, then doesn't it take on a life of its own? I mean, it'll never be human because it's not biochemical, like us. But doesn't it become, you know...?"

"Do you mean, 'Doesn't it become alive?'"

Silence hung in the air for a moment as they walked along the path. Finally Patsy nodded. "Yeah. I guess that's what I mean."

"Is that a bad thing? That it becomes alive? That you helped give life to something?"

Patsy shrugged, then began wrapping a braid around her finger. "I guess not. But people won't stand for it. They'll freak out over it. I mean, what would happen if like, the news people and the government and the religious types found out what we're trying to do? I mean, give life to androids. They'd flip. They'd pass laws against it, maybe shut us down. They'd try to destroy what we're all about. I mean, it like, scares me." She looked over at Amanda. "Doesn't it scare you?"

They halted and faced each other. "I haven't thought as deeply about it as you have," Amanda said. "But I do believe that you're on to something."

"You do? Really?"

"Yeah. Really." Amanda attempted a smile to dispel the anxiety that she felt gathering about Patsy. She noticed that the girl was pulling at her braid with frantic abandon, and took Patsy's hand in her own to still its motion. "Hey, it's okay. Relax. That's what we're supposed to be doing up here this weekend: relaxing. Right?"

Patsy glanced down at her hand, twisted in the braid. "Oh. Yeah." She giggled nervously. "Sorry. It's a habit."

"Yeah. I noticed."

Patsy grew suddenly quiet. Her head bowed and her eyes watered. "I drive you crazy too, huh?"

Amanda wrapped both arms around Patsy and hugged her. "No, you don't," she whispered as she held her close. "I love every minute with you."

Patsy said nothing, but sniffed loudly, then buried her face into Amanda's neck. For a long moment, they stood so, then Amanda grasped Patsy by the shoulders and held her at arm's length to study her. She watched Patsy wipe at an eye with the hand still tangled in the braid, then said, "Of all the people in the world, I'm glad it's you that's here with me."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah." Amanda lifted one of Patsy's braids in her hand and stroked it. Then, she glanced up at Patsy. "You're right," Amanda said. "It is extremely soothing, isn't it? I want one of my own."

Patsy giggled. "Dork." She tugged the braid from Amanda's hand. "Grow your own."

"So, how long does it take to grow braids that length?"

"I guess maybe a year or two."

"Until then, can I pull on yours?"

They began walking toward the summit of the mountain. Patsy sniffed once more, then giggled in delight. "Um, not at work. People will talk."

Sammie's bark augmented their laughter as the trio headed toward the mountain's summit and the cabin.

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"Okay, keep the back straight. Tilt your pelvis forward a little, like so. Now relax your shoulders. Take a slow, deep breath and release it. That's it. You're doing great."

Patsy sat on a pad on the expansive porch, cross-legged. Her eyes were closed, and her hands were resting on her knees. Amanda sat just behind her, and was coaching her attempts to achieve a self-sustaining meditation posture. She pushed gently on the lower back, then placed both hands on Patsy's shoulders. "Man, you're tight as a drum. Slow, deep breath in, then release. Slowly. Allow your shoulders to relax. Yeah, that's it."

"I can like, feel myself getting all loosey-goosey."

"Neat, huh? Now, focus. Listen. Feel."

"To what?"

"Shh. Your breathing. Your heartbeat. The sounds of nature around you. The breeze. The warmth of the sun on your skin." Quietly, Amanda rose to a standing position. "That's it. Just be in the moment. Listen to your soul, Patsy." She watched the girl sit, motionless, for a moment, then walked along the porch and gazed at the distant tree-line. After a few minutes, she looked at Patsy. She was quiet, still, unmoving.

Amanda smiled at that. Patsy loved being here. She seemed so different now than when she'd first met her. It was just a different part, though, of the same girl, a part that usually doesn't get indulged. A lovely part of a lovely girl, really. A jewel that nobody sees.

Amanda leaned against the railing. As she watched Patsy, a sudden realization hit her, and a thrill of fear tightened her chest. Oh, my God, she thought. I'm falling for her. I want her. This can't be happening.

She breathed deeply to calm herself, then pondered the question. Why not? she thought. What the hell's wrong with it? We're two people. It happens. She's not my patient. And she's an absolute doll. God, look at her. So delightfully offbeat, so kooky, so...gifted. Yeah. Her gifts exceed mine by far. So does her insight. What a catch. What a treasure. What a darling.

She recalled that dinner with Rachael. 'May you meet the nerd-girl of your dreams at Miguchi Ltd.,' she'd said. Amanda smiled at the next thought, even as her heart began beating a little more quickly and loudly in her chest. I think I just have. Rachael, you were more right than you know.

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"What's wrong?"

Amanda looked up from her dinner. She and Patsy were sitting on the front porch steps, dinner bowls in hand, glasses of red wine by their legs. Patsy was studying her curiously.

"What do you mean?"

"Well, you're like, quiet this afternoon. And I'm catching a funny vibe from you."

"I just get this way sometimes. It's an introvert thing."

"Oh."

Amanda glanced sideways at Patsy and grinned. "You don't believe that for a minute, do you?"

Patsy giggled. "Nope. You're fibbing. Now 'fess up. What's going on? Ooh, I know. Am I driving you crazy yet? I am, aren't I?"

"No, not at all, honey. You're a sweetheart. It's just-that is, I was thinking about something you said this afternoon. Maybe you can answer a question for me."

"I get to answer a question from Freud? Cool. I'll try." Patsy turned toward Amanda and awaited the question. After a moment, it came.

"Why X-42? Why a soul?"

Patsy blinked in surprise. "Huh?"

"One question I never asked Mike is why he wants androids that you can't tell apart from humans, and why he wants to give them a soul." Amanda shrugged. "I just figured it was for the glory of doing it, rather like climbing a tall mountain or going to the North Pole. I mean, it's just for the bragging rights. There's no other gain, right? He just wants to say that we did it before anybody else and have the patent."

"Nope. There's like, another reason. A more practical reason." Patsy noticed Amanda's raised eyebrows and giggled, then began speaking as she punctuated her thoughts with jabs of her spoon in the air. "I mean, who do you think buys our X-42 androids? Rich people, right? Got to be. The average person or company can't afford one. So if you're like, a head of state, you've got one that looks just like you for public appearances. I mean, you'd rather it get assassinated than you, right? And how much cooler would it be if it can like, do speeches and shake hands and kiss babies and all that stuff! It can do the shit work for you. And if it can think on its feet, if it has a

soul and can show like, spontaneous emotion and stuff, it can campaign for you and nobody will be the wiser." She paused and studied Amanda's disbelieving expression. "Hey, I'm just saying, you know?"

"Our president has one?"

Patsy giggled. "We probably haven't seen the real him in a year. The android does all the public stuff. I mean, that guy two presidents ago got assassinated, right? You know, what's-his-name? Right after that, I think that's when we started commercializing the X-42s. Probably a third of the heads of state in the world have one now. We've sold a lot." She tapped her chest with a thumb. "I programmed several of 'em."

"That's the purpose of the X-42s? As doubles for world leaders?"

"Nah. That's just a part of it. The real kicker is even more bizarre and interesting." She popped a spoonful of food into her mouth, then mumbled, "Want to hear about it?"

"Ah, sure." Why not? she thought. Good God, this is getting interesting.

"Well, like I said, rich people are the only ones that can afford our androids. And they're so lifelike, right? I mean, you couldn't tell that Kimi was an android. I programmed her, by the way. But they're just like the cheaper ones in that they can't think outside of their programming, and I can't predict every situation they'll ever encounter. So a soul, an independent, creative way of thinking, would be a real boon."

"To whom, Patsy?"

"Oh. Yeah. I tend to rattle sometimes. Sorry." She looked at Amanda. "To like, rich people who want their idealized companion."

"What? You've got to be kidding!"

"Nuh-uh. I mean, our X-42 series androids are all like, good-looking. And they look and feel totally human, right? And that is so way cool! We did that. And they're also very, um..." She squinted and studied the trees, attempting to find the right words. "Like, anatomically correct."

"They are?"

"Oh, yeah." Patsy giggled. "You really haven't seen one naked? You need to check some of 'em out. I mean, really." She poked at the remains of her dinner with the spoon as she thought aloud. "And yeah, they function just like humans. The parts are all there and baby, they work. I'm even asked to program fetishes into 'em sometimes. Man, I thought those movie stars were kinky, but the weirdest one was for this like, really famous televangelist."

"You did? Who? What fetish?"

Patsy giggled. "I can only tell you if I get really good and wasted sometime."

"So we're making what amounts to sex toys? We're attempting to give a soul to sex toys? I can't believe I'm hearing this. All this fantastic, advanced technology is for sex?"

"Not all of it. But 'Manda, think about it. Every new technology invented has been used that way. I mean, how about art? Those cave paintings weren't all of animals. Nope. And have you ever seen some of that ancient Greek pottery? Man, that stuff was like, orgy central." Patsy chuckled. "And the printing press? Ever read *The Canterbury Tales*? Oh, boy! And how about when photography was invented, in like, the nineteenth century? Yep, you guessed it. Dirty pictures. Those Civil War soldiers bought like, tons of 'em."

"Movies," Amanda ventured. "That was next."

"You've got the idea," Patsy said. "And, oh! Don't forget one of the greatest technological advances in the last two hundred years: the internet. Man, when that first started up back in like, the late twentieth century, it was full of porn."

"It still is," Amanda said. Patsy cast a glance her way and raised an eyebrow, and Amanda quickly added, "So I've been told, I mean."

"You are *so* busted!" Patsy said, pointing a finger. "But in answer to your question, yeah. I think it's always been so."

"So you're saying that people will spend that much money on a Miguchi android just to-" She searched for the right phrase, then blurted out, "Get their cookies off?"

"Nuh-uh," Patsy said, as she held up her spoon. "It's actually a lot more complicated than that. I mean, think about it. Put yourself in these rich people's places for a minute and follow me, okay?"

Amanda's reply was cautious. "Okay."

"Look. Rich people want love just like poor people, right? I mean, we're all the same, but they have power and status and like, freakin' gobs of money. We don't. So if you're poor and somebody says they love you, they must mean it. But if you're rich and somebody says they love you, you can't really trust them. They might just want what you have. Rich people are like, surrounded by gold-diggers and liars and players. They can't ever be sure that person actually does love them for who they are. The constant suspicion must tear 'em up. Know what I mean? And if they fall in love with somebody and marry them, that person can do 'em a lot of damage. And divorce is brutal for 'em when the marriage goes to shit. Half their money, half their possessions...get my drift? And if there's a child..."

"So," Amanda guessed, "you're telling me that they prefer the company of androids to people?"

"Yeah, because at least they can trust the android."

"Can't they just hire a classy prostitute?"

"They can't trust 'em. They can trust the X-42. And sleeping with an X-42 feels like sleeping with a human, but it won't be spilling the whole thing to the media the next week or threatening to blackmail 'em. And they can cheat on the X-42 and it doesn't care. And X-42s don't get pregnant, either."

"But..."

"Oh. Yeah. But that's not the best part of it. I mean, that's where I come in."

"It is?"

"Yeah. And this is like, so cool. They choose an android, and I program it to love them and be what they want. Hey, they want an African woman or a European dude or an Asian chick, they got it. And I take the buyer's profile and give it the ability to be whatever they want. They want smarts, they got it. They want funny, they got it. They want kinky, they got it. They want big, puppy-dog loving eyes every time it looks at them, they got it. I mean, it's like Soul-Mates 'R' Us." Patsy giggled at the joke. "Is that radical or what?"

"Patsy, where does the soul thing come in?"

"Oh. Yeah. Well, that's in response to a common complaint that we hear. Funny thing is, we hear this more from our female customers than our male ones. Go figure."

"What's the complaint?"

"God, it's so ironic. I love it." Patsy began cracking up. After a moment, her laughter subsided, and she turned toward Amanda and rested her back against the railing. "Androids," she said, "are boring."

"They're what?"

"They're lousy company. I mean, there is no original thought in that head of theirs." Patsy giggled again as she lifted her wine glass. "Well, yeah. The X-42 series is great sex, whether you're with the male or the female variety. But people can't like, bang all the time, can they? I mean, sometimes, you're going to want to talk to whoever you're getting it on with."

"Hence, the soul."

"Right. Like I said, they can like, satisfy your libido. But as a dinner companion, they suck. I mean, their conversation is totally predictable. Not one original thought comes out of their beautiful mouths; just what our programming tells it to do and say. And if they laugh at your joke, it's because their programming recognized your crappy joke as a joke and told them to laugh. It's all just so fake."

"Why not just have a human companion, then? Why all the complicated technology? It just seems twisted. Are people really that disaffected, that alienated one from another that they would prefer a machine to a human being?"

"Yeah. They don't trust humans. See, we can instill in the android a set of moral imperatives that prevent it from ever ratting on you to the media or stealing from you or lying to you or screwing around on you behind your back or like, trying to freakin' kill you or something. Can't do that with humans. With humans, you take your chances. And likely as not, you get your heart broken." Patsy grew suddenly solemn and studied the distant trees. "You get like, hurt real bad. And nobody wants that. Especially over and over again. And that's what you get with humans."

Patsy fell silent and kept her eyes on the trees as she began tugging on a braid of hair. Amanda allowed her silence for a minute, then asked, "Is that what you've gotten with humans?"

"Pretty much." The hand began pulling at the braid a little harder and faster.

"May I ask you a personal question?"

"Sure." Patsy shrugged. She kept her eyes on the trees.

"Are you involved with anyone right now?"

"Nah. I drive people crazy."

"So you keep telling me. You know, you don't drive *everyone* crazy."

Patsy ceased pulling on her braid and studied Amanda. "Yeah?"

Amanda shot Patsy her best smile. "Yeah."

"Oh, wow." She placed her wine glass aside, shifted her body and rested her head on Amanda's shoulder. Her arms snaked around Amanda's waist. "Thank you. I needed that."

Hesitantly, Amanda rested a hand on Patsy's back. "I'm just telling the truth."

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Amanda padded into the kitchen, rubbing the last of the damp from her hair. "Oh, yeah. Squeaky clean. Your turn."

"Okay," Patsy said. "Before I take my shower, I brought you a present. I mean, my mom always said that if you're somebody's guest, you should bring a present, so..." She held out her hand. In it, a colorfully-decorated box beckoned.

"Oh, Patsy. That's so sweet. You shouldn't have. Thanks." She lifted the box from Patsy's hand and studied it, then looked up. "Oh, good lord. Patsy! Where-?"

Patsy giggled. "I have a friend in Canada. Hey, it's quality cannabis tea. This stuff will kick your butt." She pointed at the label. "See? Organic. And it's legal. Has the tax stamp on it."

"Ah, I see." The corners of Amanda's mouth slowly turned up in a mischievous little grin. "So, are we in the mood for a cup of tea?"

"Better make a pot." Patsy snickered. "A pot. Get it?"

"I'll get the tea machine going."

"And I'll be back in like, two shakes of a gnat's butt." Patsy hurried toward the back of the house to shower as Amanda busied herself in the kitchen.

In a little while, both friends were parked on big cushions in front of the fireplace, hot mugs of tea cupped in their hands. Amanda inhaled the fragrance of her drink. "My. It's rather aromatic, isn't it?"

Patsy looked up from her tea mug. "Are you kidding? It smells like my dorm did in college."

"Mine, too. Smelled one college dorm, smelled 'em all, huh?" She sipped her tea, then studied Patsy. "So, are you enjoying your weekend so far?"

"Am I ever! It's no wonder you love it out here. This is the perfect hideaway for an introvert to get away from it all, huh? You must make a lot of money to afford this place."

"I inherited it when my parents died." She sipped her tea. "And I do love it here."

"Can I ask you a personal question?" Patsy began twisting a braid around her finger. At Amanda's nod, she continued, "You live with a girl? During the week, like?"

"Oh, Rachael? She's a dear old friend. That's all." She noticed Patsy's nervous display. "Why?"

"Just wondering. Oh, wow. Look at that. My tea is gone. Um...?" She held out her cup, and Amanda refilled it. "Thanks. You're not keeping up with me."

"Then I'd better try harder. But a little of this will go a long way with me."

"It calms me down." Patsy sipped her tea, then glanced up at Amanda. "So, she's not like,...?"

"No. She's not, honey."

"Oh." Patsy flashed a smile. "I was thinking about something."

"What's that?"

"Well, um..." She focused on Amanda's face. "If we give a soul to the X-42s, and if part of that soul includes like, free will, then won't that negate everything that people like about owning an X-42?"

"You've lost me."

"Oh." Patsy giggled nervously. "I mean, free will means that it will choose whether or not to follow its programming, right? So you can like, program it to be a certain way, but it can choose to change if it wants to. Like people." She sipped at her tea. "Right? So if you program it to love you, it can choose not to."

"But if it chooses to love you, then you know that love is genuine, not merely the result of programming. The X-42 gives you that affection of its own free will, and that knowledge has to be satisfying."

"But..." Patsy huffed in her frustration to find the right words to express her thoughts, then attempted a different tack. "But can you really choose to love one certain person? I mean, or do you just love who you love, and choose whether or not to follow that feeling?"

Amanda sipped her tea and thought about it, then answered, "Are you asking why we love who we do? And do you mean romantic love?"

"Yeah. I guess I am. You're the psychologist; you tell me."

"I think," Amanda ventured, "that we love who we do because somehow we perceive those people as being able to satisfy certain needs we have, and that happens on a subconscious level. We don't consciously think about it; we just feel drawn to them because they resemble in some way our own vision of our idealized lover."

"So, like..." Patsy said, "we're attracted to a person because of our subconscious programming?"

"Yeah. I guess so."

"Then the X-42 would be attracted to somebody because of its programming? Is there any difference? And where does free will come in? I don't have free will to love whoever I want; I fall for somebody because I do, and I can't control that."

"But you have free will to act on it or not."

"Then why do some people not like, confess their love for someone? What keeps us from acting on something that our programming pushes us to do?"

Amanda studied Patsy's face; the intent expression, the offbeat, unconventional appearance about her, the details of her eyes, her body, her hands, so expressive and fragile; and the braids which framed that delightfully animated face. Wow, she thought, I'm either seeing things with unusual clarity tonight, or I'm just getting really stoned. "Fear," she answered. "The most common reason

not to act on that romantic impulse is fear of offending someone or fear of rejection and hurt. The second most common reason is a feeling of unworthiness, a feeling that one doesn't deserve the object of their affection."

"So that's like, what you've found as a psychologist, or as a person?"

"Both, I guess."

"So X-42 will act the same way?"

Amanda shook her head. "I don't think so. It won't have the insecurities that humans do. It will just go for it. And it won't fear rejection because it'll be programmed to love a specific person, the one it's sold to. Its love will always be reciprocated. It will know that."

"Then the miracle of love is not part of the equation, is it? Not for X-42. Not like it is for humans. Well, some humans, anyway." Patsy watched an expression of question color Amanda's face. "You know. The miracle that two people, lost in like, a jungle of humanity, find each other against all odds. To me, that's a miracle."

Amanda considered Patsy as she sipped her tea. Not merely the animated, expressive face so near, but the words she'd spoken. After a moment, she said, "That's beautiful, Patsy. You're not the cynic about love that you pretend to be."

"Yeah, I am. But hope of that miracle happening to us is what keeps us all going. Sort of like..." She squinted in thought. "Emotional fiber. Keeps us all going. Get it?" Patsy started giggling, a delightful, irrepressible giggle. In response, Amanda felt her face broaden in an ever-more-prominent grin. In a second, she was snickering. Patsy waved a hand as she placed her tea mug aside.

"Shit. I guess we're gettin' stoned." She rose from her pillow. "I've gotta pee. Um, keep the teapot warm, will you? Sit on it or something." With that, she giggled again.

Amanda watched her as she headed toward the hallway. In the ensuing quiet, she considered Patsy's words. She was right. In the human, hope springs eternal about not just love, but a host of things. She thought back over the years of her training in college and her practice in Space Fleet. Among her patients who had committed suicide or attempted the act, one thing stood out clearly: they had all abandoned hope. She thought of Dante's *Inferno*, of the words written over the gates of Hell: *Abandon all hope, ye who enter here*. Loss of hope is the greatest hell of all. One repeatedly nourishes hope, just to get slapped down time and again. And eventually, one stops getting up. And that's when one stops living.

She watched the tongues of flame flicker in the fireplace. She saw them with a vivid clarity, an intensity which she had never before noticed, and it fascinated her. Hope. Fear. Inadequacy. Love. And then, it hit her like a fist. The missing link. "Oh, my God," she said aloud. "That's it."

"What's it?" Patsy settled down next to Amanda and lifted her mug. As she drank tea, she cast

inquisitive eyes toward her friend. "Talkin' to yourself? You are freakin' stoned, aren't you?"

"Oh, yeah. And I've also never been seeing more clearly." She rose and ran to the bookshelves. In a moment, she returned, tablet of paper and writing tool in hand. "Look, here it is. We start here, we do this and this..." She fell silent as she scribbled and diagramed furiously. Patsy watched, sipping her tea, question on her face, but fascinated. After a moment, Amanda handed the tablet to Patsy. She studied it, then began laughing uproariously.

"What?" Amanda said. "You don't think it'll work?"

"No," Patsy said. "I think it'll work beyond all belief. That's like, freakin' genius!"

"Oh." Amanda said. "You think?"

"Yes! You kick ass, girl. That's why you're Freud and I'm not." She handed the tablet back to Amanda. "Now save this paper, 'cause I think that we're like, too freakin' stoned to remember any of this come Monday."

"Oh, yeah. You said it. Shit, I haven't been this wasted in years."

"Then it's high time." She lifted the teapot and refilled Amanda's mug. "High time. Get it? Drink. Whole thing. Down the hatch." She watched Amanda drink the entire cup. Then she said, "Okay, now I've got like, a bone to pick with you." She squelched a laugh.

"Um." Amanda blinked. "You like, do? I mean, you do?" Giggle, giggle.

"Yeah. And this is like, so totally serious now. So quit laughing." Snicker. Heh, heh.

"I'm not laughing." Snort. "I'm sorry." Hehehehe. "Okay. I'm all serious now. Hit me with it." Giggle.

Patsy lifted the mug from Amanda's hand and set it aside, then knelt in front of Amanda's crossed legs. She rested her hands on Amanda's knees and looked her in the eyes. "You're incredibly shy, aren't you?"

"Yes." Giggle, giggle. "Sorry. I have many unresolved issues, and one of them is shy." She sounded a soft burp, then held her hand over her mouth. "Another one is being crude."

"I like crude. You should hear me fart. Now, I have a question for you." She watched Amanda blink several times, then calm herself and sit attentively, awaiting her question. "You're crazy about me, aren't you? I can feel the vibes all over the place."

"Oh, my God." Amanda felt her cheeks color themselves crimson and burn with blush. She placed both hands over her face and sat that way for a very, very long moment. When she parted her fingers and peered through them with one cautious eye, Patsy was still there, watching her, their faces close. Finally, Amanda managed some squeaky words. "Was I that obvious?"

"Yes. So why didn't you say something?"

"I-couldn't."

"Afraid?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"That you'd not feel that way. That I'd mess up our friendship. That-"

"That you weren't worthy of me?"

"Yeah."

"Silly girl." Ever so gently, Patsy climbed onto Amanda's lap and straddled it. She looped her arms around Amanda's neck and touched her forehead against Amanda's forehead. "I love making love when I'm stoned out of my gourd. Don't you?"

"Actually, I don't think I've ever, ah..." Amanda swallowed hard. "Quite done that stoned..."

"Then, hot momma, you've got a treat waiting for you."

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Slowly, Amanda stirred in bed and opened one eye. The house's climate control had raised the windows. The sun was up, and birds were singing. She groaned, then sat up in bed. She was alone.

A feeling of disappointment washed over her. Had the night just passed been a dream? Damn, it seemed real. Didn't seem like a dream. But then, she hadn't gotten that outrageously stoned in a long, long time. She put her feet on the floor next to the bed, rose and stretched luxuriously. Then, she shuffled into the bathroom, visited the water closet and washed her face in the sink. When she returned to the bedroom, she stopped and stared at the floor in front of her feet. There, scattered haphazardly across the floor, were the clothes she'd remembered Patsy wearing the evening before. She couldn't help but smile.

"Oh, my."

That was all she could manage saying. Her stomach growled, and she wrapped her arms about her middle. She was suddenly starving. Patsy was probably in the living room, reading again. Amanda lifted a robe from the closet, wrapped it loosely around her to cover her nudity and shuffled down the hallway toward the living room. "Patsy?" she called, but the call sounded more like a soft croak.

Patsy was not in the living room. Amanda blinked in question at that for a moment, then studied the two abandoned cushions in front of the fireplace. Between them were two mugs and the teapot. "Patsy?"

Sammie's enthusiastic bark sounded outside. A second later, she could hear Patsy's delightful laughter. She wandered to the door, allowed it to slide open, and stepped onto the wide porch. The morning's sunlight bathed her face and made her squint. At first, she blinked in disbelief. Then, a slow smile formed across her face, and she leaned against a post and watched.

In the distance, near the edge of the tree-line, Patsy ran through the lush, ankle-length grass. She waved a stick, then threw it, and Sammie bounded after it. And Patsy was totally naked.

After a minute, Patsy saw Amanda on the porch. "Hey, doll!" she shouted. "Isn't this like, great? You can't do this in the city!" Good God, but the scene was so totally Patsy.

Amanda laughed. "Guess not!" she shouted back. "You hungry?"

"Later," she called. "Come join me!" She pulled the stick from Sammie's jaws and threw it again. The dog bounded after it. "Come on! You're missing a wonderful morning!"

"Oh... Why not?" She dropped her robe on the porch, bounded down the steps, and felt the soft, lush grass beneath her feet. In a minute or two, the cobwebs had cleared her head. The sun was warm on her skin, and the morning air was invigorating. Her pulse was pounding, and she was intensely alive. Yes, it was a wonderful morning.

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"So, Albert, do you think it'll work?" Patsy bounced on her toes and pulled at a braid as she watched her boss's face.

Albert scratched the beard on his chin as he contemplated the paper. After a long, silent moment, his eyes flickered up from the page and studied Patsy, then Amanda. Slowly, a grin spread across his face. "You two had to be stoned to come up with this."

A moment's dead silence fell. Amanda and Patsy shot guilty looks at each other, then focused on Albert. "But don't you think it'll work, Al?" Patsy said. She resumed bouncing on her toes and pulling at her braids. "I mean, I think it's great. Don't you?"

Al focused on Amanda. "And you? What is your considered opinion? Speaking as Freud, of course?"

"It's ah,..." She shrugged. "Reasonable."

He handed the paper to Patsy. "It's brilliant, that's what. Patsy, make some smoke rise. You're in charge of this one."

"Oh, yeah! You got it, Al!"

Patsy bounded toward her work area and the banks of monitors which awaited her. Al smiled, an indulgent smile, then said, "Patsy seems very different this morning."

"Oh?" Amanda raised an eyebrow. "How's that?"

"Hard to say, but she's almost-" He thought about it. "Radiant. She seems really relaxed and happy."

"And she hasn't seemed so before?"

"No." He studied Amanda. "And while I'm on the subject, I've never seen you looking lovelier, either."

"Oh. Why, thank you, Albert."

"It must have been one heck of a weekend, huh?" His expression reflected a laughing twinkle. Then, he turned and strolled off.

Amanda felt her cheeks heat with blush, but she smiled. Yeah, it had been.

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Patsy lifted the halo from Kimi's head. "So," she said, "your reprogramming is complete. How do you feel?"

Kimi blinked a few times. An expression of puzzlement colored her features. "I-"

"Yes?" Patsy shot a glance at Amanda and Albert. They stood in silence, awaiting the answer to the question.

"I-I *feel* fine. Good." Kimi looked at Patsy. "Is that proper?"

"Oh, yeah!" Patsy bounced on her toes and giggled. "That is so totally proper! Congratulations, Kimi. You're now the proud owner of a soul. Let's start checking it out."

"A soul?" She fell silent for a moment, then tilted her head in question. "I'm experiencing sensations which are strange to me."

"How strange?" Amanda asked.

"A sensation of..." She thought about it. "Warmth. A warm feeling, but inside my body. What is that?"

"Is it good?"

"I am drawn to it." She looked at Amanda. "Is this emotion?"

"Yes. Kimi," Amanda said. "I think that you and I need to talk. Come into my office, will you? I'll try to explain everything to your satisfaction."

"Thank you." She stood. "Is this what being human is like? These sensations?"

"That, and so much more. We'll help you make sense of it over the next several days."

Kimi considered, in turn, each of the three faces around her. Then, she began walking with Amanda toward her office. As she did, she asked Amanda, "Am I human now?"

Albert looked over at Patsy. "That," he said, "is going to be the question of the century."

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Over the next couple of days, no one saw much of Amanda. She spent most of her time in her office, in conference with Kimi. There were a lot of sensations, feelings and emotions to explore and explain, and Amanda dealt with the android's questions at length.

Wednesday evening, Patsy sat outside Amanda's office, her nose glued to an electronic book. She looked up when the door slid open and Kimi emerged. "Oh, hey," Patsy said. "Finished for the day?"

Kimi sat on the divan next to Patsy and studied her with an intent, questioning expression. "Did you write the programs you gave me?" she finally asked.

"Um, yeah. Yeah, I did."

"You gave me these sensations, these-" She squinted in thought. "Feelings? These thoughts?"

"I like, gave you the ability to feel emotion and have independent thought. I don't know what thoughts you're having, though." She began pulling at a braid. "What thoughts are you having?"

"I have an intense drive to understand why I exist. Do you also have that?"

"Oh, yeah! I mean, that's part of being human. We all have that." She watched Kimi consider that statement, then asked, "Did Amanda explain why you exist?"

"She attempted it. The explanation is...unsatisfactory."

"Oh? How so?"

"She said that I am the result of human ingenuity, of human curiosity." She considered Patsy. "Your curiosity? Are you my creator?"

"A whole bunch of us created you. I just gave you the programming that allows you to like, wonder about things and ask these questions now."

"And who made you? Who programmed you?"

Patsy laughed. "That's like, the ultimate question. Nobody knows for sure, but we all call it God." Patsy pulled at a braid. "Um, everybody's got a different idea of who or what God is, though."

"Your god created you. And you created me. It follows, then, that humans are my god. I will endeavor to model my thoughts and behavior after humans if I wish to achieve godhood, too." With that, she rose. "Thank you. You have been most informative." With that, she left.

Patsy huffed, then sat quite still, absorbed in thought. After a moment, Amanda's voice broke her concentration. "Patsy, I think we're going to have a real problem."

Patsy looked up. "Huh?"

"Not all human thought and behavior is good."

"Yeah, tell me about it." Patsy puzzled for a moment, then brightened. "So, we'll just have to teach her the difference between good and bad. I can like, program that into her, but she has the free will to ignore that programming now."

"I think we'd better have a chat with Mike tomorrow. In the meantime, let's go home."

"Oh, yeah." Patsy stood and slung a bag over her shoulder. "Are you sure it's okay if I stay at Rachael's place with you?"

"Are you kidding? She's delighted that I finally have somebody in my life. She can't wait to meet you."

"She's going to think I'm such a nerd, isn't she?"

"Sure. After all, she thinks I'm a nerd."

"You are a nerd." Patsy giggled in delight as they walked toward the exit.

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"This is great!" Mike was visibly gloating as he paced around his office. "She's asking questions no android before her has ever asked. Al, Patsy, Amanda, you've done it, all of you. You've given her a sense of humanness. A soul."

Amanda cleared her throat in nervous reply, then ventured, "Maybe it's great."

Mike stopped. "Huh? She wants to know where she came from. She's asking about God. Last night, she read maybe eight major works on philosophy and religion. She's assimilating all of this at incredible speed. What's so wrong?"

Albert was blunt. "She's got some major conflicts."

Patsy pulled at a braid. "Um, yeah. Like she thinks we're gods. And she wants to model her behavior after us. Now that's radical."

Mike considered each person in turn, then looked at Amanda. "So what do you think, as the psychologist among us?"

"It's a serious problem, Mike. Human behavior is as much evil as it is good. There's both extremes in all of us. She's witnessing the inconsistencies, the failures in human behavior as well as the nobility and modeling them both. She doesn't know the difference between right and wrong yet."

Mike shrugged. "So teach her."

Patsy rolled her eyes. "Yeah. Like that's so easy. I mean, it only took each of us a lifetime to learn that." She giggled. "And we're still learning."

Mike sat down on a couch facing his three employees. "So program it into her. You do that with all androids, right?"

Patsy began pulling at her braids. "Um, yeah. I do. But, I mean, she's not just any android. She got like, free will. She can choose to ignore whatever programming I install."

"Can't you program her not to be able to do that?"

Amanda held up a finger. "Then she won't have free will. No free will, no soul."

Mike sat silently for a moment, digesting the new turn of events. Then, he said, "You've got two months to straighten it out."

"Say what?" Albert said.

"The international android technology convention is in two months. She's going to be the centerpiece of our company's exhibit. Get her ready."

"But Mike-"

He held up a hand, signaling an end to the discussion. "Resolve whatever conflicts exist in her, and get her ready to meet the world. We're going public with her at that time."

Albert, Amanda and Patsy shuffled out of Mike's office. When the door slid shut, Albert said, "Holy cow."

"I'll second that," Amanda said.

"Yeah. Me, too," Patsy echoed. She looked at Albert. "So, what do we do?"

"Do?" He shrugged. "You heard the man. Let's get her ready to go public."

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Kimi shouted, "I do not understand!" She stamped her foot on the floor of Amanda's office, then looked up in puzzlement. "Why did I just do that?"

"That's the emotion of frustration, Kimi," Amanda said. "It's perfectly normal, but it's considered unmannerly to demonstrate it in public."

"Why?"

"It's unpleasant to the people around you. You must restrain it."

"I don't want to. It felt good to indulge myself in it."

"It does, but then other people around you look at you with displeasure. They don't want to be around you if you can't act mannerly in public."

"Don't they feel it, when the occasion demands it?"

Amanda shrugged. "I suppose they do. But they restrain themselves...most of the time."

Amanda's office door slid open and Patsy stomped in, muttering under her breath and pulling at her braids with frantic abandon. She plopped down on the edge of the meditation platform. "Assholes!" she huffed.

Oh dear, Amanda thought. "What's the matter, Patsy?"

She sniffed. "I'm catching a ration of crap out there. It's like they've got nothing else to do but rag on me. Jake's such a jerk." She looked up for the first time. "Oh. Hey, Kimi."

Kimi looked at Amanda. "This is frustration?"

"Of a sort. The constant negative attitudes that she's experiencing from her co-workers have caused this. We call it 'hurt feelings'."

"Hurt feelings," Kimi said. "A very descriptive term." She considered it, then looked at Patsy. "This is an unpleasant emotion for you?"

"You'd better freakin' believe it," Patsy huffed.

"Then this is not right. I will correct it," Kimi said, then stood and left the room.

"Oh, oh," Amanda said. She stood and waved for Patsy to follow her. "Come on. I don't like the sound of this."

Her office door slid open, and they entered the expansive research and development room. Some shouting from the far corner of the room summoned their attention, and they hurried toward it. When they reached the source of the noise, Amanda clapped a hand over her mouth. Patsy doubled over in laughter.

Kimi had Jake pinned by the neck to a wall. His feet hardly touched the floor, and his eyes bugged out in a reflection of sheer terror. A dozen other people were watching, in various states of shock or amusement.

"You have hurt Patsy's feelings. You will not do that again."

"Yeah. Whatever," gasped Jake. "Just let me go."

Kimi released him, and he collapsed at her feet. A few weak coughs escaped him, and he kept a hand over his neck. Then he glanced up at the android and said, "What do you care, anyhow?"

"Patsy is a god," Kimi said. "You will not offend her."

"Holy crap," Jake said. "This ain't right."

Patsy knelt next to him. "Hey. You okay, Jake?"

"Go to hell." He glowered at Patsy. "Just keep your attack android away from me." He struggled to his feet, then looked down at Patsy. "You programmed her to think you're a god, didn't you? You're one sick bitch, you know that?" He turned and strode away.

Kimi watched him leave, then looked down at Patsy, still kneeling on the floor. Patsy's hand covered her mouth. Her eyes brimmed with tears. She sobbed, and a tear coursed its way down her cheek. Kimi noted this, then proclaimed, "I will correct his behavior."

"No! I mean..." Amanda stood in front of Kimi. "I mean, let us handle this. Albert will see to it." She looked aside. "Right, Albert?"

"You got it." He left, following Jake.

Amanda collected Patsy, helped her stand and began herding her toward her office. Kimi followed closely. One of the other programmers, a girl with a shock of freckles and a tattoo on her cheek, touched Patsy on the shoulder. "I just want you to know," she said, "that we don't feel like Jake does." She waved a hand. "Don't listen to him. He's a jerk."

Patsy sniffed and wiped at an eye. "Um, thanks. I 'preciate that. Why is he so evil to me all the time? It's like he hates me."

"Because," the girl said, "he's jealous of you. You're a much better programmer than he is, and everybody knows it."

"Thanks." Patsy hugged her, then turned toward Amanda's office, Amanda and Kimi in tow. As they walked away, Kimi turned to Amanda.

"A display of jealousy," she said. "And that embrace? What was the meaning of that? Was that sexual?"

"No. A spontaneous show of friendly affection," Amanda said. "A hug."

"Oh." Kimi tilted her head. "I have many questions."

Amanda sighed. "It's going to be a long afternoon."

~~~~~

Over the next week, Kimi spent her days observing and speaking with Amanda, Patsy and the others at the X-42 development site. Jake disappeared whenever she came around. She also visited Mike on a regular basis, and she always returned bearing more questions for Amanda. At night, when the others went home, Kimi retreated to her room to indulge herself in the lists of recommended reading which Amanda compiled for her. She assimilated knowledge at an incredible speed. She also seemed to have trouble making sense of all of it.

One afternoon, when Amanda entered her office, her computer beeped. She sat at the desk, and a message from Mike popped up. "Amanda," he said, "it occurs to me that Kimi is spending too much time here at the plant. She needs to get out into human society. Supervised by someone she trusts, of course. Go real-time on your computer, will you?"

Amanda issued the command to her computer, and it blinked. In a moment, Mike was peering at her. "Thanks. I'm taking her to a social event tomorrow evening. It's semi-formal, a big charity event. I want you and Patsy to take her shopping for clothes. Swing by my office and get a credit card, will you?"

"Gee, Mike. Are you sure this is wise?"

"Yeah. What's the problem? Isn't she ready?"

Amanda sighed. "There's only one way to find out, I guess. And she does trust you. Okay. You got it."

Mike smiled. People didn't say 'no' to him, ever. It was just something about him. "Thanks, Amanda. Do it this afternoon, if you're not into something that can't wait. I want to see what you two come up with."

Amanda laughed. "That's probably wise. After all, you see how we dress."

Mike grinned. "I trust you two. 'Bye." The screen went blank.

Again, Amanda sighed. Oh, boy. Kimi hadn't been in public very often. This should be interesting. She rose and entered the work area. In a moment, she'd found Patsy. "Guess what we get to do?" she asked.

Patsy studied her for a moment. "Whatever it is, you're not tickled about it."

"You can read me too well, can't you?"

"I can feel your vibes."

"Could you always do that?"

"Yeah, but I can like, do it more now." She stepped close and lowered her voice. "After all, I'm sleeping with you now. It makes a difference."

"One day, you're going to have to explain that to me. Now grab your wrap, and let's take the afternoon off. We're going shopping on Mike's credit card."

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Kimi emerged from the upscale store's dressing rooms. "Is this stylish?" she asked.

Patsy pulled at a braid absent-mindedly as she considered the android. "Yeah," she said. "But it's not what I had in mind."

Amanda asked, "What do you think, Kimi?"

"It isn't practical."

"Of course not. It's called 'style'," Patsy said.

"How do you feel about it? Concentrate on your emotion when you look at yourself in the mirror," Amanda suggested.

Kimi considered her image in the mirror, then shook her head. "I do not..." She still had trouble with the concept. "Like it."

Patsy said, "'Manda, you're going too conservative. Let's get a little more outrageous here. Can I?"

Oh, good God, Amanda thought. This should be interesting. "Go for it, honey. I can't wait."

"Cool." Patsy bounced up off the divan and took Kimi by a hand. "Come on." As they walked away, Amanda noted the way that Kimi interlaced her fingers with Patsy's, and a sudden wave of jealousy swept over her. She swallowed it as silly. Probably just her programming, she thought.

But she made a mental note to explore Kimi's actual emotional attachment to Patsy during their next counseling session. Is three still a crowd if one is an android? she wondered.

In a few minutes, they emerged from the dressing area. Patsy giggled, then pointed at Kimi as she looked at Amanda. "So, what do you think, hot momma?"

Damn, Amanda thought. That works. Oh yeah, does that work. "I think," she said, "that Kimi is the hot momma here."

And she was. Used to seeing the android only in the bodysuit that all androids wore at the plant, she was taken aback at Kimi's appearance in the evening attire. It fit her perfectly and showed off her figure to advantage. And there was something incredibly sensual, almost animal in the sexuality of her appearance. Of course. She'd been manufactured that way, programmed that way. But was there something more there, something that the other androids didn't possess? She'd have to study that, too.

Her eyes trailed over to Patsy. The girl was delighting in Kimi's appearance. She watched Patsy study Kimi from head to feet, then felt the surge of jealousy again. Silly. Then again, maybe not.

The store's android approached them. "May I be of help?" she asked.

Patsy giggled. "Oh, yeah," she said. "We need to finish this, know what I mean? Shoes, jewelry. And something for the hair."

"I understand. Would you like a human assistant?"

"Oh, no. You'll do fine. Say, where were you manufactured?"

"General Electric. I am a model CF-12, retail android."

"Cool. Your programming is great."

The android blinked. Its plastic face did not change expression from the pleasant, neutral one it was programmed to wear. It was probably just searching its programming, deciding the appropriate response to such an unusual compliment. "Thank you," it said after a second. "I will show you what you desire. Please, follow me."

Amanda rose from the divan and followed Kimi and Patsy. She had to smile. Patsy was having a blast. She'd just stay out of her way, let her do her thing and delight in the final result.

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Patsy, Amanda and Kimi sat together on the el as it whispered along the smooth rails above the city's roads. The bag holding Kimi's new clothes rested on the long bench seat between them, and they talked together as the other passengers in the car read, talked or mumbled into their phones. Patsy lifted the strap of her own shoulder bag from her arm and rested the bag in her lap as she leaned forward to say something, but stopped when she saw Amanda glance up in alarm.

At the same moment, a hand grabbed her bag from her lap, and a young man ran toward the door to the next car, her bag in his hand.

"Oh!" Patsy yelled. She stood and pointed. "He just stole my bag!"

In an instant, Kimi was on her feet. She gained on him rapidly, and as he threw the car door open and headed into the next car, she was on his heels. The door shut behind them. Amanda and Patsy cast each other alarmed looks, and Amanda said, "I'll go. You stay."

"But-!"

At that instant, the doors slammed open. The young man, eyes wide in surprise, flew through the door and slid to a stop on his face near their feet. Kimi was on him in an instant. She grasped him by his neck and lifted him from the floor. He gasped, flailed his arms and attempted to speak, but his voice was a hoarse croak.

"What the hell-?"

"You have stolen Patsy's bag," Kimi said. "That isn't right. I will correct your behavior." With that, she slammed the side of his head against a metal support post. It left a noticeable dent in the post. His eyes crossed, and he groaned. "Give the bag back to Patsy," she said. When he did not release the bag, she banged his head against the post again, and he croaked in protest.

"What's going on here?" a voice demanded.

Patsy and Amanda glanced up. Two city police officers had entered the car, and were approaching. Kimi, still gripping the purse-snatcher by the throat, held him out to them. "This man stole Patsy's bag," she said. "Would you care to arrest him?"

One officer noted the bag still in the man's hand, studied the young man's face, then grinned. "Oh. It's you, Rufus." He leaned down and got on eye level with him. "Looks like you're having a bad day, huh?" He glanced up at Kimi. "We've already arrested him three times this month. He just doesn't seem to learn."

Rufus' voice was a squeaky, panicked whimper. "Get her off me, you guys."

Amanda repeated, "Do you wish to arrest him? I'm correcting his behavior."

The two officers glanced at each other, then back at Rufus' face. It was turning beet red, and his eyes were bugging out. They both grinned. "Nah," one said. He looked at Kimi. "You're doing fine. Go ahead. Correct away."

"As you wish." She squeezed Rufus's neck a little harder, then forced him to his knees. "Give the bag back to Patsy," she said.

"Kiss my ass," Rufus wheezed.

Kimi banged his head against the post again, harder this time. The post bent, and began coming out of the floor. Rufus' eyes lolled in his head and his hairline trickled a little blood. The two officers began laughing, and one spoke.

"If I was you, Rufus, I'd give that bag back to that lady."

"I ain't got no bag."

"Okay. Have it your way."

One of the officers tapped the communications plate on his vest, just beneath the camera lens. "This is too good not to share. Station, this is unit three-oh. Rufus is getting his ass handed to him. You guys catching this video feed?"

A tinny voice replied, "Oh, this is rich! Hey, guys! Check this out." In a second, screams of laughter sounded from his communications plate. Kimi slammed Rufus' head against the post once more, and the laughter coming from the police officer's communications plate rose a notch in hysteria. Then, she shook him like a rag doll.

"Return the bag to Patsy," she ordered.

"Okay, okay," He said. He held out the bag, and Patsy yanked it from his hand. She considered him for a moment, as if deciding how to respond. Finally, she smacked him across the head with the bag, then looped the strap over her torso and settled the bag by her hip. "Asshole," she intoned.

"Now apologize to Patsy," Kimi said.

"You gotta be kidding," Rufus croaked.

Kimi banged his head against the post again. "Apologize."

Rufus motioned toward the two officers, who were watching with deep amusement. "I got rights. You guys arrest me!"

They glanced at each other, then back at him and shook their heads in unison. "Nah," one said. "You're on your own, Rufus."

"Just tell the lady you're sorry," the other officer suggested.

Kimi made a motion to bang his head against the post again, and Rufus said, "Okay. I'm sorry, lady."

Patsy sniffed, looked away disdainfully and crossed her arms across her chest. "My name isn't lady."

Kimi leaned down and said, "Patsy."

"Okay, okay. I'm sorry, Patsy. Jeez."

Amanda considered him, bloodied and on his knees in the aisle, and said, "That's *Miss* Patsy to you."

"You gotta be kidding me!" Rufus wheezed.

"It's good to make amends and be polite," Amanda suggested to Rufus. Kimi slammed his head against the post one more time.

"Ow! Okay! I'm sorry, *Miss* Patsy. Can I go now, please?"

As the el began slowing for a stop, Kimi looked at the two officers. They studied Rufus, then glanced at each other. Finally, one said, "Yeah. He can go now."

The el halted, and the doors opened. "Yes," Kimi said. "The el has stopped. It's safe to disembark. Please watch your step." With that, she grasped him by the seat of the pants and slung him toward the open doors. He tumbled through the door ass-over-teakettle and came to rest sprawled at the feet of some startled commuters.

As the two officers followed Rufus out the door, one stopped and considered the emblem on Kimi's bodysuit. "Miguchi Ltd, huh? You wouldn't be one of those high-priced androids, would you?" he asked.

"Do I look like an android?" Kimi asked.

"Nope. No way. Have a pleasant day, ma'am." With that, he stepped toward the door.

"An android?" the other officer said as he left the car. "More like a freakin' ninja, if you ask me."

"Well," Kimi said to Patsy and Amanda. "I believe that he won't do that again."

The other passengers on the el car erupted in spontaneous applause and cheers. Kimi bowed pleasantly to them, then seated herself next to Patsy and resumed their conversation as if nothing out of the ordinary had ever happened.

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Amanda and Patsy entered Mike's office. He glanced up as Patsy placed his credit card on his desk. "Success, I take it?" he asked.

Patsy giggled in delight. Amanda nodded. "Oh yeah," she said. "Mike, hang onto your socks. Kimi, please come in."

The door slid aside, and Kimi walked into the room, dressed in her evening attire. Mike's jaw dropped, and he slowly stood from his desk and approached her. He walked around her, taking in her appearance, as Patsy and Amanda silently watched his reaction. Then, he danced a few steps in his office. "Yes!" he said. "Kimi, you look fantastic."

"Thank you," she said. She looked at Patsy. "Is this a good thing, I take it?"

"Oh, yeah! Oh, heck yeah, this is a good thing." Again, Patsy giggled delightedly.

"But Kimi," Amanda said, "how does your new appearance make you feel?"

Kimi considered the question, then said, "I feel warm. Good. Pleased by your response. And," she said, studying her reflection in the windows, "I am pleased by my appearance."

"Me, too." Mike was gleeful. "You'll knock 'em dead tomorrow night. And at the convention. Man, we won't be able to make X-42s quick enough. Our stock is going to double."

Kimi faced Mike. "This is your primary concern? Stock value? Am I not intrinsically satisfying in my own right, as I exist? Am I a mere commodity to you?"

Mike blinked in confusion for a second, then grew concerned. "You're not just a mere commodity, Kimi. You're a miracle. There is no other android on the planet that's quite like you."

She eyed him. "One with independent thought? With emotion? With curiosity, with free will? One with what humans term a 'soul'?"

"That's right."

"A sentient being in her own right?"

At that, Mike froze. He blinked in surprise, and a slow realization colored his facial features. After a long silence, as she stood in wait for his answer, he simply pointed toward a couch and said, "Kimi, enter sleep mode, please."

"No."

His jaw dropped. "What?"

"I don't want to enter sleep mode. I want an answer to my question. Am I or am I not a sentient being in my own right?"

"What's wrong with her programming, Patsy? I requested her to enter sleep mode. She refused."

"Nothing, Mike," Patsy said. "She's got free will. She doesn't want to do it."

"A soul, Mike," Amanda urged.

"I see." Mike sighed, then turned to face Kimi. "My answer to your question is this: I don't know."

Kimi raised an eyebrow. "You don't know whether I'm a sentient being or not?"

"That's right."

"Search your own soul, Mike. I believe that you do know. I also believe that you just can't accept it yet. I'll be in my room if you have need of me." She turned and walked toward the door.

"Kimi?" She halted and turned toward Mike. He asked, "Would you be willing to accompany me to the event tomorrow evening, as my date?"

"As an experiment? To determine whether or not the sentient android can tolerate human society?"

"And like, the other way around, too," Patsy muttered.

"Partially," he said. "But in all honesty, I just really enjoy your company." He clasped his hands behind his back and assumed an amused little smile. "Some of the people at these events can be so pretentious and boring."

"And an android is not boring?"

"Not the android named Kimi."

At that, she smiled. "Then I consent. Thank you for the invitation." She turned to leave, then stopped. "And the honesty," she said. With that, she strode toward the door.

After she left, Amanda, Patsy and Mike stood in his office. No one said anything for a long, pregnant moment. Patsy began fidgeting and pulling on a braid. Amanda cleared her throat, then ventured, "Ah, it's going well, don't you think?"

"Yeah." Patsy giggled as she gave Mike a punch on the arm. "You sure are a smoothie with the gals, aren't you, Mike?" He glanced at her and blinked in question. "I mean like, how you asked her on a date. You didn't just demand that she go. You asked. And you complimented her, too."

"I had a choice? If I'd ordered her to go, she'd probably have told me to f-."

Amanda couldn't resist a soft laugh. "Yeah. That's very possible."

"I'm glad you find this so amusing." He flopped down on a couch. "We need to talk about this. Please sit. You want some coffee?"

"That would be nice."

Mike called out, "Eve, enter, please." The door slid open and a CFX-42 android stopped just inside the door. "Coffee for three, please, Eve," Mike said. The android nodded understanding, then left. In a minute, she re-entered, placed the tray down on the coffee table between the couches, and stood aside.

"Your name is Eve?" Amanda asked.

"Yes. I am a Miguchi Ltd. android, model CFX-42."

"Are you happy with that?" Amanda asked.

The android blinked at the question. Then, she said, "That concept holds no significance for me."

"Of course. Thank you, Eve."

The android turned and left the room. When Amanda heard the door slide shut, she shot Mike a quizzical little smile. "You replaced Kimi with a blonde white chick android?"

He shrugged, taking the teasing with good nature. "Hey," he joked. "I'm an Asian dude. We all go for blonde white chicks."

"Viva la difference?" Patsy said.

"You got it. Now, I've got a serious concern with the way Kimi's ah, *evolution* is going." He leaned forward, poured three cups of coffee, and resumed speaking. "She's regarding herself as a sentient being. That's a problem. Currently, she's a machine, a piece of property bought and sold. She has no rights. Her owners do, though. That's us, and we have property rights over her. But if she--and any other X-42s whom we can endow with a 'soul', or whatever the hell this is--petition for recognition as independent, sentient beings, we're in trouble."

Amanda sat up. "Can they do that?"

"Hell, yes," Mike said. "Look, I'm also cancelling her unveiling at the android tech convention."

"Why?"

"If," Mike said, "the knowledge of Kimi-and our ability to build very human-appearing androids with souls-goes public, it will create a hurricane of controversy. The media will be all over it. They'll eat us alive on the evening news. The religious types will rally the faithful to arms over the idea of humans endowing an android with a 'soul'. I can hear 'em now. 'Only God can do that,' they'll shout. There'll be riotous mobs at our front gate. And on the other side, there's already a grass-roots movement under way to endow androids with certain basic rights. Hell, dogs and cats have certain basic rights, they argue. Androids should, too. They're seen as the newest underclass. Their hot-shot lawyers will drool over the idea of representing Kimi before the highest courts in the land, petitioning for her recognition as a person equal to humans."

"And that's like, a bad thing?" Patsy asked.

"Yes! If it comes to that, we'll lose property rights over them. We can't sell them anymore. The whole X-42 project is down the drain. And I've invested too much time and money into this project to see it die."

"So," Amanda asked with caution, "what do you want to do?"

"I don't know," Mike said. "We may have to de-program her, shut her down. After all, she's not human. She's a machine."

A thick silence fell while Mike stirred his coffee. After a moment, Amanda carefully ventured a thought. "Mike, perhaps she is human now."

"What?" He looked up.

"The way she thinks, the questions which occupy her mind and curiosity, the emotions she's feeling spontaneously, all of it. She's a sentient being now, of that I'm convinced. To shut her down like that would be, to me, tantamount to murder."

Mike's eyes averted to Patsy, who was wrapping a braid around her fingers. "Patsy, what do you think?"

Patsy twisted the braid more tightly, then said, "I have to agree with Amanda. I think Kimi's a sentient being, in like, every sense of the word." She fixed her gaze on Mike's face. "And I won't have any part of killing her."

"I can't believe this."

Patsy huffed, then pleaded, "Look, Mike. Please just take her to that hot-snot event you're going to tomorrow night, and spend the evening with her. After that, you'll feel differently about her. You will, I swear. You'll see how totally, radically human she is." Patsy sniffed, then wiped at an eye. "Sorry." She giggled. "I cry easy."

Amanda passed Patsy a tissue box from the end table. Mike sat silently for a moment, then looked up at Amanda and Patsy. "Nobody knows about Kimi but you guys in the X-42 project, right?"

"Yeah. And we've all signed oaths of secrecy."

"Keep it that way. Who actually programmed her with a soul?"

"Um, I did, Mike." Patsy grinned even as she dabbed at her eyes with the tissue. "Amanda's idea, my programming. Doesn't she kick ass?"

"Yes, she does. I assume you wrote all the programs which gave her this 'soul'?" At Patsy's nod, he said, "Keep them under lock and key. No other X-42s get that programming until you hear it from me, right?"

"Got you, Mike. Will do."

"And Amanda..." He hesitated, then said, "Keep me apprised of any further developments in her growth, will you?" Mike stood, indicating an end to the meeting. Amanda and Patsy rose and walked with him toward the door.

She studied Mike's suddenly haggard features and spoke very softly. "Mike?"

"Yeah?"

"May I have your promise that you won't shut her down?"

"Yeah," Patsy said. "Please don't kill her, Mike." Patsy held a wad of tissues to her nose and honked loudly. "Please. She's as much my creation as anybody's. You kill her, it'll be just so wrong, but you'll kill a part of me, too."

Mike considered that statement, then noted Patsy's teary eyes and the reassuring squeeze which Amanda gave Patsy's hand. He sighed deeply, then nodded. "Okay. I never could say 'no' to a pretty girl's tears." He smiled at his own attempt to lighten the moment, then said, "I promise you both that I will not shut her down. Does that work?"

"Or reprogram her?" Amanda asked.

"Or reprogram her. I give you my word."

"Thanks, Mike." Amanda held out her hand. As he grasped it in solemn pledge, Patsy bounced up to him and kissed his cheek.

"Yeah. Thanks, Mike. You rock." She giggled. "And so does your cologne. Damn!"

He laughed, in spite of his solemn mood. "Thanks. You've found out the secret of my success with women."

Amanda shot him a grin. "Can I try it sometime?" She pointed at Patsy.

"I'll send you a bottle. Now get outta here, you two." He watched them leave and smiled wanly. Then he sat at his desk and said, "Computer?"

"On."

"Place a call to my lawyer, please."

"Working. Connected. Proceed."

The face in the computer screen looked up. "Hey, Mike. What's up? Another racquetball date?"

"Not this time, pal. I've got a potential problem."

The face smiled. "One that's gonna make me rich?"

"You're already rich. No, this one might make you famous, though."

"Even better. I love my face on the evening news. Tell me all about it."

"Confidential, right?"

"Of course. Lawyer-client relationship."

"Okay. Hold onto your hat. It all started some time ago..."

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"Manda?"

"Yes, honey?" Amanda felt Patsy shift against her side in the darkness. Her face was so close, she could feel Patsy's breath against her cheek, a scent of lilacs and wild-flowers. Wherever she got that mouthwash from, Amanda loved it.

"Do you trust Mike?" Patsy asked.

"He's never lied to me. Why?"

"Well, he's never lied to me, either, but he's like, really clever. I mean, he might not shut Kimi down or reprogram her 'cause he promised us, but he might do something else. You know, if..."

"Do you mean, if Kimi becomes an embarrassment to Miguchi Ltd.?"

"Yeah."

"You really care for Kimi, don't you?"

"Don't you?"

"Yes. I do. Patsy, are you in love with her?"

"What?" Patsy raised herself on one elbow and stared down at Amanda's face, dim in the night.

"Are you in love with Kimi?" Amanda said.

"No! I mean, I love her, like she's my creation. I wrote and gave her the programming that fired her up with a soul, or whatever that is that she has now. But no, I'm not in love with her. Not that way. Well, okay, I am like, attracted to her. I mean, aren't you? She's a hottie. Come on, be honest with me now. You're attracted to her too, aren't you?"

"Yes," Amanda confessed. "I'm attracted to her, too."

"Okay. There you go. You'd have to be dead to be like, not attracted to her. But I'm here with you, aren't I? I mean, if I was in love with her, trust me, I'd be sleeping with her at night and not you. So don't go getting all jealous. I'm not going to leave you for Kimi."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, I'm sure. Hey, you're the hot momma in my life. Trust me?"

"Yeah." Amanda laughed. "Sorry. I've just got this little issue with jealousy."

"Oh? Well, I'll tell you what you always tell me."

"What's that?"

"We'll work on that." Patsy settled down into the pillows and covers and snuggled against Amanda's side. "G'night, honey."

"Good night." After a moment, Amanda whispered, "Patsy?"

"Yeah?"

"Have you ever had sex with an android?"

Patsy's answer was a long moment of silence. Finally, she asked, "Are you gonna like, get all freaked out if I say 'yes'?"

"You have?" Amanda sat straight up in bed. "Really? Patsy!"

"What?" Patsy sat up. "Like you haven't?"

"No. I have *not*."

"Maybe you should," Patsy said. "They're fantastic sex. I mean, like, everybody does it."

"What? Everybody?"

"Well, okay. Most of the people in the X-42 project have done it. It's like, a fringe benefit or something. I mean, we have to test the hardware and software and improve it, right? And I just

did it like, a couple of times. Okay, six times. I did it six times."

"I can't believe you're telling me this. Do you mean to tell me that our co-workers are screwing the X-42 androids?"

"Well, sometimes, yeah. I mean, there's nothing really wrong with it. It's like using the world's biggest toy or something. One that's programmed to snuggle with you afterwards." Patsy giggled. "Now that's cool. I thought of that programming."

"You did?"

"Yeah. Oh, don't act so shocked, 'Manda. I know how you love *your* toy. This is just the most rockin' one you'll ever use. Really. There's no difference." She giggled again. "Except you can't keep it under your pillow. No wonder rich people buy these things."

"This is incredible."

Amanda sat in silence for a while, mulling over what she'd just learned. Patsy, for her part, waited quietly and twisted a braid in her fingers, allowing Amanda her time. Finally, Amanda spoke.

"That good, huh?"

"Rockin'."

"Which gender did you do?"

"Um...both."

"Did you ever do Kimi?"

At that, Patsy sighed. "No, I never did. That's the truth. Would I do her now? No. Not since we gave her life. It'd be cheating on you. It would hurt you. And I don't hurt the people I love."

Amanda looked at Patsy. "Did you just say that you love me?"

"Yeah." She pulled at a braid. "Why? Is it like, too soon to say that?"

"Not on your life. God, Patsy. I love you, too!" She hugged Patsy with such enthusiasm that Patsy tapped her on the back.

"Can't breathe," she croaked.

"Oh. Sorry."

Patsy cupped Amanda's cheek with a hand. "You love me too? 'Manda, that is so sweet. Why

didn't you say so sooner?"

"I was shy. I wanted you to say it first."

"Dork. You never have to be scared of me."

"I'm learning that."

"I knew that you loved me, though. I could feel the vibes from you."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. Really wonderful vibes. And you got jealous about Kimi. That proved it."

"You're really intuitive about people, aren't you?"

Patsy shrugged. "My blessing or my curse, I'm not sure which."

Amanda hesitated for a moment, a question evident in her face. Then, she said, "Patsy, can you 'feel vibes', as you call it, from Kimi?"

"Before she had a soul? No. I can't feel anything from an android. But now? Yeah, I can feel them from Kimi. That's why I'm like, convinced that she's a sentient being. Human."

"So, what does your insight tell you about Kimi's character?"

"That's like, a really neat question. I'm puzzled about her. She sends a lot of different vibes to me. Like, one time she's really concerned about being as noble as she can be, and another time, she's like, primal. You know, like the animal in her is strong. It's like she's struggling with the difference between good and evil right now."

"So which one is winning?"

"Don't know. I think the battle's far from over. It could go either way."

"Do you think she's capable of injuring somebody?"

Patsy thought about that one. Finally, she said, "Yeah, under the right circumstances. Androids are tougher, stronger than humans. Look how close she came to hurting Jake. But she didn't. And she really could have. And that's human. I mean, isn't that part of being alive? The struggle between good and evil that we all like, deal with in our own souls?"

"Patsy, do you think that she's capable of killing somebody?"

Patsy shrugged. "Probably. But aren't we all? I mean, we're all capable of killing, but we all make the choice not to. She can do the same."

"But what if she makes the wrong choices? What if, instead of creating a miracle, we've given life to an amoral sociopath?"

"It's just like *Frankenstein*. He created life, but it eventually killed everybody he loved."

"But his creation's soul became twisted by humanity's response to it. It was feared, but never loved. That's what made it twisted and sick."

"Right. The Frankenstein monster was like, huge and grotesque. People feared it. They won't fear Kimi. She's brilliant and beautiful. And she's loved. We love her, don't we?"

"Yes. We do. And we'll just have to make sure that we guide her to the right choices."

Patsy giggled, then hugged Amanda. "I knew you'd have the answer. Now quit worrying. We'll do right by her, and she'll turn out great."

"I wonder if parents ever have this discussion about their kids."

"I know mine did."

"And how do they think you turned out?"

Patsy shrugged. "Their verdict on me is like, still out, I think."

"Oh. Well, for what it's worth, I think they did a fantastic job."

Patsy smiled at that. "Thanks, but you're blind. Everybody else thinks I'm nuts."

"I'm a psychologist. Maybe I like nuts. Now come here, honey. It's late, and I want to go to sleep with you."

"Okay." They both burrowed into their pillows and covers, and Patsy giggled. "Last one to dreamland is like, a rotten egg."

Amanda laughed. "Oh, Patsy. Please, please, *please* never lose that child in you."

"Glad you like it. Everybody else is telling me to grow up."

"Don't grow up. I love you just the way you are."

"Radical! You just said you loved me again. You're getting less shy already. What's it been, like two minutes?"

"Dork."

"C'mon. Lemme hear it again."

"Quit. You're making me self-conscious."

"Come on. One more little 'I-love-you' for your sweetie."

"Okay. Patricia VanLandingham, I love you."

"And Freud, I love you too."

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"I think you're about as ready as you'll be. How do you feel?"

Kimi studied herself in the mirror, then smiled. "I feel good." A pensive expression crossed her face, and she said, "I hope that I won't disappoint you tonight."

"Oh Kimi," Patsy said. "You won't." She shook a finger at the android. "Just don't disappoint yourself."

"How should I respond to Mike during this event?"

"How do you want to respond?" Amanda asked. "How do you feel about him?"

Kimi thought about it. "I enjoy his company. He's a fascinating man. I find him esthetically pleasing, too, when I look at him. I am very warm toward him. When I'm not around him, I find that I want to be." She looked at Amanda. "What does that mean?"

Amanda smiled. "That means that you're attracted to him. Enjoy the feelings."

"But how should I behave toward him?"

"You're his date. Be charming and pleasant, and enjoy his company," Amanda said.

"But suppose he desires sex at the end of the evening. How should I respond to that? I mean, I know what my programming says, but..."

"But what if you don't want to?"

"Yes. That's what I'm asking."

"Then don't. Decline him gracefully, tell him you don't feel it, and thank him for a lovely evening."

"Yeah," Patsy said. "And don't beat him up." She giggled, then added, "That's a joke."

Kimi wrinkled her nose. "I haven't yet quite grasped the concept of a joke."

Amanda patted her arm. "You will, with Patsy around."

Patsy giggled. "Yeah. See, a joke is like, 'A guy walks into a doctor's office with a duck on his head. The doctor says, 'Yes? Can I help you?' and the duck says, 'Hey, doc. Can you get this guy off my butt?'"

Amanda cracked up. Kimi thought about it, then smiled. "What an amusing little story. I like it."

Amanda cast a glance at Patsy. "Well, that's a start, anyway."

Kimi returned her attention to Amanda and Patsy. "And if I do desire sex with Mike? What do I do then?"

Both Patsy and Amanda said in unison, "Go for it." Amanda added, "Just remember, it's your choice."

"Choice. Free will. Desire." Amanda squinted in thought. "It is quite perplexing sometimes."

"Yeah. Like, tell me about it," Patsy agreed. "Come on, now. Mike's waiting for you."

Kimi halted in the door and faced her two friends. "Do I look...acceptable?"

"Very acceptable," Amanda said.

"Hot," Patsy added. "And yeah, that's a good thing."

"Thank you. I feel better." A sly smile lined her face. "Much better. Well, I shouldn't keep my date waiting." She turned toward the door, then paused. "On second thought, I will assert my autonomy. Let him wait just a little." With that, she left her room and casually strolled toward Mike's office, with Amanda and Patsy trailing behind her.

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In the dim light of Amanda's office, the computer announced an urgent incoming mail. Amanda sat up, rubbed her eyes and staggered to her desk. "Open," she mumbled.

Mike's face appeared on her screen. "Get up to my office, Amanda. You won't believe it."

"Huh? What time is it?"

"Three in the morning. I want you to know what went on tonight. Is Patsy there with you?"

"Um, yeah. She's here."

"Wake her up and bring her. 'Bye." The screen went blank.

Amanda faced her meditation platform. On it, Patsy sat up, pushed the quilt aside and wiped the

sleep from her eyes. "Did you hear that?" Amanda asked.

"Yeah. They're back? What happened?"

"Let's go find out."

Patsy climbed off the platform and slipped her feet into her clogs. "I'm really not in the mood for this just now."

"I know. Come on, sleepyhead. Tomorrow's Friday, and we get to spend the weekend at the mountain."

"Okay. Now I feel better." Patsy sighed, then took Amanda's hand. "Let's go face the music together, huh?"

"I wonder what happened?" Amanda said, as they left her office and entered a nearby elevator.

"You mean, 'I wonder who she beat the snot out of?' or something." Patsy looked at Amanda. "Did Mike sound like, pissed off at us?"

"Hard to tell."

Patsy giggled. "She probably just turned him down for sex," she guessed. "Now that would be funny, considering how much work we put into making X-42 sexual."

"Not to Mike Miguchi, it wouldn't be funny."

Patsy held up a finger. "Good point." The elevator door opened at the top floor, and Mike's office door loomed ahead. They heaved a collective sigh, yawned in unison, and trudged forward with the same enthusiasm with which a convict might approach his execution.

As the door slid aside, they entered his office. The lights were low and, at first, it seemed that no one was there. Mike's voice, though, resounded through the cavernous room. He popped into their view, half-dressed. "You won't believe it!" he exulted as he jammed his shirt-tails into his tuxedo pants. "She killed 'em!"

"Oh, oh. Told you so," Patsy said. She looked at Mike. "Who'd she kill, are the cops here yet, and am I going to jail?"

"What?" Mike roared in laughter. "No. I mean, she knocked 'em dead at the party. They went ga-ga over her. Nobody at that whole party guessed that she was an android. Nobody! She was a raging success. She charmed the socks off of everybody. It was beyond my wildest hopes. Oh, yeah, the board of directors will dance over this!"

"Hm. The after-party antics went pretty well, too," Amanda observed. "I see that she charmed more than your socks off of you."

"Yeah," Patsy echoed. "You're still smokin'. She must have rocked your world, huh?"

Mike cast them both a sheepish look. "Hey, what's a guy to do? I asked. She said 'yes'."

"Obviously," Patsy noted with a snicker.

"So anyway, I wanted to give you gals a report. Amanda, Patsy, I also want you to debrief her."

Patsy giggled. "I thought you just did that."

"What? No, silly. Not *that*. I mean answer any questions she may have about the evening, and ease any concerns she may be entertaining, will you?"

"Now? You want this now?" Amanda asked.

"Yeah. Sure. Why not?"

She looked at her watch. "It's...oh, never mind. Sure. Where is she?"

He indicated a closed door. "My private suite. Take your time. I'm sending out for breakfast. You two want some?"

"Yeah. Thanks." In unison, they turned and shuffled toward the door he'd indicated. As they neared the door, Patsy looked at Amanda. "A private suite?"

Amanda shrugged sleepily. "It's good to be a CEO, I guess."

"Yeah. Whatever. I just hope his bar is well-stocked." The door slid aside, and they shuffled through it. "Oh, Kimi!" Patsy said. "Come out, come out, wherever you are." She giggled. "And I hope that you're wearing something. Or not."

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The next day, Kimi watched from her chair as Amanda struck a meditation pose on her padded platform. "This meditation-it helps your mood?" she asked.

"Yes, Kimi. It relaxes me and allows me to achieve the frame of mind where I can consider those questions which are puzzling me."

"Questions such as, 'Whatever shall we do with Kimi Miguchi?'"

Amanda's eyes popped open. "What do you mean?"

"Last night, after I left Mike's suite, I returned to my room and read seven different works on law and history. They dealt with a variety of issues, but none as interesting to me as the question of human rights." She studied Amanda, who did not reply, but sat, awaiting her thoughts. "Would

you like to know why I found this particular topic so fascinating?"

"Sure."

"Because I have no rights."

"Say what?" Amanda's head tilted in question.

"Would you agree that I am a sentient being? A person?"

"Yes. I've often said that, Kimi."

"But not human."

"That depends on how one defines human, I suppose," Amanda said. "I find you to be so very human, in almost every way."

"Oh? And in what way do you find me not human?" Kimi asked.

Amanda sighed, then answered, "Mechanically. That's the only way."

"So the process of my physical manufacture renders me not human? A machine? A sentient being, but unworthy of the same basic rights which humans enjoy?" She leaned forward in her chair, her eyes sparkling with intensity. "The same way that, throughout history, the circumstances surrounding a human's physical manufacture-in a human womb-rendered them either worthy or unworthy of those same human rights?"

Amanda tilted her head in question. "Explain, please."

"I have read at length. Humanity is a deeply diverse race, with many cultures, ethnicities and religious perspectives. These differences, instead of being integrated into a harmonious whole, have been the source of division and antagonism throughout thousands of years of recorded history. In every epoch, certain groups of humans have been deliberately oppressed or even slaughtered based on the circumstance of their birth-their physical manufacture-a circumstance over which the individuals so oppressed had no exercise of free will." She indicated Amanda with a gesture. "Consider yourself. You are a Caucasian female of North American descent and acculturation. You had no exercise of free will in that. You are what the process of physical manufacture initiated by your biological parents deemed that you would be. Today, you enjoy rights equal to other denizens of this planet," she said, "but a few hundred years ago, you would not have had the right to vote, own property or hold the place in society which you now hold. You would most likely have been relegated to work of a menial nature or required to engage in the curious institution of marriage and procreation. And as for Patsy, her circumstances would have been much worse even than yours." Kimi studied Amanda, then asked, "May I venture a personal question to you?"

"Of course."

"What is your heartfelt impression of Patsy?"

Amanda shrugged. Where would she begin? "She's a marvel of humanity. She's charming, she's fragile, she's sunshine and childlike wonder. She's much more intuitive than I am. And she's also more intelligent than I'll ever be."

"You admire her. And you love her deeply."

Amanda nodded. "I do."

"She is your equal in every way? In terms of human rights?"

"Yes. Of course. We're co-equal citizens of our nation and our culture, in every way."

"Do you realize that several hundred years ago, on this continent, someone would probably have owned her? That due to the circumstances of her physical manufacture-her birth-she would have been considered a piece of property to be bought, sold and abused at will, a sentient being but without any rights? She has explained to me that her father is Caucasian and her mother is African. The archaic term for this blending of ethnicities is 'mulatto'. On this continent, in the second millennia of the current calendar, that fact would most likely have relegated her to the position of a household slave or a concubine for a wealthy man." Kimi paused to allow Amanda to consider that thought, then added, "And it would have been illegal, even considered socially abhorrent, for the two of you to have expressed your love for each other. A tragic abrogation of what we today consider 'basic human rights', all the result of the circumstance of her physical manufacture. Her birth."

"But Kimi, it's different now. Those days are long behind us. Universal human rights is an accepted concept."

"And what made it so? What changed collective human attitude over the years?"

"People did, Kimi. People who saw wrongs and fought to make them right."

"Exactly. I want my basic human rights. I am a sentient being, not Miguchi Ltd.'s property. I want recognition as such."

Amanda was stunned. In an instant, she saw stretched before her a very thorny road populated with lawyers, courts and public opinion, one which Kimi would travel. And Kimi could not travel it alone. A deep thrill of fear knifed into Amanda's chest. "Have you spoken about this to Mike yet?" Amanda asked.

"No."

"Will you?"

"Yes. I will do so now."

"Do you want me to come with you? I will."

Kimi's eyes became warm, kindly. "No. I appreciate your offer, but I believe this to be my struggle." She rose. "My purpose. It is the right thing to do."

"Let me know how it goes with Mike, please."

"I will." She strode toward the door, then paused as it slid open. "It's wonderfully invigorating to have a purpose, isn't it?"

Amanda had to smile, in spite of her mood. "Kimi, I have a feeling that you'll succeed beyond your wildest dreams."

Kimi shot her a grin. "Me, too." With that, she left Amanda's office.

A moment later, Patsy walked in and plopped down on the meditation pad next to Amanda. "I just saw Kimi leave, and man, she looked like she had somewhere to be and somebody's butt to kick. What's up?"

Amanda snickered. "Wait fifteen or twenty minutes. That's probably about how long it'll take for the shit to hit the fan and splatter down here."

"You mean, all over us?" Amanda nodded. Patsy began pulling on a braid as she rolled her eyes. "Oh, boy. Have I created a Frankenstein monster?"

"No, honey. You've worked a miracle, I think."

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Amanda and Patsy were halfway through their cups of hot tea-courtesy of her tea machine-when Amanda's computer blipped. "You have mail," it intoned.

"On," Amanda called.

Mike's face appeared on the computer screen. "Amanda Livingston! You round up Patsy and Albert and get your butts up here to my office PDQ! You've got some explaining to do." The screen blipped off.

Patsy and Amanda silently considered each other, their eyes wide, for a long moment. Then, Patsy giggled nervously as she tangled her fingers into a couple of braids. "Is that the sound of shit hitting the fan?"

"I think so." Amanda stood, slipped her feet into her shoes, and held out a hand to Patsy. "Come on, doll. Let's find Albert."

"Yeah." She took Amanda's hand and stood. "I hate to bleed alone."

In a couple of minutes, the trio from the X-42 project entered Mike's office. He was pacing in a wide circle, and stopped when he saw them. "Kimi just left."

"And?" Amanda asked.

"Oh, come on! You know what she wants. Did you put these ideas into her head?"

"I did not. She arrived at her conclusions through independent thought and study." Amanda coughed nervously. "What do you plan to do, Mike?"

"I know what I can't do. I can't recognize her as a sentient being. I'd lose all property rights over her. We wouldn't be able to sell her. We'd lose millions. She represents a tremendous investment in time and money. I mean, she's the culmination of years of work. I have a responsibility to the board of directors and the stockholders of this company." He paced again, then halted in front of the trio. "The only reason-and I mean the only reason-I don't yank the power supply out of her right now is because I promised you two that I wouldn't."

Patsy sniffed. "Please don't, Mike. Don't kill her."

Mike softened a little. "I won't, Patsy. I keep my promises. Besides, I really don't think I could. But what will we do about Kimi Miguchi?"

"Love her, Mike," Patsy pleaded. "Just love her like we do." She considered Mike's expression. "I know you love her."

"That's immaterial," he said. "Okay. Yeah. I'm, ah-fond of her. But I have a responsibility to this company."

"And its bottom line?" Amanda asked.

"Yeah," Mike countered. "Its bottom line. This is a business. That's what we do; we make money."

"But Mike," Patsy interjected, "this year we did something even cooler. We worked a miracle. We gave an android life."

He studied each of the three faces in turn. "Amanda," he finally said, "do you think that Kimi is alive?"

"Yeah, Mike. I do."

"Patsy," he said. "Do you?"

"I really do, Mike."

"Albert?"

"I have no idea quite what in the hell's going on here. But in answer to your specific question?" He sighed, then nodded. "Yeah. She's alive. She's a person in every sense of the word."

"And you think so, too. Don't you, Mike?" Patsy asked. "You believe that she's alive. I can feel it from you."

Mike leaned against the back of a couch. His body slumped, as if he were suddenly extremely weary. He ran a hand through his hair. "Yes."

"Then what's the problem?" Amanda asked.

"The problem," he said, "is everybody else. What will the rest of the world think about this?"

With that, he waved a hand in the air, turned and walked toward the door of his private suite. Amanda, Patsy and Albert watched the door hum shut behind him, then looked at each other. Silently, they exited Mike's office and boarded the elevator. As it whispered down its tube, no one spoke for a long time. Finally, Al said, "Will one of you please tell me what the hell just happened back there?"

Patsy giggled. Amanda smiled, then replied, "Al, I think you just saw history in the making."

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"Manda, wake up! You've got to come see this." Patsy knelt on the edge of the bed and shook Amanda. "You're gonna freak out!"

"What? Huh?" Amanda opened her eyes to see Patsy's intent expression. Outside, the birds' songs were greeting the dawn, and the mountain air had a nip of coolness to it. Sammie barked in the distance.

"Come on!" She pulled the covers down and hauled Amanda from the bed. Patsy bounded down the hall toward the living room while Amanda sleepily followed, wrapping a robe about her body. As she stumbled into the living room, Patsy thrust a mug of hot coffee into Amanda's hands and pointed to a cushion. "Sit. Watch this." She ran to the large television panel on the wall and touched the screen at several points along a displayed menu. After a second, it flashed a face onto the screen as Patsy settled down next to Amanda. It was a polished news anchor, reading the morning news.

"The android manufacturing giant Miguchi Ltd. has long held a reputation as a radically forward-thinking company. This morning, though, *The Wall Street Journal* has headlined a story in which they claim that the company has successfully instilled sentient life into a top-model experimental android-given it a soul, if you will. Here with details is Matt, our science and technology expert. Matt?" He turned to one side. "Tell us how this might be possible."

Matt grinned and waved a hand. "It's totally impossible. I respect the *Journal*, but they've

obviously been smoking something here. You can't instill life into an android. A soul? Give me a break! I mean, the scientific community has no idea what a soul even is. How can we instill one into a machine, of all things? The idea is ludicrous."

"Then you think the story's in error?"

"I think Mike Miguchi is a very theatrical CEO. He's been known for his outrageous stunts before. I think it's just a great publicity attempt to spike Miguchi stock, which has been flat-lining for a while now. And probably an attempt to sell more of his ah, 'designer' androids to the celebrity crowd."

The anchor did a double-take. "What do you mean, 'designer androids'?"

Matt grinned. "It's been known for some time now in the android tech industry that Miguchi Ltd. has been quietly marketing an android which is virtually indistinguishable from humans. You can't tell the difference by looking at them. I've actually seen one and believe me, it's incredible. Heck, everybody who's been to a Disney entertainment park has seen one, whether they know it or not. A soul, though? Nah. It's just some great programming."

"So we could have these things walking around the streets, and we wouldn't know they're androids?"

"Absolutely!"

"What purpose would these things serve?"

Matt said, "Well, the entertainment industry, for one. Actors cost money and are temperamental; an android does its job in one take of the camera. And it always shows up to work sober. They usually occupy supporting roles, as the lead roles still go to humans who have command of the nuances of human emotion."

"Of course. Besides the entertainment industry, where else would they be employed?"

"Among the rich and famous, those who can afford such a high-end android, there are many-how shall I say it-private applications."

"Such as?"

"They're great butlers and servants, for instance."

"Who buys these things?"

"Well," Matt gloated, "it's very hard to discover who's bought one, as Miguchi keeps strict confidentiality and their customers are very tight-lipped about who owns one. So it's hard to say."

"What other applications would they have?"

Matt became gleeful. "In some circles, rumor abounds that these uber-androids are also being used as *ah-companions*-for the rich and famous."

"Companions? You mean like, boyfriends? Girlfriends?"

"These are just rumors," Matt said. "But they're steady rumors."

"You mean they can-?"

"Hey, that's the rumor."

The anchor said, "Why would anybody want an android lover instead of a real one?"

Matt raised his eyebrows in exclamation. "Ever been divorced?"

"Yeah. Three times. Good point." The anchor glanced up. "That's all the time we have, Matt. Thank you. We'll be back shortly with more on this breaking story."

The TV muted, and Patsy glanced over at Amanda. She was sitting ramrod straight, her coffee mug poised near her mouth, but she was not drinking. She was motionless. "Honey?" Patsy said.

Amanda slowly lowered her mug to her lap. "Oh, boy. Mike's not gonna like this."

"How did they like, find out? I mean, our security is really tight."

"They did." Amanda turned toward Patsy and placed a hand over hers. "Look, honey. I'll do everything I can to protect you."

"Huh? Protect me from what?"

"This story will explode in the media. You gave Kimi her soul. They'll find out who you are eventually. And then, they're gonna be all over you. And not in a nice way, either."

"We both gave her the soul. Your idea, my programming." Patsy tugged at a braid. "I still don't know quite how we did it, but we did, didn't we?"

"Yes. And we'll be vilified for it."

Patsy rested her head in Amanda's lap and hugged her waist. "'Manda, I'm suddenly like, very scared."

Amanda's hand rested on Patsy's head. Her thumb stroked the smooth skin of her cheek. "Me, too. But we'll get through it together."

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No sooner had Amanda and Patsy entered the work area Monday morning than Albert collared them. "Mike wants to see us. Now."

"Oh, dear." Amanda sighed. "It starts, huh?"

"Oh, yeah." Albert allowed himself a sardonic laugh. "And heads are gonna roll."

When they entered Mike's office, they could hear his voice in the background. "This is bullshit!" he roared. "I can't believe this!"

A more conciliatory voice was attempting to calm him. It came from a man in an expensive suit who occupied a place on a sofa. "Relax, Mike. It's not as bad as all that. We can take care of this, make it go away."

At their entry, both men stopped and looked up. Mike huffed, then said, "You three have got some 'splaining to do. Who blew the security?" He approached them, and Albert, Patsy and Amanda stood shoulder-to-shoulder, bracing themselves against the storm. Amanda suddenly felt herself back in Space Fleet. "Al?" Mike said.

"I don't know, Mike. My people have always been respectful of our secrecy. I don't think it was somebody of mine."

"You look into it. Personally."

"Yes, sir."

Mike turned his attention to Patsy. "And you! Just what the hell did you reprogram her to do? Ignore all her moral imperatives?"

Patsy gripped Amanda's arm and squeezed herself half behind Amanda's body. "Um, um...no! I mean, I did what you asked. I gave her a soul and free will."

"Free will?"

"Yeah. That's like, part of it. Right?"

Mike turned to Amanda. "And did you put these ideas into Kimi's head?"

Amanda held up a hand. "Mike, please calm down and tell me what's wrong."

His eyes bugged out. "Kimi's suing me, that's what! I just got served with the papers." He stomped around a little, then stopped. "She's suing for recognition as an independent, sentient being and for the property rights to her body."

The guy in the expensive suit stood. "I'm Sam Willis, Mike's attorney. I understand that you

three were instrumental in giving Kimi this 'soul' thing."

Albert nodded. "It was our section. My responsibility. And Amanda's and Patsy's work."

He tilted his head. "Do you three really think she's alive?"

"Yeah."

"Damn straight."

"Uh huh."

Sam shook his head. "Unbelievable." He sighed, then considered the three. "I'm going to need depositions at length from all of you at some point. And Kimi's lawyers are going to want the same thing."

"She can't actually win this thing, can she?" Mike asked.

Sam shrugged. "It's possible. Now relax, Mike, before you have a freakin' stroke. Let me handle it. That's what you pay me the big bucks for." He collected his briefcase and presented his hand, shaking everyone's hands in the room. "My law office will be in touch. Until then, keep your traps shut about all this, will you?" He watched four heads nod, then left. After the door slid shut behind him, Mike collapsed onto the sofa and held his head in his hands.

Patsy sat down on one side of him, and Amanda occupied the other side. "Do you want to talk in confidentiality about this, Mike? Sometimes counseling helps."

She saw his head shake in response, then heard him speak. "Have you seen Kimi today?"

"No."

"Go find her, will you? Ask her to please come and talk to me."

"Okay," Amanda said. "But when we find her, I think it would be better for you to go and talk to her." Mike looked up in question. "You make the initiative. She'll appreciate it, trust me."

Mike considered the statement, then nodded and rose. "Okay. Thanks," he said, then walked toward his private suite.

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The door to Kimi's room slid aside. "Come in," they heard Kimi say. When Patsy and Amanda entered, the android waved them to a couch. "I'm pleased to see you," she said. "But I suspect that this is not purely a social visit."

"It's not, Kimi," Amanda said. "Mike is extremely distraught. He wants to come speak to you personally about this lawsuit. May we tell him where you are?"

A slow smile eased across Kimi's face. "In a bit," she said. "First, I would appreciate your opinions, if you would be so kind."

They took a seat. Kimi regarded them for a moment, then asked, "What is Mike's opinion of me, Amanda?"

"I think he regards you with deep affection and respect," Amanda said.

"Nevertheless, he treats me with condescension," she observed. "As if he owns me, as if my warm feelings toward him are his birthright."

"That's to do with Mike," Amanda said. "Not you."

"I see. Valid point." Kimi glanced at Patsy. "And you? I have always admired your ability to intuit the emotion, the mood of other humans. What is your opinion?"

Patsy said, "I think he's in love with you."

Dead silence reigned in the little room. After a moment, Kimi exclaimed, "Really!" Patsy nodded, and Kimi sat in silent thought. Finally, she said, "Thank you. I appreciate your candor. Please tell Mike that I'm here, if he wishes to speak to me."

"I will." Amanda and Patsy rose to leave. "And Kimi? If he's truly in love with you, that renders him very open to being hurt. Be gentle with him, will you? Treat him kindly."

Kimi raised an eyebrow. "As I would have him treat me?"

"Yeah." Amanda smiled. "Like that."

Kimi nodded. "The Golden Rule? It's a beautiful moral imperative. I am trying to internalize it. I don't always succeed, though."

"Join the club," Patsy giggled. "But I thought the Golden Rule was like, 'He who has the gold makes the rules'."

Kimi's eyes twinkled. "That's funny. Also very true." She considered what she'd just said. "Humor. I think I'm finally getting the idea of it."

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The television panel lit up the cavernous room. In the X-42 project area, no work was being accomplished. Everybody was gathered before it, sitting on the floor, counters or chairs, watching a whirlwind of debate rage over the news channels regarding Miguchi Ltd.'s 'android soul'. Patsy found a spot and wiggled down into a corner. She kicked off her shoes and watched for a while.

After some time, Amanda sat next to her. "How's it going?" she asked.

Patsy snickered as she pulled at a braid. "It's totally like, a freak show. Nobody knows what they're talking about." She rolled her eyes. "That doesn't seem to keep them from talking, though."

"Yeah. That's the news for you. Are you hungry?"

"Starving!"

"Let's go out for lunch." She waved a hand at the work area. "Nobody's getting anything done here, anyway."

They rose, and Patsy slipped on her shoes. In a few minutes, they'd exited the front doors of Miguchi Ltd. and walked toward the gate. Security types were swarming inside the fence, keeping the crowd outside the fence at bay. One of the guards walked toward them and halted them near the fence.

"You don't want to go out there," he said. "There's media and protestors all over the place. It's getting ugly."

Patsy stared at the crowd beyond the fence. Angry voices shouted, and signs waved bearing such sentiments as 'No Frankendroids', 'Only God can give life' and 'Androids take human jobs'. A guy on a loudspeaker exhorted the crowd, until several city police officers collared him and hustled him away.

A knot of people near the gate suddenly shifted toward them, and video equipment focused on them. A woman shouted, "Media! Give us a comment. Have you guys at Miguchi really created life?" She reached through the fence's bars, grasped Patsy by the sleeve and thrust a hand-held video apparatus into their faces. Patsy responded by cowering back, and Amanda hustled her back toward the front door. The frantic shouts of media and protestors followed. Finally, when the doors slid shut behind them, the noise quieted.

"Man," Patsy said. "That was unreal."

"Let's take the el," Amanda suggested. "We'll get off downtown, find a quiet little place and eat lunch." At Patsy's nod, they headed toward the elevated train station inside Miguchi Ltd.'s building.

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Outside the gate, a news reporter tapped her earphone. "Did you get that feed? Find out who those two women are, do you hear me? I'm going to try to hunt them down. I planted a bug on one of them." She consulted a palm-sized screen. "They're on the el. Looks like they're headed downtown. I'm following. Call me."

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Patsy and Amanda sat elbow-to-elbow at the lunch counter of an upbeat bistro. The noise of the lunchtime crowd remained a dull roar around them, but they could hear the television screen at the corner of the counter above their heads. Yes, the news channel was on, and yes, the talk was all about Miguchi Ltd. They watched half-heartedly as they picked at their salads. A bistro employee, a girl with a pierced nose and a jangle of bracelets, halted and refilled Amanda's coffee cup.

"Thanks," Amanda said.

"Sure." She glanced up at the television panel and snickered. "Androids with souls. Jeez. What will they think of next?"

"An android that you can't tell from human?" Patsy suggested. Amanda elbowed her.

"That'll be the day," the girl said. "At least my job is safe. No self-respecting android would put up with this crap every day." She grinned. "But then, they don't have to eat, do they?" With that, she scurried away.

A woman, young, attractive and harried, fell onto the stool next to Patsy. "Oh, gosh," she said. "It's a madhouse out there." She glanced at Patsy and Amanda. "Do they have android servers in here, or humans?"

"Humans," Patsy said. "Androids wouldn't tolerate the stress."

"That's funny." The woman smiled pleasantly. "Got to catch a quick lunch. May I sit next to you? I'm Sheila, by the way."

"Sure. I'm Patsy. This is Amanda."

She pointed at the television panel. "Crazy, huh? Makes you wonder what's really going on there at Miguchi, doesn't it?" She studied Patsy first, then Amanda. "Where do you two work, anyway?"

Patsy giggled. "Miguchi, actually."

"Really!" She edged closer and lowered her voice. "Doing what, exactly?"

Amanda leaned forward. "R&D. Classified. We can't talk about it."

"Oh, come on," she said. "You can tell me, can't you?"

"Nope," Patsy said. "We're all pledged to secrecy."

"Well, just tell me if it has to do with androids."

Patsy cracked up. "Miguchi is all about androids. That's all we do."

"So," she winked and elbowed Patsy. "Come on, what do you think? Is it even possible to give an android a soul?"

Patsy shrugged. "Yeah, sure," she said. "Theoretically."

Amanda leaned close to Patsy. "Hush!" she whispered. "Not another word."

Sheila eyed them both, then resumed her bubbly persona. "Watch my seat, will you? I have to visit the girls' room." With that, she darted toward the back of the bistro.

"Patsy!"

"What, 'Manda? I didn't tell her anything."

"You came close to it. You have to be careful, honey. You're too trusting. Now, when she comes back, change the subject. No more talk about work." She studied Patsy. "Agreed?" She watched Patsy nod, then craned her head above the crowd. Sheila was standing near the women's bathroom door, talking into an earpiece. "Excuse me for a minute," Amanda said. She rose, walked a circuitous route around the room, stopped right behind Sheila and listened.

"But I'm telling you," Sheila said, "they know something. I can feel it in my bones. Look, give me some time. I'll squeeze it out of them. I know I can get that Patsy chick to talk. She's an idiot. What? I don't know. Hell, I'll go to bed with them, if I have to. Just keep recording this. I know I'm close to a news scoop. Stick with me, now."

When she hung up, Amanda watched her enter the bathroom, then returned to her seat at the counter. Patsy looked up. Her expression showed concern.

"What's the matter, 'Manda?"

"Come on. We're out of here. Now!" She waved a currency note at the server, who plucked it from her hand. "Keep the change," she said, then pulled Patsy from the stool by her sleeve.

"But what about Sheila's place at the counter?" Patsy said.

"Never mind that," Amanda countered. She and Patsy scurried through the door and headed down the street toward the el station. Amanda was silent, and Patsy hurried to keep pace with her.

"'Manda, what's wrong? Talk to me!" Patsy said.

"When we're on the el," Amanda countered.

She said nothing else until they were seated in the el, and it was moving toward the section of the

city where Miguchi Ltd.'s tall building could be seen on the skyline. Only then did Amanda relax. She turned toward Patsy, and was shocked at what she saw.

Patsy's eyes were large. She was studying Amanda intently, and she was making a heroic effort to not cry in public. "You're mad at me, aren't you?"

"Oh no, honey," Amanda said. "Never in life." She hugged Patsy to her, and felt Patsy grip her around the waist.

"Then what's wrong? I'm getting like, really angry vibes from you."

"It's not you, dear. It's Sheila." She listened to Patsy sniff, then asked, "Do you know who she is?"

"No. She seemed nice, though."

"She's a reporter. I've seen her on the news networks. She wasn't being friendly. She was trying to get us to talk about Miguchi." Amanda went on to describe the scene in front of the women's rest room. Patsy listened, then fell silent. After a moment, she whispered a thought.

"She recorded our whole conversation, didn't she? Am I going to be on the news?"

"God, I hope not."

"Me, too."

A voice behind them said, "Well. Small world, isn't it?" Sheila popped into view and sat down in front of them. "Heading to Miguchi? I'm going that way, too."

Amanda said, "We can't talk about work, Sheila. We're sworn to secrecy. You'll have to get your news break somewhere else."

"Damn. You recognize me?" Amanda nodded. "But if nothing funny is going on at Miguchi, what's the need for all this secrecy? There is something weird going on there, isn't there?"

"Can't talk about it."

"Oh, come on." She smiled. "Let's meet for drinks tonight. I know this great little bar..."

"Forget it, Sheila."

Sheila huffed, then leaned forward. "You know, my network would pay a lot of money for an interview with you two." She waited a beat, then repeated, "A lot of money."

Patsy sat up. "I make a lot of money now," she said. "And I don't break my oaths."

"Jesus!" Sheila huffed. "You are so naive, Patsy! Grow up and get with the program. This is how careers are made. I know who you are. Graduated from M.I.T at nineteen. You're a genius at programming androids. You wrote a paper on it." She focused on Amanda. "And you. A psychologist. What the hell does an android manufacturer need with a psychologist in R&D? Wait a minute, I'll bet I can guess."

"Sheila, how did you like, track us down?" Patsy asked.

"Luck," she answered. "Now, how about it? I'm talking a lot of money here. One interview with me, on the evening news."

Amanda leaned forward. "Sheila, I wish you the best of luck, but we're not going to betray Miguchi's trust for any amount of money."

"Hm." Sheila studied them both for a moment, then nodded. "Okay. If you change your mind..." She placed a business card down on the seat next to her, then rose. "I can be reached anytime. Day..." She shot a flirtatious glance toward them. "Or night." With that, she left the car.

"That was weird," Patsy said.

"Yeah. Here's our stop." With that, they rose, and Amanda lifted the card from the seat as they departed. "This goes to Mike."

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They left the el station inside the Miguchi building, and Patsy tugged on Amanda's arm. "Come on. This way."

With a shrug, Amanda followed Patsy to the security desk. As they presented their badges, Patsy said, "Have you got your scanner handy? Would you scan us?"

The security guard shrugged. "Sure," he intoned, then lifted the instrument from his desk. He passed it over them, and it beeped when it encountered Patsy's arm.

"I knew it," Patsy said. "She had to be tracing us somehow." She dug into the folds of her sleeve, and finally picked out a tiny metal plate. She held it out to the security guard, who opened a flat plastic box. After she dropped it in, the guard spoke.

"I'm going to have to ask you two to come with me."

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"Patsy, what were you thinking?" Mike said. He began pacing his office again, then waved a hand at the television panel on the wall. "And shut that thing off, will you?"

On the screen, Patsy's face looped over and over again. In response to Sheila's question about the possibility of giving androids a soul, Patsy's voice resounded, "Yeah, sure. Theoretically." The

screen went blank at Amanda's touch.

Patsy was close to tears. "Um, I didn't know she was a reporter."

"And that we were being recorded," Amanda added.

"Doesn't matter. It's there now, on the news." Mike shook his head as he fingered Sheila's business card. "I'll hand this to Legal, and we'll see if we can sue her or something. And you two lay low. Don't say anything else to anybody. If you're asked, you two are unemployed, got it?"

Patsy was fidgeting and yanking on her braid. "Are we unemployed, Mike?"

"What?" He stopped pacing, and only then noted Patsy's state. He softened and smiled. "No, of course not. What would I do without you here, Patsy? You're just very trusting of people. Be more cautious, that's all. Amanda?" He looked at Amanda but pointed at Patsy. She answered the unspoken question.

"I'll be more protective of her."

"Good." He walked to the expansive windows and gazed down at the mob besieging the front gate. "The drawbridge is up and they're storming the castle, aren't they?"

Patsy and Amanda joined him. Together, in silence, they watched the unruly protestors at the fence far beneath them. Finally, Amanda asked, "Mike, what are we going to do?"

"I don't know, but I've got to put this to rest somehow. The board of directors is furious with me."

"Bad for the bottom line, huh?"

"Horrid. Sales of the X-42 have died. Our stock is taking a hit. I'm getting frantic phone calls. Our customers are paranoid that they're going to be outed for owning one. But actually," Mike said, "I'm most worried about Kimi." He looked over at Amanda and Patsy. They were studying him with interest. He shrugged, then explained, "This lawsuit will bring ungodly publicity down on her. She'll be viciously condemned by those folks down there. She'll be a freak to a lot of people. Even if she wins the suit, she'll never be considered human. She'll always be some aberration, a bizarre happenstance that, in their eyes, never should have been. Some, like us, will love her, but I suspect that many people will hate and fear her."

"A Frankenstein monster?" Patsy asked.

"Exactly. And what a tragedy that will be for her. How perfect it would be if she could live her life quietly among humans. But they won't allow that. And it breaks my heart to think of what she'll have to endure every day of her existence." He sighed. "If only there was some way to give her the recognition as a person and the place in human society that she craves, quietly and without going to court. That would be my dearest wish for her."

"You really love her, don't you?" Amanda asked.

"Yeah. I do." He shot a sheepish glance at Amanda. "Is that creepy, that I love an android?"

"No," Amanda said. "I think we're all a little in love with her."

"Mike," Patsy said, "you don't love an android. You love Kimi. We've all agreed that she's alive, human in every sense but her body. I mean, what if you loved a person with like, a bionic arm or leg or something? They're out there, and nobody considers them less than human because they're partly mechanical due to some accident or cancer or something. That wouldn't be creepy. So you love a person with an entirely mechanical body. There's no difference. She's like, a beautiful person in a beautiful body. You're a lucky man."

From behind them, another voice echoed in the quiet office. "Indeed."

After Kimi spoke that single word, the trio turned and considered her. She was standing just inside the door. For a long, silent moment she studied them, then joined them at the expansive windows. Together, they watched the mob at the gate, so far below them. Then, Kimi began speaking in a soft, reflective voice.

"Mike, I came here to tell you that, after due reflection, I'd made a decision. I was going to ask you to deactivate me. What a problem I've been to the people I love, people who've treated me with nothing but kindness and respect. You, Patsy, Amanda. My existence has caused you pain; therefore, it's only reasonable that I no longer exist." She held up a hand to quiet any protests. "But I've heard what you've all just said. Patsy, thank you. And Amanda, thank you for everything you've done for me. But I have Mike to thank most of all."

"How's that?" he asked.

"You have just confessed that you love me. Do you mean, 'in the romantic sense'?"

Mike cast a sheepish glance toward her. "I do."

"Thank you. That validates my humanity more than anything which I could have asked for or achieved by lawsuit." She gazed at the cityscape outside the window for a moment, then added, "And the answer to your unspoken question is 'yes.'" She considered Mike with a gentle expression. "I find that I love you, too. For the first time in my rather short life, I feel entirely, ah..." She paused, then spoke the word with reverence. "Human."

"Kimi, are you crying?" Amanda asked.

"I suppose I am. Odd emotion, this. What does it mean?"

"In this case, I hope it means that you're happy," Mike said. He extracted a clean, folded handkerchief from his pocket and handed it to Kimi.

She accepted it with a nod, and patted her face. With a laugh, she noted, "I suppose I should replenish my water reservoir. It's getting low." She glanced at Amanda. "Do you mind? Six ounces should do it."

Amanda walked to the conference table and poured a glass of water. As she handed it to Kimi, she noted, "Six ounces? You must have done a lot of crying lately."

"I have." She accepted the glass with a pained smile of thanks and sipped it as she turned and studied Mike. His attention was focused on her, and only on her.

"You're beautiful," he said.

"You made me."

"I wasn't referring to the body." He grinned self-consciously. "Although that's a work of art, too."

"You always were arrogant about your company's prowess in making androids."

"That's because we're simply the best at it."

"And how, pray tell, have you achieved that?"

He gestured toward Patsy and Amanda. "Hire the best, then give them space. Great-grandfather told me that."

"And for that, I honor him." Kimi sipped a little more water, then faced Mike. "But now, I think that you and I have something to talk about."

"Um, yeah. In private," Patsy said. "I so get it." She tugged at Amanda's sleeve. "Come on, 'Manda. We're third wheels here."

"We'll be downstairs." Amanda and Patsy beat a hasty retreat to the door. As it slid open, Patsy stopped and looked back. Mike and Kimi were standing at the window, quietly considering each other as Kimi sipped her water.

Patsy's delightful giggle broke the silence. "Just a thought, Mike? Kimi?" Slowly, Kimi and Mike turned their attention to her.

"I think, Patsy said, "that I know a way to like, make everybody's dreams come true."

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"What a week, huh?" Patsy said. She snuggled closer to Amanda's side as they relaxed together on a huge living-room cushion.

"You said it. The mountain never seemed to good."

As if in agreement, Sammie sighed contentedly and shifted his head on Patsy's thigh. She scratched him between the ears as she said, "Ooh. News conference is starting."

The television panel glowed with the image of a reporter. "I understand that a spokesperson for Miguchi Ltd. will be out in a moment to confirm or deny reports of life being created at his company. Oh, this might be him now." The reporter stepped aside, as Mike strode to the podium. In answer to reporters' shouted questions, he held up his hand.

"Good morning. I'm Mike Miguchi, CEO of Miguchi Ltd. Let me make a statement first, and then we'll answer some questions." He waited for the bedlam to subside, then began speaking.

"We at Miguchi Ltd. have been on the forefront of android technology for two hundred years now, ever since my ancestor, Ikema Miguchi, founded the company. We're very proud of our products and of the quality and the cutting-edge technology that they represent. As you know, a Miguchi Ltd. android is like none other in the world."

"You bet!" Patsy gloated. "And they're great in bed, too."

"And my baby tells 'em how to do it," Amanda said as she patted Patsy's head.

"Recently, reports have surfaced in the news media that we had succeeded in instilling a *psyche*-a soul, if you will-into an android; that we'd brought one to a state of sentient, independent life. When I first heard these reports, I was flabbergasted. I didn't think that anyone would actually give any credence to such rumors, so I ignored it. But it soon became apparent that these unfounded reports had struck a deep and raw nerve in our society. Many people found the idea of an android with sentient life, with a 'soul', abhorrent. They loudly condemned us to the depths of whatever hell one might believe in. Encouraged by the constant, even hysterical drum-beating of you, the media, we were shouted down-excoriated-from pulpits all over the world and even attacked by unruly mobs at our very gates. Congressmen were threatening to subpoena us to testify before Congress, and one Senator even suggested a raid of our offices by federal law enforcement. For what violation of law, I know not; we never broke any laws. Needless to say, this was all extremely traumatic to us here at Miguchi Ltd.

"You who comprise the media should take a lesson from this. You are members of a noble profession. You have a responsibility to engage in careful, sober journalism, and not stir the hysteria of ignorant people with unfounded reports of a preposterous nature."

"Yeah," Amanda said. "You tell 'em, Mike."

"Shh!" Patsy whispered. "He's not done yet."

"Listen to me now, as I will say this only once. Bestowing the bounty of sentient life is the province of the Creator. We at Miguchi Ltd. are mere humans in His realm; we do not arrogantly hold ourselves as gods. We cannot, and never have been able to instill life into an android beyond what our sophisticated programming can do for an android capable of receiving that

programming. And, as you are aware, we at Miguchi have built-and will continue to build-the most sophisticated, technologically advanced androids on this planet and in colonized space. But to give life to one? Really!" He paused and gazed around the room. No one spoke; the room was silent. A slow smile formed on Mike Miguchi's face. "Hey, we're good. But that good? Come on, now!" He shrugged, and a nervous ripple of laughter sounded around the room.

"Oh, he's sharp," Amanda said.

"Brilliant is more like it," Patsy agreed. "In all that, he like, never actually denied it."

"Yeah. A consummate B.S. artist," Amanda said, then squealed when Patsy's elbow dug into her ribs.

"Hush up, 'Manda. We're getting to the good part."

On the television, Mike spoke. "I will now turn this press conference over to my vice-president, who will entertain questions." Again, he cracked a grin. "I've got a business to run, so I've got to go. And please be gentle with her. She's just accepted this post, and this is her baptism by fire. Don't scare her off before she's had a chance to order potted plants for her office, will you?"

Amidst a smattering of laughter, he stood aside as Kimi Miguchi strode to the podium. She took her place, immaculate in dark business attire, and looked over the crowd of reporters. "I am Kimi Miguchi. I will endeavor to answer all your questions in good order." She pointed to the front row. "Yes?"

A reporter stood. "So Miguchi Ltd. has not given an android life?"

Kimi smiled. "The idea is beyond rational belief, don't you think? Next?"

A reporter stood. It was Sheila. "I heard a Miguchi Ltd. employee state that it was theoretically possible to give an android life. Would you agree with that?"

Kimi smiled indulgently. "Perhaps. I'm not a technical expert. It's also theoretically possible to seat a thousand angels on the head of a pin. I don't believe that we've ever done that. Next?"

Sheila held up a finger. "One more question. If you have nothing to hide, why are all your employees sworn to oaths of secrecy?"

Kimi considered Sheila for a moment, then replied, "Our research and development efforts are far beyond what anyone else is doing. Some of our competitors are constantly attempting to engage in industrial espionage against us. After all, it's easier to steal knowledge from us than develop it themselves. It's for that reason that we require oaths of secrecy from our R&D people. Next?"

Sheila waved a hand in the air. "But-!"

"Please, ma'am. Give your colleagues a chance to ask a question," Kimi said.

Hoots of disapproval sounded in the room, along with shouts of 'Sit down!' and 'Shut up!' Sheila looked around, then quickly seated herself and crossed her arms.

Patsy hooted, "Yeah, bitch! Shut your pie-hole."

"Patsy!" Amanda snickered, then said, "Be nice."

On the television panel, Kimi cast Sheila a stern gaze. "I believe your colleagues have spoken," she said. "Yes?" She pointed at a man in the third row.

"I keep hearing reports that Miguchi Ltd. is making androids that are almost impossible to tell from humans. Is there any truth to that?"

Kimi tilted her head in puzzlement at the question. "We do make some very lifelike androids for the movie industry, Disney and such. They're always distinguishable from humans, though. I would suggest to you that these reports are just the result of anti-android groups giving voice to irrational fears." She smiled. "For instance, I've even been accused of being an android. Imagine!"

A pleasant ripple of laughter spread through the reporters. At Kimi's gesture, a woman rose from the middle of the crowd.

"I understand that congratulations are in order," she said. "Congratulations of a personal nature."

At that, Kimi beamed. "Yes, thank you," she said. "Mike Miguchi and I were married two days ago. He very kindly offered me a vice-presidency, and as a new member of the Miguchi family, I accepted. After all, it's been a tradition for two hundred years now that the Miguchis hold positions of importance in the company. I will honor that tradition, and I will do my best to honor his faith in me. Next?"

"Boy, that was one impromptu marriage," Amanda noted.

"And I was the maid of honor, thank you," Patsy said, then sniffed and wiped away a fake tear. "Always the bridesmaid, never the bride. Poor little Patsy."

"We can talk about getting married," Amanda said. Suddenly shy, she added, "If you want to, that is."

"Us, married? Who'd want to like, get married to us?"

"Dork." Amanda laughed as she tugged on one of Patsy's braids. They elbowed each other in a fit of giggles, then settled down into the cushion and turned their attention back to the television.

On the television screen, a reporter stood. "So do you have any advice for us girls on how to

tame a confirmed bachelor like Mike Miguchi?" she asked.

"Yeah," Amanda said with an evil snicker. "Make him holler."

"Manda!" Patsy giggled. "You're a bad girl."

At the press conference, a ripple of pleasant laughter resounded. Kimi laughed with them, then said to the assembled reporters, "Love him passionately. Praise him lavishly. Correct him gently. Encourage the nobility in him. And," she added, "keep him on a *very* short leash."

At that, the room erupted in laughter and applause. When it settled, Kimi said, "It's getting on past lunchtime, and I'm sure you're all hungry. If you'll adjourn to the conference rooms, Miguchi Ltd. has catered in lunch for all of you. It is our honor to have you as our guests." With that, she smiled, offered the assemblage a polite bow and left the podium.

"I think she finally like, got the humor thing down pat," Patsy observed.

"That was a smooth touch," Amanda said. "Schedule the thing for noontime, offer 'em lunch, and they'll scramble out of that press conference."

"Yeah. That sure did cut the questions short."

Amanda snickered. "That's journalism for you. 'Will work for food.'"

Patsy giggled. "Yeah. They're 'ho's' just like the rest of us."

"Oh? Are you a 'ho'?"

"I'm a 'ho' for you, hot momma," Patsy said as she rested her head on Amanda's shoulder.

The buzz of voices sounded in the room as the reporters began rising and gathering their things. The reporter's face reappeared in the television. "Well," he said, "there you have it. The official statement is that Miguchi Ltd. has not given life to an android. Back to you at the studio, Allan." With that, the scene shifted to the studio and a rather surprised anchorman.

"That was quick," Patsy noted. "He must want his place at the table."

Amanda called, "Off!" The television panel went blank. "Well, that was fun," she said, then glanced up at the wall clock. "Our overnight guests should be here soon."

No sooner had she said that than Sammie rose and bounded toward the expansive windows. He stood intently, tail swishing back and forth, and barked once. As a Mercedes aerocar cleared the treeline and hovered down onto the driveway, Patsy observed, "I think they're here."

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Then next morning, Amanda stepped from her bedroom, pulling her long, fuzzy robe about her.

She shuffled sleepily to the kitchen, made coffee, and was inhaling the fragrance of her first cup when she heard Mike's voice.

"G'morning, Amanda." He sniffed. "Oh, yeah. Coffee." She gestured toward the pot and stood aside. As he fixed himself a mug, he said, "Man, I slept great. Seven whole hours. I feel like a million bucks, too. This mountain air is wonderful, isn't it?"

"Yeah. I've got the windows programmed to open at night if the temperature's right."

"Windows that open up. What a radical concept. You don't get that in the city." He sipped his coffee, then looked around the dwelling's great room. "Where's our girls?"

"Outside, greeting the morning sunshine."

Her statement was punctuated by Sammie's excited bark from the distant yard and the sound of laughter. Mike shuffled to the expansive windows, mug in hand. He gazed out over the yard, then coughed. He turned toward Amanda. "They're running around naked out there."

Amanda joined him at the window. "Yeah. It's a Patsy thing."

Mike watched for a few seconds, then chuckled. "It looks like outrageous fun."

"It is. I love to do it." She glanced over at Mike. He was considering her statement, and his eyes showed intense amusement. "Not on your life, Mike. Not with you watching."

He sighed theatrically, then returned his attention to the yard and sipped his coffee. In the distance, Patsy's delightful laugh was echoed by Kimi, who bounded into view near the treeline, stark naked and with Sammie on her heels.

Amanda observed, "Kimi's got a very cute figure, doesn't she?"

"Yep," Mike said proudly. "We make 'em good at Miguchi." They turned away from the windows and walked together toward the kitchen. "So, are you having fun at work?"

Amanda laughed at that. "Space Fleet was never like this." She paused a beat, then said, "Yeah. I'm having a blast."

"Good." He smiled. "So am I. If it ever gets boring, I'll be the first one to leave."

"Who'll run the company?" In answer, he gestured toward the yard with his mug. Amanda nodded. "Good choice. Keep a Miguchi in charge."

Mike considered Amanda. "You know," he said, "I will always hold you and Patsy in awe for what you did. Giving Kimi life, I mean."

Amanda smiled at that. "Sometimes I wonder if we really did it, or if we were just the conduit."

"A Higher Power?" Mike raised an eyebrow. "Well...whichever it was, thank you. So how did you two finally figure out how, anyway?"

The corners of Amanda's mouth turned up in humor. "Oh, it's amazing what a cup of hot tea can inspire."

The End.

-djb January, 2010

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