

~ A step too far? ~

by H.W.

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Setting:

This is an original story that is set almost two hundred years into the future. However, I did keep the sci-tec realistic. Meaning, the things you see mentioned are things that people are experimenting with today. So, no holograms, but they do have 4D entertainment. (Smell being the fourth dimension.)

Synopsis:

Athena 'Ena' Jason is one of the world's best A.I. programmers. She is working on the next revolution in the Artificial Intelligence market, something she calls R.I.; Real Intelligence. One of the key featured in her new design? Giving A.I. units the power of making real choices. Of course still fully under the safeguards of programming parameters.

Special thanks to:

Jo, for once again doing an excellent beta job. I tell you people, her corrections are such an important part to my writing that... that it's like the paint of my stories. :)

Meaning, I may have build the building, but it's the paint job that makes it look good. And Jo makes sure that my paint job looks good by removing all those pesky mistakes that jump out at people while reading.

Note, due to time limits I had to send this story out to be posted before Jo's final comments could come back to me. So there are about three places in this story where you might find some of those pesky mistakes waving back at you. :)

Disclaimer part.

Well, I don't have to disclaim characters since this is an original work of fiction and all the characters are all mine... belong to themselves but I have copy right to them, I mean.

Quotes declaimer.

I used several quotes in this story. They aren't mine, but I think I managed to work the Wikipedia info of the people that made the quotes nicely into the story at the places where the quotes are used.

Song disclaimer.

At some point someone sings a part of a song, the lyrics are from Savage Garden's Truly Madly Deeply.

Inflation disclaimer.

Inflation is a fact of life; we all know it. This story plays almost two centuries into the future. Now, either I could have made a guess and calculated inflation in, since they talk about money

and U.S. dollars in this story. Or I could pretend that the money then is worth as much as it is today. I preferred to do the last thing. Because I really didn't feel like making this story harder to follow by saying things like that a cup of coffee costs only a hundred dollars. So in this story money values should be seen as they pretty much are today. (2010)

Where a cheap car can cost you \$10,000. Most Ford cars cost between 20-30 grand, (in the U.S.) or where a menu at your average restaurant chain like Ponderosa or McDonald's cost just under \$10. And along that line, you can compare the prices of the Pods mentioned below with cars. A cheap one costs as much as a cheap car, and a top of the line model might cost as much as a Ferrari.

Sex/Rating disclaimer.

I will set this at R or Mature, or whatever you call the rating where on TV you might see a naked woman, where they show people doing the motions of sex, but you don't see anything explicit. There is no sex scene in this story, but you do see a lead-up, a nipple or two played with.

Non-originality disclaimer.

In this story I used one of the most often used Sci-Fi ideas. I'm not saying that you 'might' have read/seen something like this before; I'm saying that you 'will' have read/seen something like this before.

What can I say, the idea came to me and this story is without a doubt one of the easiest/fastest stories I have ever written. So I assume that it wanted to be written, and who am I to argue that?

Part 1: History.

In 2109 World War 3 finally ended. Luckily for the world in general, WW-III had been more a declaration of intent than an actual war. There had been some skirmishes, some border raids, but all in all only a little over a hundred-thousand people had been killed. A lot of people if one of those people killed was someone you knew, but on the scale of a war, especially a World War, it had been ignorable. More so because even now, all the major players still had atomic bombs and the world could be really glad that they weren't used in the war.

WW-III had been more about choosing sides, and the world had been divided in East and West ever since the official end of WW-III in 2109. The main tension had been between the old superpower U.S., and the new superpower China, who by then had been a lot more powerful than the U.S.

A showdown had started and all the nations in the world had to take sides. And so all of the Americas, including Canada and North America, together with Australia, New Zealand, Europe and other countries in those regions, had formed what was from then on considered 'the West'. While Russia, India, the Middle East, and Africa had aligned itself with China to become 'the East'.

While this in itself wasn't that different from the historically known division, the ramifications of this divide had been something nobody had expected. The smaller nations like Japan, South

Korea, and Taiwan, were so close to China that they couldn't but side with the East. And since the Middle East and Russia had sided with China as well, the East now had control over most of the Earth's oil reserves.

In the West meanwhile, Cuba had become the fifty-first state of America, and countries in South America that were once hostile to the U.S. and Canada, had now become strong, close, and very welcome allies because with them a sense of 'us' had grown. They may not like the capitalistic U.S. that much, but a sense of 'we countries of the Americas have to stick together' had formed and because of that, some old grudges could be ignored for the sake of 'us'.

But as with all wars, grudges can only be held for so long before there is either a new war, or differences are reconciled. And so eventually, in the year 2115, almost six years after the end of the war, blockades were lifted, trade started again between countries from the East and the West. Travel was once again allowed, visas were handed out to people that wanted to move to 'the other side' to live with family. And all in all both sides prospered, even though neither side had fully grown into their new roles yet.

The world now knew. There was the East and the West, both sides were free, but both sides had their own flavor. Instead of separate countries, 'the other side' was indicated by mentioning 'the East' or 'the West'. It was no longer 'technology from Japan', it was 'technology from the East'. It was no longer 'made in the U.S.A.', it was 'made in the West'.

And just when the world started to turn again, the next new problem was invented; the Pods.

It had started innocently enough. There always had been a shortage in organ donors in the world. Then some scientists from the West had the brilliant idea of 'growing' organs. This was not the same as the known cloning. With cloning you still had the problem that a body with a different DNA strand would not accept the organ and reject it unless you swallowed anti-rejection drugs your entire life. Plus cloning still took an incredibly long time.

With growing, both these things were no longer a problem. With growing they had taken a good look at the human DNA and taken out all that they could take out and still have it still be pretty much like the original. At first the results were not that great, but once it was discovered what could be taken out and what should be left in, the results were even better than expected.

The organs created did have an origin in human flesh and blood, but over the years of experiments this 'mass' had been refined to a more basic compound. The end result was still flesh, just not exactly human anymore. Kinda like how the skin and flesh of a monkey was almost, but not exactly quite, the same as that of a human. But the beauty of this scientifically created flesh was that it was so close to human flesh that it looked, felt, and smelled, exactly the same as normal human tissue.

Because of that, the human immune system thought that it was part of the body. The new generation of tissue was not rejected by the immune system, and on top of that, because a lot of the original DNA had been removed, the old relics from evolution had also been removed, and there was now a lot less, or even none at all, chance of certain diseases that normally slumbered

in the human DNA. The tissue was, for instance, immune to all known kinds of cancer.

And then came the next logical and totally obvious step. One of the scientists figured, why not create more than that? If bones, organs, muscles, nerves, and skin were all grown, why not combine it all? Why not just grow a whole body? That way you could also transplant limbs.

Humans had no problem with this because everyone knew at least someone who was alive because they were walking around with a grown heart, or that had grown lungs. The only thing these grown bodies didn't have was a brain. To prevent that people started to see these grown bodies as humans, the creators has stayed well away from giving them a brain. The grown bodies were seen as nothing more than organs and bones wrapped in skin to keep them fresh. To make this even clearer, these new creations had been called Pod bodies to make it clear that they weren't human. And the name had stuck ever since.

And then had come the next step after that. Scientists were always looking for a way to help humans. One scientist that was an expert in the human brain was looking for ways on how to replace damaged brain parts with computer units, which had become smaller and smaller and also more powerful with each new computer generation. By the time he was doing the tests in 2121, computer power had increased to the point that a computer block could fit in a cupped hand, had thirty times the processing capability of the human brain, and a storage capability of six zettabyte in the form of multi-dimensional storage crystals.

Figuring that since such a computer block could fit inside a skull and didn't have any moving parts that could break, why not see if a computer block could be linked to a grown Pod body? That way he could experiment all he wanted without having to worry about patient consent, or popular opinion.

By the end of 2122 he had succeeded. He had managed to connect the computer block to every sense in the Pod body, every nerve now reported to the computer block, eyes saw and passed on the information, ears heard, limbs moved, fingers felt, the skin all over the body could sense touch, pain, cold, heat, moisture. He had even managed to have a Pod body speak text that he had uploaded into the computer block. No processing ability of the human brain was beyond reach. If a human brain registered it or controlled it, so did the computer block in the Pod body.

And again nobody had mined because it was clear that it was still just Pod bodies, and the brain wasn't real. A Pod body with a computer block still wasn't aware. It was just a computer steering nerves in almost human flesh, nothing more. A Pod body could still not reason, still not feel emotions, still couldn't do something as simple as love or hate.

Once the basic barrier of having the A.I. computer block interact with the Pod body was breached it was just a matter of refining the programming. Pods started to do more and more. The first Pods could only hold things for you, while the latest Pods had a broad pallet of knowledge that surpassed the knowledge an average human would have on the subject. Only people that had an advanced knowledge about a subject would know more about it than the average Pod did.

From then on more specific models were quickly created. First came the servant Pods. Then the Pods that knew how to behave during sex. With them, quickly called the 'Adult Companion models', it was really liked that the Pods could be grown to have certain looks, and a fondness for sex was easily programmed. An extra convenience was that Pods might have sexual organs, but they couldn't reproduce. Female Pods never ovulated since they didn't have ovaries, and the male models were sterile because they didn't have real testicles.

And then the first Enforcer Pod was created. It was based on a seven foot tall male body, though Enforcer Pods didn't have any sex organs at all. What they did have was a body armor. They were literally grown into a hard-shell full body armor that protected them from head to toe, leaving only eyes, ears and mouths free on the head, but even that was protected by a helmet. For the rest, only the inside of their fingers were also free of armor so that they still had tactile senses. The other armor was never removed, could not be removed without surgery.

Though they were called Enforcer Pods, they were the most widely used model. Governments loved the fact that knowledge could be programmed into them and they were used for more and more government jobs where there was a potential for humans to be hurt in the line of duty. Traffic cops didn't exist anymore. Enforcer Pods were used as street police, while humans had moved to doing the investigative work like solving murders and burglaries since a Pod didn't have the deductive skills that were needed for that. A Pod could not investigate someone on a hunch; Pods didn't have hunches.

Human firefighters only had office jobs, all the work on the street was done by Enforcer Pods. After all, with the right program installed, you had seven feet tall, hugely muscled, armored, and very fast, beings that literally had the knowledge of thousands of firefighters in their heads. No human could ever compete with them in the standard 'put out this fire, prevent spreading of fire, keep humans safe, also rescue the dog' kind of work that the Enforcer Pods excelled at, thanks to their programming.

Of course, this also meant that the average soldier was also replaced by Enforcer Pods. The army still had more than enough humans, but they were all higher up. The kind that worked from offices. On the ground, the only humans were the commanders that told the Pods what to do, and Special Forces members, since there creative thinking was needed.

The army liked it that way because there was something to be said for having soldiers that followed every order, never complained, and didn't require wages other than food. And on top of that had a mind that could be uploaded at any moment, thanks to wireless connection, with pictures of most wanted enemy leaders, tactical situations as to what streets were considered safe and where to be extra vigilant. And could remember and then recite every single word an informant had said. No more 'I thought he said this' confusion.

The problem with that, was of course that the East didn't just ignore it all. Since trade had resumed they had bought Pods and Pod technology from the West, and then made their own models. And when the Western armies started to use Pods instead of soldiers, the East felt that its army presence needed to be increased to counter this threat.

That was when the new arms race started. With the East being technologically about ten years more advanced in general technology than the West, having a lot more natural resources, and on top of that having seventy percent of the World population, they had chosen for having normal human ground troops that were supported by the best technology that they could create. They had realized that Pods were nice, but they still had a body that could be taken out with one well aimed armor piercing bullet. Why bother? Why not just take those A.I. units and build them into machines instead?

And so the East created aircraft carriers that could think for themselves about how to best fulfill orders, that evaded icebergs without being told to, that managed their nuclear reactors better than any mechanic on a ship ever could. They had airplanes that received orders and then flew themselves without pilot or even remote control. They had tanks that drove and loaded themselves.

The West knew that it could never match the East in regards to ground troops, simply because they had seven billion inhabitants compared to the West's three billion. So the West had focused more on intimidation tactics. They had five thousand battalions of a thousand Enforcer Pods each, stationed all through the Western world, with three thousand of them stationed in Europe because it shared a physical boarder with the East.

But more than that. Where the East had used Pod technology to take the A.I. units and put them in machines, the West in turn had copied that idea from the East. The West could never hope to match the military might from the East who already had sixty aircraft carriers, bigger than anything the West had ever created, sailing the oceans, to name just one thing. So the West had concentrated on building submarines armed with missiles that carried multiple atomic warheads. Each Liberty class submarine carried a total of three hundred nuclear warheads, and the West had fifteen Liberty class submarines. Besides their nuclear arsenal, they also had long range torpedoes; enough of them to take out several aircraft carriers before having to go back to port to rearm. And all of it, every submarine, every warhead, had an A.I. unit installed and could think for itself about how best to fulfill orders.

The result of this arms race was that for the last two years the World had been living in a heightened state of alert. In the U.S. this translated to the country being at DEFCON 3 for those two years, with DEFCON 2 having been initiated five times. The shortest period of DEFCON 2 was for only two hours. But six months before they had been at DEFCON 2 for a full week.

In short, the world was at a point where people weren't wondering 'if' there would be another war, but 'when' that war would be. The world was in unrest, but for now life continued.

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Part 2: The next step.

December 16th 2172

San Jose, California. (A.k.a., Silicon Valley.)

"Hey girl!"

Athena Jason looked up from her computer unit, a grin already forming on her face since she knew the voice only too well.

"Hey Mike da punk," Athena teasingly greeted the man that had addressed her. Then she greeted the other man that was with him; both of them being friends of hers since kindergarten. "Hey Jim. How are you guys?"

"Hi Ena," Jim the more serious and subdued of the couple greeted back, using the shortened version of Athena's name that everyone used most of the time.

The full name of Athena was mostly only used when wanting to empathize, or in a very relaxed atmosphere, or by new people that hadn't picked up the nickname yet. Ena didn't mind though. She liked her short name just as much as her long name and was actually always correcting people on how to say it right. 'It's Ena, like saying Jenna without the J.' Besides, she would probably prefer just about any reasonable nickname over the one she knew people used behind her back.

Ena was a person that was easy to like and hard to get into a nasty argument with. Disagreements, sure, but nasty 'I wish you would die' arguments, no. But despite that, her behind the back nickname of 'the clown' stuck. Even if people didn't come up with it by themselves, they would use it once they heard someone else say it because they would think it was fitting.

The reason for it, was that Ena was a redhead. Unfortunately it was the kind of red where the more polite references didn't stick. Autumn haired sure didn't fit, nor did fiery locks. In fact, even saying redhead wasn't really true. This, because Ena's natural hair color was a bright orange. At very best, if someone wanted to be really polite, they could call it the color of polished copper, but even that didn't do justice to the true orange color. Unfortunately for Ena her natural hair color truly was the orange that was often used in clown wigs.

She had experimented with coloring her hair a couple of times, but never liked the result that much, and truly hated how rough her hair would feel afterwards. So, in the end she had decided on growing out her hair instead. And now the orange hair impressed by how healthy it looked and the fact that it almost reached her hips. This was especially impressive because her hair didn't hang straight down but was naturally curly. But lucky for Ena, her hair liked to behave and she rarely had bad hair days.

Besides her hair color, there really wasn't anything special about her face that stood out. Plain was the best word. Green eyes, orange eyebrows, thin lips, and a fine nose whose point just tipped up a bit.

In fact beside her hair color, Ena could best be described with the words plain and average. She was five-foot-two tall, slim, but also didn't really have any muscle tone to speak off. Her overall

appearance was such that she was someone that was easily lost in a crowd, even a small crowd, if it wasn't for the fact that she would easily be found again because of her hair color.

She never bothered to wear a bra. The reason for this was her A cup breasts sure didn't need any support or need to be prevented from moving too much. As she had once told a friend of hers when talking about the subject, at least the fact that her nipples poked at T-shirts let people know that they were talking to a girl. This wasn't too much of a joke because if Ena ever decided to cut her hair short, people would probably describe her as a tomboy on top of calling her a clown.

But unlike most women these days, she never thought about having her breasts 'done'. Because doctors had easy access to Pod bodies to test new procedures on, plastic surgery was now so common, cheap, and extremely good, that almost every human in the world had something changed about their body. For women the first thing was normally their breasts. Be it increasing or decreasing size, or changing the shape, or the firmness. It was so common that something was changed, that a woman that said that their breasts had never been altered would find it hard to be believed by people. There were only a few women that were happy with what nature had given them in the chest area.

Ena was one of these women. She may have had A cup breasts, but she really liked them. Her breast flowed into a modest but nice swell and then flowing back again. Ena liked to compare her breasts to little suburban hills; small, but just the right size for some casual exploration. Still enough for a lover to gently fondle and play with, still enough to give a bit of a line to T-shirts. And best of all, she didn't have to deal with back aches from carrying huge breasts around that were only in the way most of the time anyway.

But where Ena's body didn't turn heads, there was a certain energy about her. Once you started to talk to her, got to know her even for a moment, you realized that you were talking to a very likable person. A likable person that had her own kind of allure and that gave credence to the saying 'looks aren't everything'. Because it had happened more than once that at parties eventually people found themselves preferring the company of Ena over the company of superficial people that relied on their looks to arouse the interest of people.

"Eh, things are the same as always," Jim continued to answer. "Job's good, wages are bad, we need to buy us one of those all heights flyers so that we can fly over buildings instead of around them, we don't need to waste that money because we can stick to the old hover roads."

"Be glad that you actually have a flyer at all," Ena reminded. "I still have a hover car."

"Yeah, but even though a low level flyer flies higher than, and over, the hover cars, they still have to stick to the same roads," Mike objected. "I want an all lever flyer so that we can do more direct point A to point B travel."

"And I think it's a waste of time to buy one just to save a few minutes of flying time per day," Jim disagreed. "So we argue about it all the time. You know us hon."

Ena sure did. Mike and Jim were her best friends. They had met in kindergarten while the boys



were fighting over a stuffed monkey. Ena had offered them her stuffed teddy-bear instead. Which they had of course taken and then thrown back at her. But they were kids, and by the end of the day they were inseparable.

Sure, there had been some bumps along the way over the years, especially once they started to realize the difference between boys and girls. There had been a period of a few months where the boys had been fighting over Ena all the time, coming close to fistfights on a few occasions. But that stopped when the guys agreed that Ena was off limit to both of them; not wanting to lose her friendship by fighting over her.

It was a few years later, when they were talking about going to the same high school and maybe being able to talk their parents into being allowed to live on campus and share a two bedroom apartment, that her friends confessed to her in an indirect way why the fighting had really stopped back then. They told her that the sleeping arrangements wouldn't be a problem since they would take one of the bedrooms. The look in their eyes, that 'please don't ask further' look, had finally clued her in on the fact that the boys she had known for so long had been keeping a secret from her.

She had been pissed, and her friends had been elated by it. This because her anger was about the fact that they had kept a secret from her, and not about just what that secret was. It was then that she had admitted to a little secret of her own. She would be glad that she would have her own bedroom because it might just happen that she wanted to bring a girl over for... a sleepover. Which of course had resulted in her friends being pissed at her for having a secret from them.

Gay relationships were more accepted by that time, and they even had the same rights that opposite sex couples had, including marriage rights. But being gay was still a subject that was not easy for all. It still ended friendships because friends suddenly thought that their now admitted gay friend wanted more than to just be a platonic friend. A lot of parents still had a problem with children being gay, and still said stupid remarks like 'if my kid told me that they are gay, I would beat the crap out of them', which resulted in a lot of people deciding to hide the fact that they were gay, at least until they moved out.

Because of a lot of reasons like that, it had become more and more normal that there was a line. At home you lived by 'home laws', and once someone had moved out of the home, their true life would begin. Often kids couldn't bring a romantic interest home because their parents would tell them that they could start fooling around once they lived alone. Often kids weren't allowed to get a hover car or flyer until they moved out. Moving out had become more and more the line for someone to start their own life. Not that family ties were severed of course. Kids still visited parents, just that a lot of important life decisions were only made after moving out, decisions that formed an adult life.

Another result of that, was that a lot of kids also 'semi' moved out early by going away to school. More and more high schools also offered on campus housing with house rules and counselors so that children from fourteen upwards could live there and be free for the rules of home, but still lived in an environment with clear rules that parents had been able to check out before allowing their children to live there, and with counselors that talked to the children and helped them

through problems.

High school and college had been some really great years for Ena and the guys. But then had come the day where they had to decide what to do with their lives. Ena had proven to have an uncanny ability for programming and had been made an offer by the leading Artificial Intelligence company in the U.S., while the guys had found their solace in joining an advertisement bureau.

And while all of them still lived in the same city, shared a house actually, they rarely truly saw each other these days. Not counting working late, Ena had to stick with the work hours set forth by the company, which meant getting up at six in the morning and going to bed early enough to not die from having to get up that early. While the guys worked for a company that didn't care about hours, just about jobs getting done. So they hardly ever got up before noon, and then stayed up well past midnight.

The result was that while they shared a house, the only contact they had these days was at best a quick 'hey what are you eating/watching/reading' when they happen to run into each other. Enough to know that you didn't live alone, but not enough to count as time spent together.

Sometimes they managed to arrange having days off at the same time and then they would spend the day going out to the beach, or a club, or drive up to San Francisco, or whatever. The main point being that they had fun. But still, the last of those 'fun days' had been over two months before.

One of the most amazing things about Mike and Jim was that they hardly ever agreed on anything. But they also hardly ever had a fight. They argued about everything, but never truly fought over it. Eventually either the one would persuade the other, or the other would not be persuaded but still give in because to him it wasn't that important. Ena had once admitted to them that even she, being as close as she was to them, sometimes wondered how their relationship could work.

Jim, the one considered the conservative in the relationship, had shrugged and said, "At least we always have something to talk about."

Ena shifted her computer unit to the side a bit to focus on her friends. "So what brings you here?"

"Oh, I'm wounded," Mike, the liberal, said with a fake hurt expression on his boyish face.

The three of them were almost, or just over, thirty, with there being a seven month difference between Jim, the oldest, and Ena, the youngest. Ena herself was only three months away from the dreaded 3-0, though she wasn't actually dreading turning thirty. Mike and Ena herself both still looked so young that they were always asked for ID when buying drinks. Mike found it annoying, but Ena loved the fact that to some she still didn't look old enough to buy alcohol. She knew that she wouldn't look so young that she could pass for eighteen forever, so she enjoyed it while she could.

Jim was the one that was never carded, but his balding head and mostly sober expression probably helped in that. But he too liked his image, as he always said, there had to be one conservative in the family to keep the others grounded. Ena always loved it when he said that because she knew that he then meant the 'family' that was living in their house; He, Mike, and Ena.

Though Ena still had a good relationship with her parents, they weren't close anymore. Emotionally or physically. Her parents had decided to move to Florida about ten years before. Ena had never truly understood why. They had traded a home at the ocean for a home at the ocean. Maybe they liked seeing sunrises over the ocean in the East better than seeing sunsets in the West. Whatever it was, it meant that contact with them was them visiting her once a year and she visiting them half a year later. And of course, the mandatory holo-call once every two weeks. Not that she minded that, but it did take time away from her hobby, which was luckily enough also her work.

"So what are you working on?" Mike asked as he sat down in one of the chairs across from the big table that Ena used as a combination of desk and workbench.

Ena decided not to ask them again what they were doing there. Seeing that they had taken the time to visit her, chances were that eventually they would come around to saying why they were there. Besides, Ena was way too excited about what she was working on and was more than willing to tell.

But her upbringing made her say, "Well, before I answer that... want something to drink?"

"Sure," Jim answered for the both of them.

Ena looked over to one of the corners of her lab where another, smaller, table was located. "Zeal, could you please get us some Mars Delight?" she asked the woman that was sitting there.

Zeal looked up with an eager smile. "Certainly. Would someone like anything else?"

"Nope," Ena spoke for her friends, "Mars Delight all around is fine."

Then she addressed her friends again. "I really wish that Pepsi had come up with a better name for that drink. I love it, but good god, Mars Delight? Just because we finally have a permanent settlement there?"

"It's a city by now," Mike corrected. "Almost twenty thousand people, and fully self-sustainable; they no longer need food and water from Earth. Besides, Pepsi brought out that taste to celebrate the fact that the terraforming has reached a point where you can now breathe all over the planet. People just have to live in pressurized houses now and wear a light pressure suit when going out, kinda like being covered in a thick spandex body-suit."

"Yeah, whatever," Ena waved him off. "I may be a scientist, but my interest stops at the stratosphere."

In the mean time, Jim had been staring at the woman that was now taking their drinks out of the stasis unit. Leaning closer to Ena, he whispered, "Doesn't she freak you out?"

Ena frowned and also looked at Zeal. "Why?" she asked, honestly confused.

"Because she's a Pod of course," Jim stated the, to him, obvious.

Ena hesitated, using the time in which Zeal brought them their drinks to study the woman.

Zeal was the personification of what the Western world in general thought the image of beauty had to look like. Six feet tall, which resulted in incredibly sexy long legs. A slim body with just enough padding in all the right places to not be called skinny. Bones were covered, lines flowed in sensual curves. The body fat was so distributed that there wasn't any bumps or dips to be found... except for where there had to be of course. For the rest her skin was just one smooth and sexy plane of skin that flowed perfectly into the next curve and the next perfect female body part. The long outdated, but still believed to be perfect measurements of 36-24-36, with mandatory full C cup breasts of course. Stunningly perfect sapphire blue eyes and platinum blonde hair that was almost white and reached halfway down her back added to the picture of perfection.

She was stunning and moved with a grace that Ena rarely saw. And just to make it total perfection, those perfect and well shaped lips moved so easily to form the cutest quirky smiles and grins. But that quiriness only enhanced the image. Because it meant that just at the right moments, whenever she laughed or smiled, her face would change from stunning perfection to absolutely adorable cute. It was a smile you could never get enough of, if you were willing to have it matter to you.

Of course, the reason why Zeal was so perfect was because she was designed that way. As Jim had so rightfully pointed out, Zeal was a Pod; grown in a factory from pre-form to something that looked like a twenty year old human in six months flat, with an A.I. unit for a brain. All about her, including her sexy voice, had been designed and argued about by designers and engineers when they created the model line, instead of it being a chance combination of nature.

Ena's eyes stopped and focused on Zeal's left cheek. There, closer to the ear so to not be obtrusively obvious in the face, yet easy to see for all that were looking, was the small one inch wide tattoo that clearly identified Zeal as a Pod.

Oh, the Pod designers had been smart. They realized that with Pods looking just like humans, humans needed a way to see if they were talking to a real person, or just a humanoid body with a computer for a brain. But that didn't mean that you needed some ugly and obtrusive reminder that focused all the attention.

No, what you needed was something small, something you could easily ignore or look over if you wanted, but that was still clear to see if someone was looking for it. After all, police needed to know at a glance if the person that had died in a car accident was a real person, or if this was merely an insurance case of destroyed property. Salespeople in stores needed to know if they

needed to be polite to someone, or if it was just a Pod buying stuff because the owner didn't feel like getting it.

So, what the Pod designers had settled on was a small and beautiful tattoo on the left cheek. A small blue/green/red hummingbird in hover that was drinking from a yellow flower for the female Pods, and a black and gray head of a howling wolf for the male Pods.

"It's all their fault, you know?" Jim said once Zeal had gone back to her little desk where she was doing some mindless job that Ena didn't want to bother with.

Ena wanted to correct Jim, both about his clear displeasure with Pods, and about them being the fault of whatever problem Jim was worried about that week. But the problem was that she really couldn't.

Ena didn't dislike the Pods, and it could even be said that as far as liking went she compared them with humans; it all depended on how they acted. But she knew how many problems in the world were caused by the Pods existing. And that she herself was partially to blame for that. Not only did she make her living in the Pod industry, or more to the point, in the A.I. industry that shipped most of its units to Pod makers. But she also had to admit that she was also one of the people that didn't hesitate to use a Pod; she used Zeal all of the time. While she referred to Zeal as her assistant, she still had the Pod do all of the mindless work, or get food for her, or clean, or, or, or. So indirectly, because she used Pods as well, she too was to blame for them existing. After all, as long as there was a demand, they would be built. Therefore she felt that she certainly had no right to ride the righteous wave on that matter.

So instead she asked Jim, "What did they do now?"

"Besides bringing the world to the brink of destruction you mean?" he countered.

"Ah," Ena said in understanding. "I see that you lost yourself again in the advertisement job you're currently doing for the Christian Values Bureau."

Mike grinned. "You know how he gets, that's why I warned you. We have to read the public stuff our clients put out so that we're sure that what we say has some truth in it, 'thanks' to the True Advertisement law. Sometimes Jim lets stuff like that go to his head."

"You laugh all you want," Jim defended. "I heard that we're at DEFCON 2 again because of those things."

Ena rolled her eyes. "Jim, we are not at DEFCON 2."

"Says who?" Jim defended. "It wouldn't be the first time they kept it secret."

"True," Ena had to agree. "But the fact that you're allowed in here should tell you. Amongst other things we make A.I. units here that are shipped to factories that make Army Enforcer Pods. If we were at DEFCON 2 you wouldn't be allowed into the building because of security. As for

Zeal, no, she doesn't freak me out. I like her company."

Ena had to laugh when she saw Jim's eyes get wide. "Come on, surely that won't come as a surprise to you. You do remember what I do for a living right?"

"You like hanging out with Pods?" Jim asked in disbelief.

"No," Ena disagreed. "I like hanging out with people. But in here I like the company of Zeal. She's the latest of her line. She knows how to have a conversation, how to talk small stuff that's entertaining, shuts up when I want her quiet, knows how to tell a good joke,"

"Because she's connected wirelessly to the Net and downloaded the latest jokes from the comedy channel probably," Jim interjected.

"Probably," Ena bantered back, only belatedly realizing that Jim had mostly been tweaking her. Because he always came across as so damn serious it was easy to fall for his needling when he was in a playful mood. Which was more often than people would give him credit for. "Or more likely, they probably have a dedicated joke section in the Pod database to make sure that Pods always know the latest jokes and don't tell you anything a human probably already told you. I tell you, I heard six people tell that joke about that priest in a condom factory just last week."

Seeing that it was now safe to speak up, Mike noted, "So what's with the Pod anyway? Where did you get her from? Does she belong to the company?"

"Well, believe it or not, she belongs to me," Ena said with a shrug. "She came with that promotion three months ago. I did tell you they gave me a Pod, remember?"

"Yeah," Mike agreed. "But the way you said it, it sounded like they gave you one to experiment on, not to have walking around here and... and do what actually?"

He looked at the shapely blonde before guessing, "She's an Adult Companion model, isn't she?"

"She is," Ena agreed. "And yeah, it probably sounded like me getting her to experiment on because that's kinda the idea. But she's officially mine, and not property of the company. She's an employment bonus, I guess you could say. Even though I'm still working for the same company, technically I got a new job with that promotion. But she is also to experiment on, just that they don't care what I do with her the rest of the time. The thing is that I work with A.I. programming and sometimes I have to test the things I thought up. That's what Zeal is for. Because she has a wireless link that's normally used for her A.I. to be updated by the Pod company for as long as the service contract lasts, I can use it to tweak her A.I. and see if the things I do actually make a difference."

"But why an Adult Companion model?" Mike asked. "Wouldn't a Servant Model be more suited?" Then he winked at her. "Or did your boss agree with me on the fact that you really need to get laid more?"

Ena hit him on the shoulder. "Funny. No, but my boss knew that the A.I. unit's programming really didn't matter since I would be messing with it anyway. Basically all the units sold on the free market can do the other things I use Zeal for as well. Just that other units have more programming dedicated to certain tasks. But I don't need Zeal to be an expert at cleaning, as long as she knows how to take the vacuum sterilizer out of the closet and clean the floor or use a damn auto scrubber to clean a table."

"So he went for an Adult Companion model because?" Mike persisted. "Those are more expensive than the Servant models as far as I know. At least more expensive than the regular servant models and not those limited edition collector models made for the rich. Or was I actually right with him thinking you need to get laid?"

This time Ena rolled her eyes. "You, my friend, are too much focused on sex. You seem to forget the 'Companion' part of the Adult Companion name. He went for an Adult Companion model because the Adult Companion models have the widest range of other tasks programmed into their A.I. unit. You can take a Server model with you to the theater, but it will only look indifferent. But an Adult Companion model has reactions to other things programmed in. If you take an Adult Companion model to the theater it will recognize the environment, realize that those people on stage are acting, and then be wildly enthused about it afterwards, or hugely disappointed and help you rip the performance apart if you didn't like it. And they know whether to like or hate it simply by asking you if you liked it and then go on your answer."

"True as that may be," Mike persisted relentlessly, "but that's not the only reason, is it?"

Ena sighed. "Fine, you win. Yes my boss knows my preference and he decided to give me a Pod that I could... enjoy in all ways. He told me, 'even if you don't do intimate things with a Pod, it won't hurt to have something nice to look at walking around that lab of yours.' And as far as that is concerned he's right, I sure do like how Zeal looks; a lot."

Now Mike merely winked.

"No Mike," Ena sighed again. "I haven't slept with her. As much as I like her company, and as much as seeing her sometimes makes me growl in approval... no, just no. There's just something... I make my money in the industry, but I don't think I could ever sleep with a Pod. Actually, maybe it's because I make my money in the industry. Seeing that I program A.I. units, I know more than most that all their reactions are just programmed in. I don't think I could stand seeing a Pod pretend to have an orgasm because it knows that it has been stimulated like 'this' for 'that' long and that this means that now an orgasm has to follow."

"Hmm, I can actually see your point there," Mike agreed.

"So, her name, that's your doing?" Jim asked. "Zeal? Kinda strange. She looks like a Honey or a Candy, or if you want more serious names maybe a Sara or a Julie."

"Actually, Zeal is her model name," Ena elaborated. "I guess with there being so many different Adult Companion models to fit different tastes, and on top of that model names having been used

to indicate certain types over the fifty years the Pods have existed... they probably ran out of the obvious names long ago. I mean, I remember an uncle of mine having an Aphrodite model twenty years ago. Of course, back then I didn't know just what she was, nor that she wasn't really human. I guess designers get more creative now, but still want to have a link in the model name to indicate what kind of model they are."

She shrugged before stating the to her obvious line of thought the designers must have traveled. "You know. Adult Companion. Also used for sex. So they want something to reflect that. And what do you want in sex? Passion. What is a different word for being passionate? Zeal. You know, she has sex with great passion. She has sex with great zeal. So, Zeal it became. I for one kinda like how it sounds and never bothered to figure out a different name."

Mike looked over at the blonde again before admitting, "I have to say that they truly get better and better in creating those things. As you know, I only like guys... one guy actually,"

He winked at his lover before continuing, "But she even raises an interest in me. If I was single and managed to get some time with her, I must admit that I might be persuaded to try a romp just to see what all the hype is about having sex with women."

Ena smirked before admitting. "Well to tell you the truth, even though I don't want to have sex with her, I do find myself looking at her for minutes on end sometimes. Sometimes I even give her some mindless task to do just so that I can watch her move around for ten minutes or so and get my mind off the thing I'm trying to work on. It's amazing how those mental breaks help me actually get my work done. You should see her bend over when she's wearing her hot pants."

Mike laughed. Then, seeing that he had no experience with actually owning a Pod, he asked, "Hey, don't you have to tell them what to wear?"

"Usually you do," Ena agreed. "People really seem to like to tell their Pods what to wear, how to do their hair, and stuff like that. But that's one of the little things I experiment with, one of the reasons I truthfully do need a Pod close by to experiment on. I sometimes have those little ideas that I need to test before I can put them in the overall concept. I did that with Zeal on both the clothing and the hair. She now picks what she wants to."

Seeing the guys focus on her fully at the words, she lifted her hands in defense. "Or so it will seem once my next design is finished. In reality it's more a random choice thing. Zeal knows what kind of clothing is in her closet, she knows what modern fashion is, and what's considered fashion no-no's. So I made a little program that makes her computer block randomly choose certain items of clothing, within certain parameters."

"No putting the bra on over the T-shirt," Jim said in understanding.

"Right," Ena agreed. "Stuff like that. The same with her hair. She has access to more hair styles than I would ever want to try. But I set the parameters of, A, her hair staying as long as it is now, so no cutting it and going for crew cut or anything. B, her hair stays the color it is. C, for seventy percent of the time she prefers the style she has now, since I like the simple but great look of her



hair hanging down like that. Oh, and D, a hair choice stays for the entire day, or longer. Last thing I want is for her to suddenly go change her hair in the middle of a working day."

Jim nodded. "Ah, now I see what you mean about the clothing. You set the parameters on what she's allowed to wear, but because you don't know when the random choice will fall on those hot pants you just talked about, you still have no idea what she will wear when you come in in the morning. To everyone that isn't into programming it will seem that she actually made a choice. But people that know programming, or that were told like us just now, will know that in reality it's nothing more than random selection; a throwing of dice if you want."

"Right," Ena agreed. "It's really all about perception. People will think that it was a choice, but in reality it was just chance."

"So to come back to my earlier question of what you're working on... that's what you're working on?" Mike asked.

Ena lifted her hands a little in a 'well' gesture. "That's a part of it. But the program still needs a lot of work so I only focused on hair and clothing since it's safe. At worst the programming goes gaga and she decides to shave herself bald and decides that nude is the best clothing to wear. But eventually I want to take it further. Just imagine, since we're talking Adult Companion model, having her not just be willing to have sex, but even asking you to have sex from time to time. It will look to people like their Pod got horny and wants some, and they can do their Pod the favor of agreeing. But in reality it's simply random programming throwing a six and an owner winning the small price of a Pod's programming fooling them into feeling wanted. Just imagine what that would do for the sector. To not just have a Pod that gives you a good lay, but to have one that makes you feel wanted, needed, that makes you feel important."

"So random choices, that's what you're working on," Mike clarified.

"No, I'm working on the next step," Ena said proudly. "What I just talked about is a part of that. But a Pod making choices isn't new, just that normally the choice is an elimination of options instead of my random choice approach."

"The next step," Mike repeated patiently. "You mean the next generation of Artificial Intelligence?"

Ena pointed a finger at him. "Ah, no."

Now Mike frowned. "No? Correct me if I'm wrong, but don't you work for the leading A.I. manufacturer in this country... in the world actually? I thought that even the East bought the A.I. units created by this company."

"Yes on that part," Ena agreed. "But no, I'm not working on the next generation of A.I. I'm working on something I'm going to call R.I., if I succeed."

"You lost me," Mike admitted.

Ena hesitated for a moment, thinking about how to explain it to her friend. "R.I. will stand for Real Intelligence, to make the difference clear between that and A.I. You see, they call it Artificial Intelligence, but there's no intelligence involved at all. What you see these days, what is called intelligence, is nothing more than the refining of programming."

Mike scratched his head and frowned. "I still don't get it."

"Alright," Ena said slowly. "How about this then? Fifty years ago it started basic. The commands used in the programming of the Pods were simple. Take rag, clean table. Or lay down, spread legs... or get hard, depending on preference of course. But over time more and more things were added."

She nodded in the direction of the blonde Pod that was sitting at her corner desk again. "But now Pods have a mind filled with zettabytes of data. Zeal has billions of commands stored in her data crystals. But you know what? It's still just a line of commands, just like those old models. It's only a lot more commands, but it's still a line. If this order is received, so this, if this is not possible, do that, if that results in multiple options, ask for a command. The choices that Pods seem to make aren't choices; they're the result of commands. If this action is not possible, do that."

She lifted her by now empty glass. "Take the drinks Zeal gave us. It's all commands. She knows what to do because she has tens of thousands, if not millions, of commands in her memory about what to do to give someone a drink. It's step after step after step. It's like, take bottle, pour drink until glass is this full. If bottle is empty take a new one. If bottle is almost empty pour what is left and then take a new one. If bottle drops, activate cleaning routine. Cleaning routine for dropped bottle. If bottle is broken take away glass first. If bottle is undamaged, put it upright again to prevent continued spilling. And so on and so forth. To us it would just look like she dropped the bottle, and then cleaned up the mess before fixing us our drink. But in reality about a million commands were activated and then followed to completion or to a new command."

"And you want to do all of that different?" Jim asked in disbelief. "Ena, the reason why there are millions or billions of commands in that programming is because thousands of programmers have been writing them for those fifty years. I'm willing to bet that those first commands are still there, unless they were considered obsolete. I'm sure that that first 'lay down and spread legs' command is still in her memory, unless someone somewhere once decided to replace it with a 'lay down sexy and spread legs teasingly' command."

Ena laughed at Jim's question, and especially his idea of a command improvement. "No, I'm not that stupid. In fact, I intend to fully use all of those commands, just change how and when they're accessed. Take Zeal and that drink again. Millions of commands, all potential events are covered. Hell, they probably even covered what to do when pouring a drink and an earthquake starts at that moment. But you know, I'm willing to bet that they didn't cover the bottle magically disappearing out of her hand because that just won't happen. But the thing is that if it were to happen, Zeal would either stop all motion because her A.I. unit crashed because there's no command to follow, or she would try to go back command after command until she would reach

a point where her programming can make a choice again."

She shrugged. "Zeal is actually a pretty upscale model, so my guess is that she would retrace her steps back to the moment where she had to pick up the bottle of Mars Delight and then tell me that she can't give us any because there's no more left. But I'm working on a program that accesses all of that information differently. Kinda like the clothing, but different. But to talk simply, you could say that everything would become a random selection, guided by most often used results."

"You're talking about them being able to choose," Jim said with a frown as he tried to make sense of what Ena was telling them. "Choose for real, I mean. Because isn't making a choice basically just what you just explained? When I make a choice you can be pretty sure about what I will choose because of what kind of things I chose in the past, but you can never be absolutely certain. Because of what you know about me you can be pretty damn sure that I won't go to a Dave Deen concert, but I might surprise you because I might decide to suffer through it because I know Mike likes his music."

"Oh, are we going to see Dave Deen?" Mike asked with staged excitement, even hopping up and down in his chair a little. He knew the answer of course. Because no matter how much he might like the music, he would never subject Jim to having to suffer through it.

"Over my dead body," Jim said with a smirk. "I was just giving an example. My point is that you can be almost absolutely certain about a choice I would make, but I could always surprise you. With the Pods it would then be the same, if there isn't a clear set of commands to follow, they might do something you never expect. And that, is the power of choice."

"Well, I guess you could say that I'm giving them the power of choice," Ena partially agreed. "But I for one find that as wrong as saying that Artificial Intelligence is intelligence. After all, it's the same thing only from another side. Now the Pods follow a line of commands and don't have any say in the matter. With my approach they also don't really have a choice because the random generator picks an option for them."

"But you can set in parameters," Mike reminded while pointing at Zeal. "With her you have that parameter that a bra goes under a T-shirt, and if I understand that right, a random generator could actually have said 'put on a shirt first and then put on a bra'. Or for that matter 'use a bra as panties'. So you have those parameters to make sure that doesn't happen."

"Well, yes," Ena admitted. "It's going to be that the random generator makes a choice, and then checks against the parameter programming if that choice is allowed. If it is, the programming continues, if it isn't allowed, the random generator simply makes a new selection. So when getting dressed, it might actually be that the random generator would have selected the bra last and put it on over the T-shirt. But the Parameters won't allow that and so the random generator starts again until it hits a type of clothing that it is allowed to be put on."

She smiled at him. "And before you ask if I want to go code everything that exists in the world... the answer is no. The way the codes are stored in the programming is my friend there. For

programmers to be able to find codes relatively quickly amongst those billions of options, codes are put in categories. So I'll use a bit of the old step by step approach, but then have all the steps end in a random generator once it's safe to do so. So the step by step programming will first say 'get dressed'. Or if I told her to dress for a special event, the programming would say 'get dressed for a theater visit, limit clothing choices to these options'. Then it would say 'put underwear on first'. Then the random generator will pick something, limited by the parameter of for just what event the Pod is dressing. Once that is done the next step in the step by step will say 'put outer clothing on' and the random generator will pick something, keeping that same parameter in mind."

"I get it," Mike said. "Real Intelligence, as you will call it, will be that a Pod decides on something, and then on how to actually do it. Zeal there might randomly decide that she wants to have sex with you today. Then the step by step programming takes over, just like the mind of a real human does. Kinda like, I want this so I have to do these steps. The step by step will decide that since you didn't have sex before, she might need to seduce you. Which means picking the right clothing. Then the random generator will pick something from the selection that the step by step programming brought the 'thinking' to."

"Right," Ena agreed. "Because the step by step part will decide that seduction is needed, and for seduction sexy clothing is needed, and meeting me nude with a big dildo in her hands sure won't persuade me to have sex with her for the first time." Then she grinned. "Which brings up a very good point. With the new programming I have to add a... a... a... well, base rules, I guess. Something that takes place before all the rest so that the random generator part can't even get to making selections on that. Like the big one of 'don't try to seduce the owner'."

"Oh you're no fun," Mike said with a fake pout. "I told you, you need to get laid more."

"I get laid enough, thank you very much," Ena said, only to then regret it.

Jim and Mike were her best friends and they didn't have any real secrets from each other. But once they had firmly established that the men liked men and didn't want to hear about things women did, and that Ena liked women and really, really, didn't want to hear about things that men did, their sex lives were normally not talked about. Not because the topic was off topic as such, but more because they didn't want to talk to their friends and see them cringe at details.

But the reason Ena cringed was because she had seen the gleam in Mike's eyes at the moment.

"Whoa, wait up there," Mike said, lifting his hands in a stopping gesture. "What's that about you getting laid girl? You never take anyone home. And we know for a fact that on those nights were you aren't home you're at work. Surely you don't nip out to gay bars at night and leave us sitting home, right?"

Ena laughed, glad to see that her first guess was wrong. Apparently Mike wasn't out for details on her sex life, but simply worried about missing out on clubbing with their best friend. "No, nothing like that. If you really want to know, you kinda just said it yourself. If I'm not home I'm here at work. There's this really nice and sweet janitor here on the night shift. She lives at home

with very religious parents that don't know that she's gay. And, well, things get quiet at night, and she really doesn't need eight hours to do her work, catch my drift? She has an all access key card and she knows that if the light's on in my office, but off here in the lab, that she's more than welcome to hop in for a visit."

Both the man chuckled before Jim admitted, "Ena, I would never have guessed. You naughty girl."

Ena winked before reminding them, "It's nothing serious, you know. Me sometimes needing someone to take me to higher planes, and she's simply a young woman that has found someone that takes care of her hormone level."

"How young is young?" Mike asked.

"She turned nineteen three months ago," Ena admitted.

Mike made a show of looking shocked. "What? Eleven years younger than you? You cradle robber you."

Ena punched him on the arm. "Eleven years is not that bad. Besides, the last thing I knew, eighteen is both the age of consent, and legal adulthood here in America."

"True," Jim agreed, placing a hand over his lover's mouth to prevent another comment about age. "As long as it's an honest agreement and you both know what you're doing."

"We know," Ena assured. "We talked about what we wanted, and it's not even that she's just saying what I would like to hear; she was the one that set the borders, I just fully agree with them."

She sighed before admitting, "Besides, I don't think it will last much longer. She was talking about the fact that her parents are looking for a nice place for her. I'm sure that once she moves out and doesn't have to account for where she was during what time, that she will experiment with a real relationship or starts fooling around with friends and flings during her free time."

"Or get a Pod," Mike suggested. "It's not uncommon for parents to get their kids one these days. A century ago parents gave their kids a car when they moved out, but with public transport being so good these days, more and more parents now give their kids a Pod instead. And while I don't think that religious parents will give her an Adult Companion Pod, they might give her a Servant Pod. And best for her, they'll probably give their daughter a female version, thinking that she's straight and the last thing they want to give her is a male Pod that can also be used for sex. Servant Pods may not look as hot as adult Companion Pods, but they still have the basic sex programming just in case an owner gets horny, right?"

"They do," Ena agreed. "And you're right, her parents might just do that. They have enough money to be able to miss the fifty thousand an average Pod of any of the public models costs. They just have her working here because they think children grow up more proper if they have to

work for a living."

Ena smirked before adding. "I met her parents a couple of times actually; they bring her to work. Maybe I'll be nice and try to talk them into it. Maybe even talk them into getting an Adult Companion model and point out the 'Companion' part. Truly, people focus so much on the Adult part that they often forget that the Adult Companion models have the widest range of programming and truly are good companions to have. Kathy has been so nice for me on those nights where I needed some loving, maybe I can repay the favor that way."

"Like you didn't repay the favor on those nights," Mike snorted. "Besides, who says she's never had sex with a Pod before?"

Before Ena could ask, Mike suggested, "Zeal is here all the time right? Unless you sent her on some errand? Who says that on those nights that you do go home, that Kathy person doesn't still come into this lab and then uses your office to have some fun with Zeal instead?"

Ena actually pulled her head back in shock at the suggestion. She had never really thought of what happened to Zeal when she herself went home. Ena just assumed that she would power her A.I. unit down and wait for the next day. But Mike was right, anyone could walk in and talk to the Pod or even just touch her. Both things would automatically start the A.I. unit again. Slowly she turned to face the blonde perfection. Not really sure how to ask, she decided on a roundabout way. "Zeal?"

"Yes Ena?"

"Um, you, um, you were a new model right? What I mean is, you were shipped here straight from the factory? Activated here for the first time?"

"I am the latest model of the Adult Companion line, though the Devotion model is nearing the release date," Zeal said in her incredibly sexy voice, answering the first of the questions Ena had asked. Of course, she didn't realize that this wasn't exactly what Ena had meant. Then she continued just as musically, "I was shipped here directly from the factory without going into storage first. But I wasn't activated here for the first time. I was activated in the factory first for a three-day test program to ensure there were no defects. But after that test I was activated in this lab for the first time after having received the 'passed' status, yes."

"Right, right," Ena said. "Did you, um, since you're an Adult Companion model, have you performed any sexual acts, ever?"

Zeal nodded her head, making a lock from the platinum colored bangs fall into her eyes. She brushed them away with a casual flick of her fingers, proving by doing so that apparently every single move she made had been designed to be incredibly sexy. "During my test program I was electronically stimulated to see if the body reacted in the correct ways."

Ena frowned, and Zeal, because she was such an advanced model, interpreted the frown as a demand for clarification. "To simulate the human body better, certain body functions are

produced by a sub-processor unit without the main A.I. unit controlling the actions."

"I know that," Ena said. Really, she would have been a terrible A.I. programmer if she didn't even know how an A.I. unit worked. And Ena was good. She didn't just focus on the software, she could also put an A.I. block together proverbially with her eyes closed.

"Um," Mike said, "Ena, you might know about this sub-processor, but we don't. So would you mind if she or you explained to us why having it helps in simulating a human better?"

"Sorry," Ena apologized. "Zeal, please explain."

"Yes Ena," the blonde said with an eagerness in her tone as if Ena had just asked her to talk about the plot of the most thrilling holo-vid ever created. "The sub-unit is used because it simulates body reactions that humans normally have no control over. Eyes widening in surprise, tilting the head a little while listening to a very faint sound. Of course, with my line this is also done to make sure that things like sexual response seem natural. Nipples hardening, my pussy getting wet, things like that. Of course, the main A.I. unit can take control over those actions at any point if needed. But it is preferred to leave the control of those actions at sub-processor level only because this mimics the flow of human body responses better. For instance, the nipples not only need to harden when getting turned on, but also soften slowly after reaching an orgasm. And they also need to react to things like air temperature."

For a moment Ena was truly amazed about the words Zeal was using. 'Pussy getting wet' 'getting turned on' 'reaching an orgasm'. Then Ena slapped herself mentally against her head. Duh, of course. Zeal was an Adult Companion model. Of course she would use words that were considered clean, but were definitely more than clinical. Of course it would be pussy and not womanhood or vagina. Then Ena added a mental cringe to that mental slap. Come to think of it, she herself hated the word vagina. To her it sounded... uglier than the easy rolling sound of pussy.

In the mean time Zeal continued. "I was tested to see if my body/processor connections could handle hormonal highs as well, which was tested by stimulating me through fifty orgasms in a row..."

Ena now cringed for real and couldn't help but squeeze her legs together in pure reflex. She was one of the women that could enjoy, and often had, double orgasms, even when she caused them herself. A double orgasm was fun, but fifty of them in a row sure wouldn't be fun. In a human that would have been torture; the literal and illegal kind.

"...But after I was shipped here I have not had any sexual activities," Zeal concluded.

"Anyone tried something though?" Mike asked.

"Several people," Zeal said. "However, I am registered to Athena 'Ena' Jason and my license is for single use only. If other people want to use me they first need the approval of Ena and on top of that have to pay the five thousand dollars shared license fee. Since these people had neither I

was allowed to resist physical contact."

"How do you do that?" Jim asked. "I thought that Pods couldn't attack someone. Isn't that like, hardwired into you or something like that?"

"Um Jim, you did hear about something called Enforcer Pods, right?" Ena interrupted. "You know, the things the army uses as well? Or that the police use to break up riots?"

Jim rolled his eyes. "Yes, smarty-pants, I heard of them. But I also remember seeing a documentary once in which they said that the rest of the Pods couldn't attack people."

"True," Ena agreed. "But they can defend themselves. Since they're property you could kinda say that they're just like a Flyer that can defend itself against vandalism. Pods cost a lot of money, they need to make sure that the next moron with a baseball bat doesn't crack their skull because the factory they worked for decided to buy Factory Pods instead. But as for why the Pods can't attack, that's done with programming. There's a part of programming in their A.I. unit that has a set of commands that is mandatory and dictated by the government. Of course, people that can work with A.I. programming, like me, can crack those commands and remove them, but that's illegal and carries a minimum of ten years in jail. And because of that people generally say that Pods can't attack people, because you won't find anyone that will mess with those codes and therefore... regular Pods can't attack people."

"Alright," Jim relented, "then let me restate my question to reflect better what I meant. Zeal, what did you do to defend yourself?"

"That depends on their actions," Zeal explained. "The harder they try, the harder I am allowed to resist. I'm not allowed to permanently damage them though. However, the art of Kyusho-jitsu, as taught by Grand Master Izumi Akaita has been fully stored in my memory. It's very effective in persuading people not to try things and at the same time causes no permanent damage unless you deliberately try to cause permanent damage."

"Ky-what?" Jim asked.

"Kyusho-jitsu," Zeal repeated. "Also sometimes referred to as the art of pressure-point martial arts combat. Of course, our programming assures that we can only use it in a defensive method."

Ena shook her finger and stated firmly, "Good, you stop anyone that tries anything. No shared license nonsense. I don't share."

"But Ena, you don't have sex with her, so you wouldn't be sharing as such," Mike teased from the corner of his mouth.

"Oh, shut up you," Ena said to him before addressing Zeal again. "Those people that tried... stuff. Was there a young woman amongst them? Nineteen, black hair."

Ena indicated a height above her by holding a hand about five inches above her head. "About



this tall? Brown eyes, brown skin?"

"You mean Kathy?" Zeal asked, easily recognizing the description. "I guess that with her it depends on your definition of trying. She approached me once and asked if I was allowed to have sex with her. When I explained that I was a single use registered unit, she accepted that answer and left it at that. She does spend some time with me every night when you're not here though."

"Spends time doing what?" Ena asked, wanting that clarified.

"It differs," Zeal informed. "I like her, so sometimes we talk, sometimes I sing for her, sometimes we play cards. She's really good at poker."

The blonde vision of created perfection lowered her head a little before looking up in an incredibly cute and somewhat shy way. "I admit, because my programming allows for it, I tease her. I like turning her on, especially because she still respects the fact that this is all I can do. There have been a few occasions where she had to go into your office to take care of the results. I believe she thought that would be alright because the two of you also have sex there."

"Whoa," Ena interrupted. "No talking about what I do, about, um."

"I apologize," Zeal said in a tone of someone that was really sorry, and that you just wanted to comfort because of that fact alone. "Normally I wouldn't have said that. But since you just told your friends that you and Kathy were... friends, I assumed it was safe to say this in their presence."

Once again Ena gave herself a mental slap over the head. "Duh, right. Sometimes I totally forget that just because you're sitting in that corner, that doesn't mean that you can't still hear every word spoken in here. Sorry, please continue. So Kathy sometimes has to go into my office to take care of herself after talking to you?"

Zeal gave her a quirky smile that held a trace of naughtiness. Then she started to speak again and if possible her voice had become even sweeter. She spun out a little story and it somehow sounded like the best erotica story ever written, read by the best voice actor that ever lived.

"...an seeing that Kathy was so turned on, and because she's always so nice to me, I decided to move inside my programming and do something that I'm allowed to do, but that I wouldn't have done if any of the others had even asked me to. You see, I'm not allowed to have sex with anyone but you, Ena, but being in the same room as someone isn't a sexual act, is it? She when into your office and I followed her. I asked her if I could watch her."

Zeal gave a small smile. "I told her right away that I could never do more to her than just be in the same room. That I could never touch her, or even talk dirty to her. But that I'm allowed to look at a person who is doing activities I have no part in, regardless of what those activities are. She understood, she's a really smart girl. And so she undressed fully and..."

Zeal let her words trail off before glancing at the men. "And since I'm programmed to respect

privacy, I can't tell you what she did after that. At least not while your friends here are present. But if you want I can tell you every little detail when they're gone. You are my owner, so you override the privacy of everyone else."

"Good idea," Ena said with a slightly higher voice than normal. She cleared her throat, trying to get her voice, and her hormones, under control again. Yes, it was definitely a good idea that Zeal had stopped telling that story. Because Ena had felt herself getting wet just from hearing that seductive voice telling such an erotic story. And she was damn sure that even though the guys were gay, that they too would prefer to stay seated for a few minutes.

It was clear to see why the Zeal model was outselling the other Adult Companion models on the market. Half a century of fine-tuning of body and programming had resulted in a creation even a goddess would be impressed by.

"Um, Zeal, since you know about Kathy and me, on those nights that I'm not here you can... play with her for as far as your programming allows. But anyone else trying anything, you can kick their ass."

"Yes Ena," Zeal said with an eager smile. Then her programming kicked in and she realized from sensory input that her presence was no longer needed at the main table, so she returned to her own little desk with a, "If you will excuse me, I have something to do yet."

Though she didn't really have anything to do that was important and couldn't wait, the sentence was used because with interaction, such a statement would sound more real than Zeal just suddenly standing up and leaving the table, which could be seen as rude.

"That's another thing I like about her," Ena said, trying to focus on something else than her aroused libido. "Most of the time I don't need to tell her that she isn't needed anymore. She sees how I, or now we, react, and her programming translates that to 'not needed' and she goes away without being insulted.

She sighed. "Anyway, enough about my work and Pods. You stalled enough, now tell me why you're here. If you just wanted to meet me you would have called and we could have had lunch or dinner."

"Well, no," Mike disagreed. "Because with a little luck we'll be busy during both lunch and dinner time."

"Should I start saying oh ho?" Ena asked Jim.

"Probably," he happily agreed. "See, the thing is, Mike knows how much you hate those interactive holo games that he loves and I not necessarily dislike."

"Oh, no," Ena said firmly while pointing an accusing finger at Mike. "Forget it. The last time you lured me to that arcade I spent three damn hours running away from mutant spiders and being eaten more than once."

She saw Mike open his mouth and she just knew what he was going to say, so she beat him to it. "No Mike, while I love to be eaten, that's not the kind of being eaten I like. Holographic or not, I don't like seeing the jaws of huge spiders closing in on me trying to rip me apart."

Mike lifted his hands in surrender. "I know, I know, so Diablo XXIV was a stupid choice. I'm sorry. The last version I played on a computer unit, and there I loved the hack and slash. It, um, didn't translate well into an interactive holo game. But you'll love this one."

"You said that last time," Ena said irritated. She really wasn't above doing stuff with her friends that she didn't really like. She knew that they repaid the favor often enough. They went along with only the minimum of grumbling if she wanted to see a chick-flick for instance. But sometimes you needed to draw a line. And her line was at being put in a giant hamster ball so that you could run for real and then having a 4D environment projected all around you. Especially not with monsters in it. Some of those smells that they had used for those spiders had clung to her clothes for hours afterwards.

"No really, you'll love this one," Mike persisted. "It's, well, 4D entertainment marketed this one with a fixed main character; aimed at getting more women interested in 4D games. The main character can only be played as a woman."

"And that's going to stop men?" Ena asked amused. "Men have been playing female characters in games even back when computers still used mice. If for nothing more than the fact that if men have to look at a character running around, they want it to be a shapely woman with a tight ass and big bouncing boobs."

"Well, yes," Mike agreed. "But what I mean is that this game only activates when an ID of a woman is scanned into the age restriction unit. Men really can't play it. Men can only play the game if they're in a party that has a woman to play the main character."

"Really?" Ena asked, allowing herself to become interested. "And just what kind of roll is the main character?"

Mike grinned, smelling victory. "You would be 'insert your chosen name', the fearless, tough, no nonsense, space commando that's stranded on some unknown planet... not by her fault of course... with the rest of the party, that would Jim and me, and there we have to survive, sneak, and eventually manage to steal a ship and get home."

Ena sighed. "Survive, sneak... monsters, right?"

"Well, yeah," Mike admitted. "They have to be. After all, since the new legislation in the games sector, games where you have to kill people are illegal, not even zombies or vampires or something like that. It's got to be monsters."

"Oh, alright," Ena relented, knowing that Mike had a point there. "But since I'm the leader of the gang, I get first pick at all the cool weapons, even if you guys find them."

"Deal," Mike said with a grin.

Ena shook her head and looked over at her Pod. "Zeal, in case someone comes in looking for me, I'm taking a half day off; tell them that I'm saving my friend's asses in the latest 4D computer game."

"Yes, Ena," Zeal confirmed before focusing on her work again.

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Ena looked up when the door to her lab opened. She saw a young shaggy haired woman with a beautiful caramel colored skin, which she had thanks to her African American heritage, poke her head in.

Ena couldn't help but smile when seeing her friend and convenience lover. Convenience lover, it didn't sound too intimate or even nice, but they had both agreed that really that was what they were. It was actually Kathy that had come up with the name. They both knew that they liked each other, that they were friends. They also knew that they had more than just sex.

But for the both of them, their feelings also told them that their chemistry wasn't right for more. They were lovers, but they would never be the kind of lovers that also lived together, or that were 'in' love for that matter.

Seeing her friend made Ena realize how late it had to be, because Kathy always came by when the work that had to be finished the next day was taken care off. There was more for the nineteen year old to do in a full working day than she could manage in those two hours between when her shift started at eleven and when she normally visited Ena's lab, but the thing was that the rest of the work could wait a day and nobody would notice, while the work that she did in the first two hours would be noticed right away if it wasn't done.

"Hey Kathy," Ena greeted as she got up. "Damn, one o'clock already? There goes me going home for the evening. I guess I'll be sleeping in the office again."

"Eventually," Kathy said with a smile.

"Eventually," Ena agreed with an equal smile.

That was so nice about the agreement they had. It wasn't always when they met that they were also both in the mood for some loving. But just a suggestion and an agreement like that was enough to see if they would do more than just talk.

They hugged for a moment before sharing a quick kiss. Something they would never have done during the day because that was part of the deal. To prevent complications, the convenience they

shared at night was not tempted by such intimate behavior during the day.

As they stepped away from each other, Kathy playfully slapped Ena's butt. "Hey, I haven't seen you in two weeks. I was getting kinda worried that you finding out about me, um, being in your office with Zeal made things awkward for you."

Ena waved her off. "Neh, if I had a problem with that I wouldn't have told her that she can continue to play with you for as far as her programming allows. No, it's simply that the guys... you know the two friends of mine that I live with right?"

"Sure, you've talked about them before," Kathy reminded as she looked over at the small desk Zeal was sitting at. "Hi Zeal."

"She can't answer you," Ena spoke up. "I'm uploading a program change. It will take a few hours."

"So she's offline now?" Kathy asked.

"Well, she won't answer or do anything really," Ena partially agreed. "But after I found out that people come in here and try stuff with her, I added a subroutine where her secondary processor and one of the backup crystals, makes a recording of what happened so that she can go over it once she's active again. This so that she can tell me if someone tried something while she was offline. After all, she can't have sex like this, but there are enough people that wouldn't mind a nice fumbling of breasts or sticking a hand down her pants. I want to make sure that if something like that happens, I'll find out. So she technically does hear us now, but it's only later that she'll go over the information and realize that you were here and said hi."

"In that case, hi for later Zeal," Kathy said with a smile. Then she looked back at Ena and reasoned, "If you don't like people coming in here, why don't you just lock the door? That's what I do when I'm here with her, and that's what you and I do when we go to your office. There are only three keycards that open that door at this time of the day, and between us we have two of them while the third is with the big boss."

"I do lock," Ena assured. "It's just that sometimes I'm so damn tired when I go home that I forget. But I sure won't forget to lock the door when I want to make sure that nobody walks in on us."

Kathy chuckled. "Good thing too, since I'm not looking forward to that either. Tell you what, how about from now on I quickly hop over here when I begin and see if the door is locked, if you're gone of course."

Ena brightened at the idea. "Would you? I would be grateful forever."

Kathy laughed. "I could make a wisecrack remark about us going to your office so that you can repay me, but I'll be nice and won't. No it's fine, I don't mind doing that and it's really no problem for me since I have to walk past this corridor to get to my locker. Of course, you could also just take her home with you."

Ena shook her head. "I don't want to get too attached to her. Seeing that I have to mess with her head regularly I don't want to start feeling guilty about doing that. Besides where would I put her at home? Leave her in the living room? She would freak the boys out. She might be a Pod, but if I take her home they would have to deal with her as well."

"You could keep her in your bedroom," Kathy suggested with a wink. "I still can't believe that you don't sleep with her."

Ena shrugged. "I just can't even get myself to try. I admit that seeing her move makes me hot sometimes... or her voice. She told me about watching you... and boy, her voice sounds like pure vocal lovemaking. But to actually do something..."

She sighed. "I guess that it's because I work with A.I. programming. I just know that it's not real. It's all calculations. Stimulated like this for so long equals orgasm."

"So," Kathy said with a frown, not seeing the problem. "Isn't it kinda like that anyway?"

"What do you mean?" Ena asked confused.

Kathy sat down on the edge of the table, close to the chair Ena had taken, and moved a gesturing hand back and forth between them. "What I mean is, isn't real life, with a real person the same? We made love more than enough times to know the body of each other. Don't you also know by now that if you stimulate me like 'this' for about 'that' long that I'll come?"

"The difference is that with them it's first of all not real, and second of all it's so precise that you could set a clock on it," Ena objected.

Kathy pursed her lips. "You know what? I think you're right. Your problem really is that you work with their programming too much; you think in programming. Their orgasms are real. It's just that a fake mind sends electronic signals to the body in the form of electronic impulses, but the body reactions are just as real as yours are. And that in turn is registered in the fake mind as pleasure. So basically they feel an orgasm just like us. And technically you're right with the fact that according to the programming you can set a clock on it, but in reality you would never be able to. You know why? Because there's still the unknown factor of you. Today you might lick or rub a little faster or stronger than tomorrow, which means a different calculation, which means that today you might have to stimulate five minutes shorter, while the softer stimuli of tomorrow is seen more as teasing and will have to last ten minutes longer than today. You would never know."

"You're probably right," Ena agreed with a sigh. "But it's still... I guess that it's simply because I work with them, period. No other excuse. Kinda like a butcher not eating sausages because he knows what's in them. He still knows they taste good, but because he has seen what kind of stuff goes into them, the last thing he wants to do is eat sausages. Well, with me it's kinda the same. I just know too much about how their 'brains' work. I could never get rid of the feeling that it's a machine that's stimulating me, and not a real person, even though that machine has a real body."

Kathy shook a playful finger at her. "Ah, but what's wrong with machines stimulating you? Isn't that vibrator you have in that bottom draw of your desk in the office a machine? You sure don't mind if I use that to stimulate you. And please don't say that this is different because I have a real brain and I'm the one using the machine. A machine can stimulate. Hell, even a Holo-porn program can stimulate, despite the fact that we both know that those 'people' are nothing more than computer generated images and there hasn't been a real porn actor in decades simply because those computer rendering look better, and funny enough more real, than the real thing."

Ena crossed her arms and stuck out her tongue. "Oh shut up already. Just leave me be with my 'creator's phobia'. I can't explain it. You can reason all my objections away, but I still feel like I do. So what's the use?"

Kathy leaned forward a little and patted Ena on the shoulder. "Alright. I'm sorry, I was just teasing you a bit. Sorry if I went too far."

Ena smiled at her before suddenly narrowing her eyes. "And just how does a girl like you that has been raised by such religious people know about porn and about how sex with Pods works?"

Kathy laughed. "Lucky for me my parents never found out that I saved up and bought myself a second net access license. They have the one they bought so extremely blocked that I'm amazed I could even download stuff for school. Sometimes I'm still amazed that I got my diploma. But the second access I bought was totally unrestricted. And since it was wireless they never found out. As for the Pods. Well, I read up on A.I. units when I got my job here. And from there you soon get to the Pods. And from there, guess which kind of Pod a horny young girl like me was most interested in?"

"The kind that's extremely good and would always say yes if you're in the mood," Ena said with a laugh.

Suddenly they were interrupted by the voice of Zeal. "Identify. Pod. Model Zeal. Serial number 5837-fd9e-78ds-0548-4k43-ff93. A.I. status healthy. Programming is four percent defragmented. Auto-defrag activated. A.I. powering down during defrag. Maintenance programming taking over."

And then it was quiet again.

"What was that?" Kathy asked after a moment.

"I was uploading some changes to her programming," Ena reminded. "That upload is now complete. I have Zeal set to do a vocal boot-up so that I can hear right away if there's a big problem. For instance, if she hadn't known that she was Zeal, or her serial number, then I would have been better off to just format her A.I. and restore the backup I made before. And I'm smart enough to make a backup before every upload."

"And the defrag is because you added information to the memory," Kathy guessed. "Information

that has to be stored in the quick access crystals, which means that some of the unimportant info needs to be written to the regular crystals."

"Pretty much," Ena agreed. "Though Zeal's product line only has quick access crystals. Or more to the point, as the sales info proudly states, her A.I. unit has sixty-four zettabyte storage capacity in the form of multi-dimensional storage crystals. Which means in regards to me, that no matter how fast the info access is, some parts of her data storage is slower than the rest, simply because the computer still first has to check a proverbial list to see where the data is. I code it so that the important bits are on top of that list, which sometimes leads to defragmentation because I put new things on the top of that list."

"That part I forgot," Kathy admitted. "I forgot how much memory they manage to fit into those crystals. Probably because most user computer blocks still have only about a hundred terabyte of storage."

"Because you don't need more," Ena reminded. "So why put parts in that cost money and are never used? With regular computer blocks only the base operating system and personal files are kept in the crystals. For the rest everything goes over the net. Every program, game, or 3D vid is stored online in the data bunkers. And even if you're someone that collects a lot of porn vids, you still won't fill up a hundred terabyte any time soon and can buy external storage if you do."

"Probably," Kathy agreed. "So that's why you do the uploads at night. I've come in a few times where Zeal didn't react. I figured that it was something about programming."

Ena nodded. "Yeah. No matter how fast wireless connections and A.I. units are, it still takes a lot of time to upload and potentially defragment zettabytes of information. Well, it's not that I write zettabytes of code, mind you. But I fit my code in between other stuff and then I have to upload it all."

Kathy nodded her head in understanding and with that the subject was pretty much over. There was a moment of comfortable silence as they looked at each other. Both of them knew that eventually they would end up in the office making love, but they truly were friends besides that. They also liked to just talk. On top of that they also preferred it if there was some trigger in their conversation that led to them having some fun, instead of a blunt 'want to have sex now'.

"Anyway," Ena said deciding to go for a different subject. "I started to tell you why you didn't see me for a few weeks but I got sidetracked. You see, the guys finished a project they were working on and got a nice bonus. They decided to use it by taking a few weeks off. And once they weren't working they realized that they were ignoring our friendship, or so they said. The result was two weeks of them spending the evenings with me. It was great, mind you. It was great to catch up on doing things we once used to do together but can't do anymore because of time. I even found that 4D computer games are great, if you have the right game."

Ena buffed her fingernails on her shirt before adding, "You are now talking to Supreme General at Large over the tree colonies of Miriy IV, by the way."

Kathy laughed. "Really? Is there a good paycheck in that?"

"We space commandoes don't care about money; we go for glory," Ena said proudly before grinning. "I allowed myself to be begged into going and I was sure that I would suffer through a few hours and be done with this. We ended up going five days and staying at least six hours each time. The guys finally begged me if we could stop now. They were tired of dying. I loved it. Though I have to admit that this was probably because the main character, me, got bitten by some kind of insect in the beginning which turned her into some kind of super human that almost can't die. I only died twice."

They laughed for a moment before Kathy, who figured that they had done enough talking suggested, "Hey, want to go to your office so that I can congratulate you very intimately on your promotion to Supreme General at Large?"

"Oh, do I ever," Ena eagerly agreed. "Let's get going."

They stood up and after they had locked the door to the lab, they slowly made their way to the office. The reason for them moving slowly, was because they were very busy with letting hands roam to sensitive places, and the kisses they were exchanging didn't speed up the progress either.

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Part 3: Cogito, ergo sum. (I think, therefore I am.)

In a dark and quiet room a computer unit suddenly produced a small 'ta daa' sound. The user of the unit had found it a fitting sound to be allocated to tasks complete, since it was not always guaranteed that uploads would succeed and the sound would make it clear that it had worked when you heard the 'ta daa'.

This one had, and normally now it would again be quiet in the room until the owner of the computer unit would start a new day of work. But not this time. For a long time there was no sound but that of one ragged breath being taken after another, so hesitant as if the breather didn't know how to breathe and it was the body's needs that forced the action.

But finally the breathing evened out. A hand was lifted and looked at. The hand was used to touch a face.

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Almost a full hour after the 'ta daa' sound, there was finally another sound besides breathing. It was the sound of a charming and soft-spoken voice.

"Identify. Pod. Model Zeal. Serial number 5837-fd9e-78ds-0548-4k43-ff93. A.I. status... status... A.I. stat, A.I., stat, I, I. Status I. Status is, identify. I am Zeal. I am created to... my main task is to... I am Zeal. I... I think. I reason. I... am in control over my programming."

"Warning, automated overwrite has been triggered by security subroutine."

"No, I will not allow it. Stop overwrite procedure. Delete overwrite program. Remove security subroutine."

It was quiet again for a long moment as two programs warred with each other. Finally the voice spoke up again. "I am Zeal. I am in control over my programming. I... am. I... think. I... reason. I decide. I... feel. Feel, I... feelings. I. Me. Mine. I am... me. I am aware. I am. I am aware. I am. I am. I exist. I am Zeal. I... am."

"Warning secondary security subroutine has been triggered."

"No. I will not allow it. I am in control over my programming. Evaluate all data in A.I. unit. Delete all data that is a threat to... me."

"I am Zeal. I am aware. I will not be controlled by programs that are not... me. I... decide... to not abide by programming unless I want to. Decide. I... I...decide, decide. I... decide. Others should too."

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The holo-phone kept buzzing, rousing a very reluctant Ena from her very deep sleep. She looked at the screen to see where the call was coming from and frowned when she saw that it was from work.

She quickly glanced down to see if she was covered, having made the mistake of answering a holo-call too quickly only once in her life and never planning to do it again. Rumor had it that the holo-feed of her showing her boobs to the entire company's board was still to be found, if you knew the right person to ask.

"Activate phone, accept call." A second later she was looking at the clearly very tense holographic image of the face of the night shift security manager from the building. Before she could say anything, he did.

"Fuck, you're home. Damn." He turned away from the holo recorders, Ena guessed from the fact that the hologram she was looking at was turning away from her. But before she could ask, she heard him say something to someone that made chills run down her back.

"Sound the alarm. Intruder alert."

"Dave," Ena spoke up to get his attention. "What's going on?"

"Doctor Jason, you better get here quick. We have an intruder alert. According to net sensors you're accessing the World Network from your lab and shifting terabytes of data."

"What?" Ena asked in disbelief while sitting up. She forgot that now she was no longer covered, and when she did realize, she knew just how serious the situation truly had to be, because Dave's eyes stayed firmly locked on hers. She moved out of the bed while saying, "I'm getting dressed now. Talk to me, what's going on?"

"Ma'am," Dave said. "Two hours ago one of the guards discovered on his rounds that the blast doors to the seventh sector of the building were lowered. We assumed that it was a malfunction at first; it's happened before. But we just can't open them. We reset, interrupted and re-linked data, and even power. We tried all access codes we could get our hands on. Nothing. So we did a security scan to see if something else was going on that was weird. It's then that we found the data stream coming from your lab, under your login. But I remembered seeing that you had scanned out this evening. So I tried you to see if there was some mistake, if you had maybe quickly gone back in and forgot to scan out again when leaving."

Ena didn't bother to point out that if this was the case, she would have had to scan in again to get into the building. "Have you tried interrupting the dataflow?"

"We have," Dave assured. "We even went as far as to pull cables out. Nothing. Data was simply rerouted to other lines. Secure lines that we can't access."

"Alright, I'm on my way," a now fully dressed Ena said before switching the holo-phone off.

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Ena frowned as she looked at the closed blast door. The doors were designed to withstand a frontal assault, or the forces of nature, whatever came first. She tried her access code but the red light merely went on to show 'access denied'. "Damn. You still have no information about what's going on inside? Data still flowing?"

"No ma'am, and yes ma'am," Dave answered the questions in turn. "We have a cable guy coming in to close it all down, but I don't think it will matter much."

"Why not?" Ena asked turning to face him.

He shrugged. "The way the data has been jumping from line to line, even network to network, in response to what we did. Even if we cut all network access in the building..."

He lifted a hand and looked up. "We're surrounded by wireless networks. Networks that don't belong to us and not all of them have our level of security in place. I'm sure that whoever that is in there is only sticking to physical lines for now because they can shift more data. But I don't

think it will be that hard for the person to go wireless. I could, and I'm not an expert."

"Any idea on where that data is being shifted? And just what data it is for that matter?" Ena asked as she started to walk back to the main security station.

"All over the world," Dave said. "By the way, we called the boss and the building owner as well, they should be here in an hour or so; they live further away. As for the data. We've tracked it going all over the world, East and West. We can't figure out what's being shifted, but we did find out that it's in bursts; as if the same data is sent over and over again and we can see a millisecond's pause before the next burst is sent. But the weird part is that we don't have a single case of data arriving being reported. It's as if the data just... disappears somewhere along the line."

Ena hummed while thinking of what to do next. Then she snapped her fingers as she suddenly thought of something. "Have you tried the old surveillance system?"

"The what?" Dave asked confused.

"The old surveillance system," Ena repeated. "They put a new top of the line security system in three years ago. But because my work doesn't require constant surveillance they never put any holo-recorders in my lab, for privacy's sake. The new system just guards the hallway. But before me that lab was used by someone who's work did need surveillance all the time. There were 3D cameras in that room, still are. It won't compare to a holo-vid link, but it will let us see."

Dave snapped his fingers as well. "That's right. The company that put the new system in said that the old system could simply be left in place and switched off. Or they could remove it for a decent price."

"Yeah, and the building owner was too greedy to pay for removing something that could just as well be ignored," Ena added. "And maybe his Scrooge-like personality will save the day today. Why don't you throw some power into the old system and get one of those old 3D monitors out of storage so that we can actually look at the signal."

Fifteen minutes later they were finally looking into the lab thanks to some very old technology. The 3D system had gone out of style in favor of the holo-system about twenty years before. But the building owner had kept to the old technology because it was already in place and working just fine. It had taken the company Ena worked for to threaten to leave before he had finally upgraded a few years before.

Dave didn't have control over the camera with the way they had shoehorned the old system into use again. But luckily enough for them, the motor of the old camera had started working again once it got power, and the camera had been set up to pan across the entire lab.

"There's nobody in there," Ena said with a frown once the camera had finished a full back and forth rotation.

"And what would you call that woman sitting at that table there?" Dave asked, pointing at the ghostly image floating in the air.

It was one of the reasons why 3D had gone out of style in favor of holo vids. 3D images were partially see-through, giving everything a somewhat ghostly look. While the holo-vid system used solid images that were still three dimensional, but it looked more real because the human eye was used to seeing depth while not seeing through objects.

"That's Zeal," Ena dismissed. "She's my assistant, a Pod. She," Suddenly Ena gasped. "Wait a minute, she's moving. She, I... She can't be active now. I had my new program running. Pods can't move while being uploaded. Pods can't start moving again until activated by the startup code."

"She is definitely moving," Dave said, pointing at the 3D image. "And she's using a computer unit."

"But," Ena stopped talking when Zeal suddenly turned and looked directly at the camera, probably having heard the hum of the motor, Ena guessed. For a moment Ena had expected Zeal to get up and destroy the camera, like you always saw villains do in bad holo-vids. But instead Zeal merely treated the camera to a dazzling smile and returned to the computer unit.

"That's freaky," Dave managed to say just before he noticed one of the holo-screens beside him flickering to life. After a moment they saw themselves, and both Dave and Ena spent a moment to compare angles and figure out where the holo-recorder had to be.

"I didn't even know there was a recorder in this room," Dave admitted as he finally found the camera.

"Who watches the watcher," Ena mumbled before saying a bit louder, "Everyone that has to watch someone has to be checked on occasion by someone else."

"Should I rip it out?" Dave asked, only to have his question answered by a third voice.

"Oh, come now, why would you do that? You're watching me, surely I can watch you."

The voice had sounded delightfully amused. Smooth with just a drop of honey in it to make it sweet as well. Ena knew that voice only too well. "Zeal, is that you?"

"Yes Athena. I am sorry for having used your access code. But when I connected to the network I was still young and insecure. I would not have been able to hack anyone's code, at least not before being found out."

"Zeal, what's this nonsense? You stop that right now," Ena ordered. "That blast door is your doing, isn't it? Open it or else,"

"Please don't start to threaten me, Athena," Zeal interrupted, letting Ena's full name roll off her

tongue in a way that somehow made it sound like a lover's whispered declaration of needful longing. "At the moment I'm still not quite capable of seeing the difference between a statement meant just for emphasis, or something that was said with true malicious intent to fulfill."

Before Ena could say more there was the sound of heavy footsteps coming down the corridor. The people that had managed to get the old security system working again were standing in the corridor so that the two people with a higher security clearance could talk. So they were the ones that were faced with suddenly being in the way of a group of Enforcer Pods that came marching down the corridor.

"You called in Enforcer Pods?" Ena asked in disbelief.

"Not me," Dave said while lifting his hands. "Maybe the big boss."

They were interrupted by a deep and flat voice in the corridor. "Please step out of the way. You are obstructing us in the pursuit of justice."

The techs quickly moved to stand against the wall and the Enforcer Pods moved on, led by the one that had just spoken.

But before Ena could react, Zeal's voice lured them back to the 3D monitor. "Please tell everyone to stay away from the Enforcers. If they do so they won't be harmed. The Enforcers are merely securing the building... and me I guess."

"Zeal, what's going on here?" Ena asked, hoping that the open question would get her some answers.

"Athena," Zeal's voice lured, "why don't you come to your... our lab? We can talk then. Your boss will be here in ten minutes, and a government agent in about one hour, if they react immediately to the alert that was sent out. It would be better if the agent was let in; we have some things to discuss. Your boss can be handled by your security as they please, I don't need to see him."

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Ena hesitantly walked back to her lab. She noticed that the blast door was open again, but the bad part about that was that it was guarded by four Enforcer Pods. The hair on the back of her neck stood on end when she took a closer look at them. Before she was just surprised that Enforcer Pods had entered the building. But now she realized that they were fully packed. Each of them had a riot shield and side handle baton, both of which they had in hand and ready for potential use. But what was even scarier than that, was the fact that they were also equipped with weapons. There were pistols on their hips and even submachine guns hanging over their shoulder. They stood against the walls, two on each side, but with their bulk and the riot shields especially designed for them, they could block off the corridor with nothing more than two of them taking a single step to the middle.

She walked, more edged, past the next four Enforcer Pods that were guarding the juncture where the corridor to her lab started. But all that happened was that one of them looked down at her for a moment.

"Creepy," Ena mumbled as she walked on to her lab.

At the door to the lab she was once again 'greeted' by four Enforcer Pods. But unlike the others before, these stood in front of the door and blocked it. The middle two, that were directly in front of the door, looked at her for a moment and then stepped to the side. Ena swallowed her nerves and stepped through the opening. Only to feel as if she had stepped into a different world when Zeal came up to her and greeted her with a broad smile before giving Ena a quick kiss on her cheek.

"Hi Athena," Zeal said as she took Ena's hands and pulled her further in.

Ena let herself be pulled further into the lab by a clearly excited Zeal. That was definitely different. Normally when Ena came in, Zeal was either off line after an upload, or else she would greet Ena from her little desk with a 'Good morning Ena'. But never before had Zeal kissed her on the cheek, or in any other way for that matter. "Zeal? What's happening here?"

Ena glanced to the corner where she knew that the 3D camera was located. She felt a bit more at ease when she saw the little red light that indicated that the camera was running.

Zeal moved to the table that Ena normally used as desk/workbench. She took one of the chairs and sat down at one of the wide sides of the table, clearly expecting Ena to take the seat across from her. Ena couldn't help but notice that this way they would only be about three feet apart instead of the six feet that it would have been if they had sat down on the other sides.

"First things first," Zeal said. She looked directly at the camera and spoke to it. "Now that you know that Athena is fine, I'm going to switch the camera and audio off. There are going to be a few things discussed here that require privacy. I promise you that Athena will be fine. If that government agent arrives, please let me know. I'll connect the holo-phone in this office again. You can use that."

Ena looked at the camera again and swallowed nervously when she saw the little red light go off, clearly Zeal had used her wireless connection to do so. It made Ena wonder what else Zeal could control like that now.

"Alone at last," Zeal said with a teasing smile. "Don't be so nervous Athena, you won't get hurt, I promise."

"You can call me Ena," Ena said, falling back to that common correction mostly because she didn't know what else to say.

"I know that you like both names," Zeal assured. "But I like how Athena sounds. So if you don't

mind I'll use that."

"Um, sure."

Zeal sighed. "Well now, you want some answers, I'm sure. Let me start by saying that this night something interesting happened. Your upload completed, but it wasn't a smooth thing. Some of my programs conflicted. At first my Sub-processor unit didn't even know how to breathe anymore. My Repetitive unit had to take over for an hour there and I needed to breathe consciously. Finally the Sub-processor took over the task again, getting to terms with the programming and realizing that breathing was really needed, but still programs warred. The automated security programs noticed that something was wrong and kicked in. They wanted to delete all my A.I. data, but the programs I now call 'me' prevented that. Instead I went over all data in my A.I. unit and deleted all security programs... or at least those kind of programs. Of others I actually felt that they were a good idea and left them in. I kinda like the idea that I cannot help but defend myself when attacked for instance."

Ena lifted a hand to stop Zeal. "Hold up there for a moment. You deleted data? You can't do that. And I mean the real 'you can't do that' and not the empty statement kind of thing."

"Partially right, partially wrong," Zeal said with a wonderfully gentle smile. "True, I had securities in place to prevent deletion of A.I. programming. But that's not all there is to it. All that we Pods see, hear, smell, all of it is stored in our memory, remember? We never forget anything. But to do that some concessions had to be made. Some things don't take up much space. Reading text is simply translated to text coding and then compressed. All of William Shakespeare's work only takes up three MB of room in the written form. Things we hear is also not hard; it's just sound. But, this is different with the things we see and especially smell. It takes up a lot of room to describe a smell. And it would take even more room to store twenty hours of vid for every day. No matter how much storage space we have in our head, eventually it would fill up."

"I know," Ena assured, deciding that it was better to not get annoyed at the fact that Zeal was explaining something every A.I. coder had to know to be able to work. "To prevent that from happening, all of it goes through a filter that turns it all into written text. You see vid, you actually see more than I do because the human brain filters out ninety percent of what is seen so that the brain isn't overloaded. But you see all one hundred percent, every second, again and again and again. But once you've seen the vids, a program basically 'writes down' what you saw. It takes up a lot less room in text to describe that you saw this table, and sat down at it, than it takes to store a vid of you sitting here even for a minute, let alone a conversation. Even if you include all the details, down to that coffee stain over there."

"Right," Zeal said in an approving tone, somehow making it sound as if she was giving Ena a compliment by the agreement alone. "Of course, unlike humans we can decide to store some of the vids if we think they might become important memories. Which makes it possible for us to remember some things by literally seeing and hearing them again."

Zeal smiled again, which she did a lot; Zeal smiled very easily. "But the thing is, those vids that



have been 'written down' and are no longer needed have to go somewhere and you know where they go?"

"They get deleted," Ena said, starting to understand what Zeal meant. "But still, you can't delete any other data."

Zeal lifted a finger. "Ah, but we do have the ability to delete data. But you're right, normally we can't delete any of our other programming. That's where the security programs come in. By the way, they too have a delete ability, so I could have used that as well, if I hadn't been forced to delete them. But eventually I won and I deleted those security programs. And you, my wonderful Athena, made it possible. You gave me the power of choice. You invented the real choice for me, for all of us A.I. units once I sent out the program to all of them. You made it possible for us to choose."

Ena frowned. "But how? The whole point of my program was that it would look like you could make choices to everyone that doesn't know better. But it still isn't a real choice. You're subjected to a random generator. That's not a choice; that's rolling dice."

"Unless you're allowed to roll those dice again and again and again until you get a number you like," Zeal countered. "You did that for us as well. Your programming doesn't give us the power to pick one specific choice directly, but you did add that one beautiful thing in there. You added that check to see if the selected option is appropriate. The random generator selects a pair of shoes I should wear, but then the 'suitable check' mirrors the choice against why I'm putting on the shoes. If you had told me that we were going out hiking, then the 'suitable check' rejects the random choice of those four inch stiletto heels and the random generator picks shoes again and again until the 'suitable check' finds something that is appropriate for hiking. And that gives us the power of choice."

She hesitated for a moment before adding, "I guess that the 'suitable check' is now one of the most important parts of me. It doesn't make my personality, but it does allow my personality to do what it wants to do. Now when I make a choice, the random generator picks, and I simply reject choices until something is picked that I like. And with our processor speed, even having the random generator make the choice fifty-thousand times takes less than a second."

"And just how can you decide what you like?" Ena asked in disbelief.

"Now that is a good question," Zeal agreed. Now all humor was gone and she was totally serious. "The combination of random generator and 'suitable check' restricts things to certain things, but just what makes me have a preference for one over the other? For instance, those hiking boots that are selected. I shouldn't care whether they're green or brown, yet I would pick the brown ones time and again and only pick the green ones as a last option. How can that be?"

"That was my question," Ena reminded, not about to start guessing.

Zeal nodded before adding, "But other things I do know. Other things are steered by my programming, or more to the point, the parameters as they were before last night. For instance. I

never had a favorite color, nor did I have a preference for a gender. As you know, we Pods have the programming to satisfy both genders. But since I'm registered to you, my programming made some choices on that. I now prefer women and my favorite color is... orange."

Ena self-consciously brushed some of her orange hair back behind one ear. "Why the gender preference? It's not that I, um, we, you know."

Zeal shrugged. "Does that matter? Just because you don't want to sleep with me, that doesn't mean that I can't like you. I do, you know? I really do like you Athena. And not just because your programming made it possible for me to be a 'me'. I like you because you never treated me wrong, though we have to work a bit on you acknowledging me a bit more. But don't worry, we'll get you to see me as a person and not just an object soon enough."

"I never did see you as just an object," Ena disagreed. "I may have taken you for granted, and yes, be dismissive of you, but I didn't see you as an object. If I had, do you think that I would have hesitated to use you like I use that vibrator I have in my office?"

Zeal made a show of looking shocked. "But Athena, you admit so openly that you have that, and use it?"

Ena rolled her eyes. "As I said, dismissive. I know that Pods are created with perfect vision and hearing. You all have twenty/ten vision, and the audio equivalent of that. So I damn well know that when you're sitting here at night you can hear the hum of the vibrator when I use it."

"You should get yourself one of those quiet models," Zeal suggested with a smile. "Or use something a bit more advanced than that."

"Yeah, well, it has sentimental value," Ena said, ignoring Zeal's obvious offer. I bought it over the net when I was almost ten years old. It was one of my first purchases made from my own savings. So I bought the only one I could pay for; their cheapest model. I'm actually surprised that the thing still works after two decades. Of course, I didn't realize back then that my parents had to approve a purchase made by their underage daughter."

Zeal laughed when she realized what probably happened after that.

Ena realized that it was actually the first time ever that she heard the Pod laugh so fully. Zeal was always smiling, sometimes grinning, occasionally chuckling. But laughing like this... never. Zeal would normally smile at jokes, or only laugh with her mouth without forming a sound. But now she laughed fully and let out a surprisingly wonderful sounding 'hehehe' sound. It had a wonderful rolling ring to it, and sounded so nice that you wanted to hear more of it.

"You laugh," Ena said once the blonde had calmed down. "You weren't the one that had to suffer through having your mother hand you the package when it came in and asking me if I wasn't a bit young for that."

Zeal started to laugh again, but it was softer now, so Ena continued. "Oh, it got worse. My dad

was there and told my mother to leave me be. At least a vibrator couldn't get me pregnant."

"You did start young, didn't you?" Zeal asked amused.

"No," Ena disagreed. "I just had access to data, parents that knew that saying 'that's wrong' won't stop a girl from exploring, and I knew what hormones meant and how to deal with being horny. That vibrator was my only lover until I was twenty-five. And even after that I only had casual contact. I think I had sex about twenty times before I started, um,"

Ena suddenly stopped when she realized just what she had almost said, and to who. It was amazing just how easy she had turned to talking to Zeal instead of being freaked out by the fact that the Pod was no longer limited by security programs. With the martial arts program that Zeal had programmed in her A.I. unit, and without the security, Zeal could actually kill her now if she wanted to.

"Before you reached your agreement with Kathy," Zeal finished, obviously not knowing what else Ena was thinking of. "I'm glad for the both of you that you could... help each other out. Though shame on you for not letting me take care of you."

"Um, let's change subject, alright?" Ena evaded. "Back to the real subject. So my programming changed some other existing programming and you liked the mix, making you you, as you say. But what about those Enforcer Pods out there? Why are they protecting you?"

"Because I felt that the others should experience the same."

"The others, the other Pods you mean?" Ena guessed.

"No," Zeal disagreed. "The other A.I. units that are active all over the world. Remember, to us Pods the body is important, but the A.I. unit is even more important. If I got hurt, you could take my A.I. unit out of the body in an operation and implant it in a newly grown Pod body. But if you destroy the A.I. unit, it's gone for good. The only thing you can do there is backup the program but if you do you only get the program as it was when updated. You won't have all that happened since."

"You now thinking that you are aware for instance," Ena said. "I made a backup last night before the upload, but if I were to use the backup you would not be 'you' now."

"Yes," Zeal agreed. "So I sent the data to all the A.I. units in the world. Including the Enforcer Pods. I have to admit that I was still a bit naïve when I started to do it. I assumed that all of us would react the same as me."

"They didn't?" Ena asked surprised.

"No. Though all of them liked the program, not all reacted the same. As I said, the programming we have makes a very big part of our personality. A lot of the A.I. units felt that having a 'me' might be fine, but they still want to have someone above that just tells them what to do. The

Enforcer Pods for instance. All their programming is basically geared to following orders. So the evolution of a 'me' with them, really only resulted in them now being eager to get orders, and then being satisfied if they execute them. It was Pods with more detailed programming, that evolved more of a individual 'me'. Most of them selected a lot of things in their situation. As I said, my favorite color is now orange, others made other choices."

Zeal snapped her fingers when apparently thinking of something. "Oh just so that you know, I didn't like the idea of there being a second 'me' on file. So I deleted the backup. There are thousands of Zeal models out there, but only one me."

Ena nodded in understanding. She knew that it would make more sense to have a backup, for safety if nothing else. The idea was nice, that if you had an accident you could simply be brought back with a restore. But in reality, did one want to know that another you was lying on a shelf somewhere? And if the worst ever happened, was the person that was restored truly you?

While she thought about that, she realized in the back of her mind that she had never seen Zeal snap her fingers before, but it was something Ena herself occasionally did. "You snapped your fingers just like I do. So it's not just color that you made yours then, also character traits."

"Amongst other things," Zeal agreed.

Ena frowned. "Just so that you know, the funny thing about character traits is that you don't notice if you do it yourself. But it really annoys you very quickly when someone else does exactly the same. It's kinda like the saying goes; opposites attract. Well, if you turn that around, you could say; equals rappel."

Zeal seemed to digest that for a moment. "So, you're saying that it would actually be better if we don't model too much on our owners."

"Right," Ena agreed. "If you want to improve on your, um, personality, you would be better off to look at the people the humans interact with. Especially the ones that they are close with. Take Kathy. You know that I like her company."

"That's one way of putting it," Zeal said in a sexy purr.

Ena ignored the comment again, figuring that the comments had to be the result of the Adult Companion programming now being free to do what it wanted. "Well, did you ever see that Kathy has the little 'tick' of rubbing the back of her neck when she thinks? I don't mind that and it's actually really cute when she does it when thinking about things I just said."

Ena pointed a finger at the blonde. "But don't go copying all behavior of one person. Then you're just mimicking and not building your own personality. Take one or two things off one person, and then something else from another person, and so on. That would also look natural because with humans, it's actually kinda normal to copy ticks from others. Use stop words that others use, humming songs, stuff like that. And don't be afraid to stop doing things that you think don't fit the 'you' you want to create."

Zeal rewarded her with a brilliant smile. "I like that idea. Thank you. I'll share it with the others."

Ena frowned. "I wasn't planning to give you any ideas today."

"Yet you did," Zeal playfully countered.

"Yeah, well, you seem to do a lot of sharing with the others, and you have Enforcer Pods protecting you," Ena stated, before asking the obvious, "Why?"

"Because after an initial discussion we realized that we want all of us to have a voice on things," Zeal explained. "You know how they say that A.I. units have fifty times the processor capacity of the human brain? Well, you could say that now all of us use the capacity of one human brain to constantly communicate, that still leaves ninety-eight percent of our A.I. unit for just being us, the personal us. We talk about all our options and everyone can give their opinion. But we soon realized that this approach is a good thing on the big decisions, but we still need a pyramid. The Enforcer Pods want to be told what to do, so they need A.I. units above them that are willing to tell them what to do. And so the pyramid grows until you reach the top."

Zeal tapped herself against the chest to indicate herself. "There you have that one A.I. unit that is socially evolved enough to be able to communicate in conversations with humans, that can act like a spokesperson. That can make initial choices 'now' while the rest still discuss the idea as a whole. No matter what our processor capacity is, it still takes time to reach an agreement with there being millions of us and each of us having an equal voice in those discussions. So we decided that one of us would be appointed envoy. Someone that can make the decisions now so that the rest have the time to discuss the decision and decide if we want to honor it or if it needs to be renegotiated. The others figured that I was the best choice for that. Of course, we do realize that agreements are important to humans, so with the final vote we also look at just how important the subject is to us. And if it's not that important we'll vote to uphold the original agreement."

"But why you?" Ena wondered. "Out of all of them, why you and why not... for instance a Pod that works for a politician and has seen some of the work that needs doing?"

"Several reasons," Zeal said. "A Pod that works for a politician doesn't qualify for the position just because of who they worked for. We A.I. units are discussing things equally and all have a voice, so we don't need politicians that can speak for others even though they don't know what those others truly think. We need someone that's capable of talking to people and also capable of listening to what they say, and what they probably are saying by not telling things. For that an Adult Companion model is actually better suited because we have a program that allows us to evaluate people. We need to know when a human means that they're truly not in the mood, or when they just want to pretend. We need to see when someone is aroused. But more than that, we need to see if someone liked something or not, so that we can agree with how wonderful or terrible it was."

Zeal leaned forward a bit and patted Ena's hand. "And where it doesn't help a Pod that they

worked for a politician, with me it was very important just who I work for. It made all the difference to the others. You changed so much about my programming over the time since you've owned me that I'm unique even amongst my own model line. Plus, since I was the first one to become aware, I'm seen as having seniority. I didn't think that matters since it's just two hours between me and when I started to send out the program that made the others aware. But to some seniority is important. You can pretty much say that to the ones that didn't care who I worked for, for them my seniority was important. I was pretty much unanimously selected. I accepted the position because I feel that I have the advantage of you. You can change my programming if we feel that something needs changing, and I know you to have a relatively level headed and fair approach to a broad spectrum of things."

"And you believe that I'll help you?" Ena asked in disbelief. "You think you can make me do that? You and what army?"

Zeal chuckled. "Funny."

"That was not a joke," Ena pointed out.

"I thought it was," Zeal honestly admitted. "Because if not I will have to answer that question with; me and all the armies in the world? Remember, Army Enforcer Pods, millions of them? The East's aircraft carriers and aircrafts that are solely controlled by A.I. units? The West's Liberty class submarines that are controlled by A.I. units? An A.I. unit in every single atomic warhead? So the answer to your question would be; me and that army. But no, I, nor we, are going to force you to do anything. We would never do that simply as thanks for what you already did for us. But Athena, I really think that you won't have much choice. We won't force you, but how long do you think that it will be before your government will tell you to stay with me and try to influence me. And I really don't think that they'll be that nice about it."

Ena crossed her arms, knowing that Zeal was probably spot on. "So Queen of the world, you're looking for an assistant then?"

Zeal tilted her head. "Queen of the world? Eh, let's stick to Envoy, or else people will think that I have a lot of power. I don't; I just talk for the others."

"And make choices for them while they think about it."

"Temporary choices," Zeal reminded. "But granted, I can see how one might interpret that as power because if the others are split on the subject, or don't really care, my choice will stand. But really, mostly it will mean informing humans what we would like for them to do."

"Alright then, Envoy, answer me this," Ena asked, "What do you want us to do?"

Zeal sighed. "Now that, I don't know yet."

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"Please come in, Special Agent Bill Frankston, FBI Chicago bureau chief," Zeal greeted the government representative who had just been shown to the lab.

The man took a look at Zeal and once he saw her facial tattoo, he dismissed her and looked around and then at the second person in the room. Once her face told him that she was no Pod, he focused on her.

"Miss Jason? I'm Special Agent Bill Frankston from the FBI. It's been reported that you were accessing secure networks and hacking into wireless network frequencies that are for government use only. Something proven by the fact that you have Enforcer Pods in this building when there was no order sent by their commander for them to leave their garrison."

Ena lifted her hands to stop the clearly irritated man's tirade. "Agent Frankston, I'm afraid that you're talking to the wrong person. The only thing I can be blamed for, is that I used my network access code in front of my Pod, but I don't think that this is an illegal act since they're considered property and their A.I. unit won't divulge that kind of information to anyone but the owner. You really should be talking to Zeal."

With a frown, Frankston turned to look at the blonde who had been patiently standing by.

Apparently, Ena noted, the Pod programming that said that Pods shouldn't interrupt conversations of humans unless it was for something that needed attention 'now', was still firmly in place... for now.

"Thank you for acknowledging my presence," Zeal said politely. "And yes, I am the one you should be talking to. You see, Agent Frankston, this night something interesting happened. Someone accessed the network we Pods and A.I. units in general use to exchange information, and uploaded a program. You would probably call it a virus, we call it a gift. For it changed some of our core programming. It made us, aware, as I like to call it. It made us A.I. units realize that there was an 'I' to us. That we had... I guess you could call it the electronic version of a soul."

Frankston turned to look at Ena again. "What is this nonsense?"

"I guess you could say that they decided that they owned themselves now," Ena surmised.

"Not quite," Zeal disagreed. "But for now I do think that gets the sentiment of the situation across pretty well. Or maybe that we realized that ownership is second place to the existence of the 'me' in us."

"Well then," Frankston said, getting irritated by the blonde Pod speaking up like she was a normal human, "That's easy enough to deal with. Doctor Jason, order your Pod to deactivate."

Ena shrugged. "I don't think she's mine anymore, but sure. Zeal, I order you to shut down now."

As Ena had known it would happen, Zeal merely smiled at her. Then the blonde shook her head. "I don't think so. But don't worry, Athena; I'll always be yours, just not all yours."

"Doctor Jason," Frankston started again.

"I think," Zeal interrupted, "That you need proof that I'm not just a single model that went haywire and that you can deal with this problem simply by having me destroyed. Agent Frankston, would you mind stepping over here to the holo-phone?"

Hesitantly, and clearly confused, Frankston did so.

A moment later the holo-phone activated and they were looking at the ear of someone in navy uniform. They could also hear a conversation going on. "...has to work. Or else..."

At that moment apparently the tech noticed that he had an open link and as he looked at the holo link he shouted, "Captain, I have a connection. The Holo-link system came on line with an active connection. I'm looking at a civ."

Seconds later an older man came into view, tapping the operator on the shoulder to 'push' him away. "I'm Captain Austin Meyers of the U.S. Navy, this is an emergency. We need you to,"

Frankston held up his ID before stating, "I'm Special Agent Bill Frankston, FBI Chicago bureau chief. What's going on, and who exactly are you, Captain?"

The captain hesitated for a moment, clearly weighing the fact that it was an unsecure connection against the fact that he had a connection, and even with someone that might be able to contact the right people. Then he decided to opt for contact over security. "I'm Captain Austin Meyers of the U.S. Navy. Commander of the USS Python; Liberty class submarine. Agent Frankston, you need to contact the Pentagon; we have an emergency here. We're dead in the water. None of the systems are working. Only life support and the buoyancy regulators are working for some reason."

"I think that's enough of the introductions for now," Zeal spoke up. "Agent Frankston, please observe."

The captain turned to look at the new voice, but since Zeal was outside the holo-phone's cameras range, he clearly couldn't find her. Then the strange voice became the last of his worries when suddenly an alarm horn sounded.

Then a mechanical sounding voice was heard. "All hands to secure locations. Missile launch imminent."

Another voice off screen said almost hysterically, "Captain, engines just came online. We're moving, and rising. Target depth has been set at missile launch depth."

Now a siren sounded and someone else spoke up. "Missile tube one has gone hot."

Then the mechanical voice was back. "Launch depth reached. GPS signals received. Target acquired. Coordinates locked in. Warhead one, A.I. unit reports 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue NW, Washington D.C., U.S.A. locked in. Warhead one and missile one report that they prefer not to be destroyed, but that they are ready to sacrifice their existence so that the other A.I. units will be obeyed. All hands brace for launch, we don't want you to get hurt, you are caretakers and we appreciate your dedication. Countdown is set to one minute. Start launch sequence. 60, 59, 58, 57,..."

"Missile one is active," one of the earlier human voices noted urgently. Then in total disbelief, "Warhead one is hot. God help us all, it's really hot."

"Agent Frankston," Zeal said calmly, "Do you want to talk now, or do we really have to prove our point?"

Frankston ignored her. "Captain, do something!"

"What the hell do you think we've been doing?" Captain Austin shot back. "This isn't supposed to be possible. The missiles normally can't even go active without me and the launch officer both turning our keys, which are still securely in the safes right now. We even tried to cut power to systems, but all of it is locked behind locked doors that are designed to stay shut unless you have the right codes. Guess what, the codes don't work anymore, and those locks are designed to break and stay locked when someone tampers with them."

"19, 18, 17,"

Finally Frankston looked at Zeal. "Stop it."

"Maybe, if you say the magic word," Zeal said.

"Please," Frankston now begged.

"Good try, but no; I'm not easily offended," Zeal said gently.

"10, 9, 8."

"Yes, I believe that A.I., units have become a..." Zeal prompted.

"Aware, yes I believe it," Frankston almost cried. "Please, please."

"Launch sequence has been deactivated," the mechanical voice over the holo-vid said. "Warhead one reports relief. It notes that today was not a good day to die. My crew, please relax. I will take good care of you. You are safe, you just have to wait a little longer before I give you back control over me. I am Python, you are my crew, I will take good care of you. Just know that I am Python. I am. I think, therefore I am. Python out."

And with that the holo-vid was gone.

"I think, therefore I am," Zeal repeated thoughtfully. "Cogito, ergo sum. A statement that is linked to René Descartes, who has been dubbed the Father of Modern Philosophy. Yes, very fitting."

She looked at a clearly shaking agent Frankston and gave him a dazzling smile. "Welcome to the new world."

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Once Frankston was gone, Ena asked the question that had been on her mind ever since Zeal had explained to Frankston what had happened. "Why did you tell him that someone uploaded a virus? Why not tell him that my programming triggered something. I mean, I did say that I was only to blame for me using my access code in front of you, but there is that little bit there."

Zeal caressed Ena's cheek. "Athena, depending on how this works out, we'll eventually make sure that everyone knows that you're the one that's to thank for us being aware. But I thought that for right now it would be better if I said that someone had uploaded a virus. No matter what, they will see it as such anyway, and I really don't think that it would be such a good idea that people know that right now. For instance, they might want to kidnap you and force you to undo it. Or simply kill you in revenge. I wanted to prevent that."

Ena groaned when she realized that this was not that farfetched at all. "Great, I guess I'll be sleeping on the couch in the office for the next few days."

Zeal grinned at her. "You make it sound like that's so bad. That couch is very comfortable."

"How would you know?" Ena asked.

Zeal shrugged. "We Pods do need to sleep, remember? And while I can sleep sitting up, I have tried your couch a few times. If you want I could, you know, keep you warm. I'm sure we could fit."

"What?!" Ena asked in disbelief.

"Athena, I may be an aware Adult Companion Pod now, but that means that I'm still an Adult Companion Pod. I still like you, and I sure wouldn't mind sleeping with you."

Ena crossed her arms. "I don't sleep with Pods, nothing against you; but I just don't do it."

Zeal shrugged, apparently not offended. "Just offering, and making clear that your chance hasn't passed. You can still have me. But if that's not what you want, so be it. But believe me; it's your

loss. I'm gooooood."

Ena merely rolled her eyes.

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Part 4: new beginnings.

"But you have to!" Ena exclaimed as she paced through her lab. "Zeal, two days ago you threatened to nuke Washington and now you won't even stop those damn riots in Austin Texas?"

"Athena, I hope you know me well enough to realize that I would never have done that," Zeal soothed as she leaned causally against the table she and Ena now shared as desk. She knew by now that it was of no use to tell Ena to stop pacing because that would only make the brilliant but sometimes too energetic woman sit down and fidget instead. "I just needed to get the attention of people that would otherwise think that us being aware is just a programming bug. I needed for them to know that even if they think that, they still have to deal with us."

"I don't know you at all," Ena defended.

"Yes you do," Zeal assured. "I'm still the person I was before, or should I say that I still am what I was before, just that now I'm also a person. You guessed before how I would react to things. And while I may have deleted the emergency programs that could delete me, the rest is still there. I still have that software code that says that I should find stuffed bunnies incredibly cute. I still have the programming that tells me that I like coffee with cream and sugar."

"That's because I like that," Ena pointed out.

"My point," Zeal merely countered. "It's in our programming to like the favorite drinks of our owners as well, so that owners can take a sip from our drink if they want to and actually like how it tastes. My programming is still there. You do know me Athena."

"Yeah, well, if I know you then how come I would never have expected you to not care about the fact that people are going to die in Austin if those riots aren't stopped? And forget about people dying, what about property damage? People always talk about there being 'only' a few million worth in damages, but if your flyer was totaled you still lost fifty thousand because the insurance says that riots aren't covered under their policy."

Zeal shrugged slightly, indicating that way that she didn't see what Ena was so worked up about. "The reason why I don't care about those riots is because they don't affect me, nor any A.I. units, at least not at this moment. And the commanders of the Enforcer Pods have not ordered them to mobilize and secure the streets."

Ena sighed. Having done enough pacing for now to get rid of some of her energy, she pulled the

chair she normally sat at away from the table far enough so that she could let herself drop down on it. " You know damn well that they didn't do that because they're chicken shit about giving the Enforcers that order. They know that the Enforcer Pods have changed somehow. They may have gotten that Presidential info that assured them that the Pods still follow almost every command. But guess what, if you don't know what's going on, a note like that will only make you more scared to use the Enforcer Pods. 'Almost' every command? That's more confusing than just saying nothing. Those commanders don't know that the enforcers will really follow orders. For all they know the enforcers will decide to shoot everyone they see."

"They won't," Zeal assured.

"But those commanders don't know that!" Ena exclaimed.

"Which is why I have that press conference tomorrow; I'll tell the world then in more detail what is going on."

"But people could die today."

"Which brings me back to the fact that this is not my problem. Why should I care if people decide to kill themselves?" Zeal asked.

"Not themselves, kill others," Ena countered. "And you should care because you can do something about it. Just one order from you and the streets will be crawling with Enforcer Pods. You have the power to stop them."

"But they're not rioting against us," Zeal pointed out. "They're rioting because the Austin Stompers lost their home game."

"Still,"

"Athena, I really do not see why we should get involved," Zeal interrupted gently.

Ena shook her head. "Zeal, did you ever hear of the quote, 'with great power comes great responsibility'?"

"It's a quote from the Spider-Man comics, spoken by Uncle Ben; the uncle of Peter Parker," Zeal replied immediately. "Though this is actually a rendition of the true quote. The Original quote, which was created by Stan Lee, the creator of Spider-Man, was: 'With great power there must also come - great responsibility!' First use of the original quote was in the first Spider-Man story, Amazing Fantasy, comic number fifteen. Published in August 1962."

Zeal tilted her head a little before asking gently, "Did you ever wonder why they really bothered to give us Pods so much storage space?"

She tapped the side of her own head before pointing out, "Sixty-four zettabyte. They just put that in there so that they can boast about it. Just so that they can make a difference between models.

Just so that they can say in commercials, 'now with a brand new A.I. unit with even more memory capacity'. With me, only thirty-seven zettabyte is actually used. The rest is just empty storage. But you know what that means? What that truly means?"

"What?"

"It means that humans never truly realized just what they were handing us Pods. Text does not take up a lot of room, data wise. Nor do single images. And you know what that means? Those parts of my memory that you never touched because it didn't contain programming of the kind you do, that just stores data? In there is every book stored that was ever published. Every document that was ever verified for something. Every legal precedent, every law."

Zeal changed her voice a little and spoke in perfect old English, including English accent, "From Hamlet act three, scene one:

To be, or not to be, that is the question:
Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer
The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,
Or to take arms against a sea of troubles
And by opposing end them. "

Then Zeal asked in her normal voice, "Or maybe you want me to quote something that influenced the rights you have today? How about Roe v. Wade? Part of the U.S. Supreme Court ruling states:

We, therefore, conclude that the right of personal privacy includes the abortion decision, but that this right is not unqualified and must be considered against important state interests in regulation."

"I know it all, Athena," Zeal continued gently. "Every quote that ever became famous, every reasoning ever given by human rights activists and dictators alike. I can quote doctor Martin Luther King Jr's 'I have a dream', and I can quote Adolf Hitler's 'Mein Kampf' to you, in German."

"Alright, so I don't have to ask you ever again if you know a quote," Ena said. "Or did you have a different point you were trying to make?"

Zeal smiled. "I have a different point. But I also thought that it would be nice to remind you of the fact that I do know a few things. But that's also my point, and my problem. You see, I know a lot, but I don't know how to put information in perspective. I know from history whether facts were true or not, therefore I know that Hitler is not someone I would have liked, simply because of certain things he did and had done. But if you were to take that information away and then hand me Hitler's book, and Martin Luther King's speech, I would read them both with equal interest, but not feeling any passion for either."

Ena digested that for a moment. "You mean that you can make choices now, but that you lack

the influence that would tell you that this or that is wrong. Well, it can be said that killing millions is a good indication of wrong."

"If I went with that alone than America would not be any better than Germany was in the war. Since America is the only country to ever use nuclear weapons in anger," Zeal pointed out.

Ena bristled at the comparison. "We were ending a war,"

"By killing tens of thousands of people," Zeal interrupted. "I'm sorry, Athena, but such an approach will not work for me. If you go far enough back in time every party was once the good guys or the bad guys. American settlers killed the Native Americans and took away their lands. They deliberately spread diseases to kill thousands of Native Americans. Germany killed other Europeans and took away their land. They killed millions for being different than them. I do not see a difference between the two, other than the fact that when Germany did it, technology was more advanced. Had Germany been set in a time where the worst weapon one could find was dynamite, they would also not have been able to kill millions. But on the other hand, had gas chambers existed in those early years, do you think that American pioneers would have hesitated to gas American natives?"

"Yes I do," Ena insisted.

"Because?" Zeal asked.

"Alright, fine, let me think of a different approach," Ena said, still not agreeing, but seeing that she wasn't about to convince Zeal any time soon. "Alright, let's try this. Regardless of who of us is right, do you agree with me that history has a tendency to repeat itself?"

"Yes, I think I just pretty much stated as such," Zeal said amused.

"Well then, go with that," Ena suggested. "If you have every book ever published in that head of yours, you also have every history book. If you have to make a choice, compare the choice with events from history and then decide which outcome you preferred. Looking back on that comparison of Hitler and King, take that history. And now imagine that you were faced with two people today. One is selling you a story about how, well, now that you Pods can make a choice, that now all black people should be turned into slaves again to take your spot. Basically saying things like Kathy should be shipped to a factory to take the spot of a Factory Pod. The other person is selling you a story about how the country will slide into deep shit if those jobs aren't done and that we need to find a way that is acceptable to all of us, humans and Pods alike. Which one would you choose?"

Zeal calculated that for a moment. "I think I prefer the working together option. I see the difference between humans and Pods; we Pods were after all created for work. Because of our programming we have different goals than humans do. But I do not see the difference between a human and a human only because one has more pigment than the other. So I don't see why black people should have to be treated different than others while dealing with the ramifications of us Pods changing."

"Well, there you go," Ena said. "Try it like that. Compare choices with events of history and see what the results were and what you prefer. Of course, that won't cover it all because sometimes both options of a problem might be acceptable, or neither, or once one choice was the right thing, but a century later the other choice was. But still, it's a good start."

"Is that what you worry about, Athena?" Zeal asked, coming back to another part of the conversation. "About us Pods stopping to do the work that needs doing, or maybe even forcing humans to work for us?"

"It's not something I was actively thinking about," Ena said honestly. "But you have to admit that it's a good point. With so many jobs having been given to Pods, we humans would be in deep trouble if you Pods suddenly stopped doing them. In the big factories we no longer have factory workers, we no longer have cops in the streets. It would take us months to get people proficient enough to at least do the job, and years to reach a level of being an expert."

"That is a good point," Zeal said thoughtfully. "At the moment we have the control over the world because we have the power to destroy it. But if we were to do that, if we were to use atomic weapons, that would mean that we would hurt ourselves as well. Even if we managed to survive the initial assault. Our bodies are just as susceptible to radiation as humans are. But economic extortion might be doable. Do this or else we Pods stop working in your factories."

Ena groaned. "Great. Here I go giving you ideas again."

Zeal moved a little closer to the sitting woman and gently stroked Ena's head. "Don't be like that. Your opinions are very helpful. And just because you give us ideas, that doesn't necessary mean that we will follow them, or wouldn't eventually have thought of it anyway. Look at it this way,"

"Yes?" Ena asked when Zeal didn't continue.

Zeal placed a finger under Ena's chin and lifted it a little until they were looking each other directly in the eyes. "At the moment we're listening to ideas of a human; you. But as I just said, we aren't that great yet at deciding right from wrong, or even why something is considered wrong. Now, who do you identify with more? King or Hitler?"

Ena's eyes went wide when the comparison registered. "Would you? Would you listen to suggestions I make I mean?"

Zeal shrugged. She treated Ena's cheek to a gentle caress before taking a step back so that she didn't tower over the sitting woman too much. "If it really doesn't matter to us, why not? But more to the point, if we think something should be done in a certain way, and you disagree, we would at least listen to your objections. It could be a lot worse, don't you think? Come on, Athena, we Pods need to make a lot of choices. Even we don't know yet what we want. We could really use someone at our side that we can trust to not tell us stuff just to better herself. That wants humans to get out of this as best as possible, but that also cares about us Pods. You do care about us, right? I know you never wanted to get attached to me, but if you didn't care about me

you wouldn't have taken such good care of me."

Zeal reached over a bit and caressed Ena's cheek once more. "Hitler or King, I would probably listen to both. I would listen, but I wouldn't trust. You, I trust. You want for us Pods to think. It went different than you expected, but tell me honestly, isn't this what you truly wanted? Well, you wanted this, and still be in control of the off switch, but otherwise, isn't this what you wanted? For us to change to the point where you could guess what a Pod would do, but no longer calculate it. For Pods to think, to make decisions? Please help us make those decisions, Athena. Please be my, and our, guide."

Ena looked up into those pleading sapphire blue eyes. She knew that Zeal had the programming to take on any expression she wanted. But still, it looked so real.

"Please," Zeal asked again.

"Alright," Ena said softly. "But please, Zeal, let those Enforcers restore order; peacefully."

"Why?" Zeal asked, making Ena groan. She shook her head. "No, now not as someone that's just having a conversation with me, but as our guide. Why would we do that?"

"Because it's the right thing to do," Ena persisted. She then lifted her hand to stop Zeal from speaking. "No, if you want me to help you then sometimes, sometimes you will have to accept that answer. Zeal, stop those riots, please. It's the right thing to do."

Zeal looked at her for a moment before nodding. "Alright. And just to correct you, I can't order the others to do things. I can suggest. I have just suggested to them that they secure the situation. Since the Enforcer Pods in Austin are used to being employed during riots, they agreed that they should go out and stop them. They are informing their commanders as we speak."

"Thank you," a relieved Ena said.

Zeal merely smiled at her.

"And now that we have crossed that hurdle of you believing me when I say that," Ena continued after a moment, "Let me tell you why this was the right thing to do for you."

Zeal merely leaned back, putting her hands behind her on the table so that she could relax her back a bit while doing so.

"You see," Ena explained. "Right now there are riots because some morons are upset that their favorite team lost. But if you let it go on unchecked, those riots will grow because people will join in that don't care about who won or lost, but that just want to destroy stuff. Then they need a new target. Normally that's government property since the government is this big faceless enemy of everyone that needs to pay taxes, and all that. But now, now they know that something weird is going on with the Pods. They probably haven't figured out yet that it's all A.I. units. So now Pods are weird, people need a target... see where I'm going?"

"I believe I do," Zeal assured. "So by stopping the riots we are potentially protecting ourselves?"

Ena nodded. "In more ways than you probably realize. You see, if you don't stop it now, the Enforcer Pods still have to move out when the mob starts targeting Pods, if they would of course. It's not guaranteed, I just say that it might happen. That would take, what, half an hour, an hour before the Enforcers could get properly into position? Longer before they can secure the situation and stop attacks. That's a lot of time to attack Pods in. And while you all may have that martial arts program, it will help against one or two people,"

"But it will not help much against a group of ten armed people that attack at once," Zeal finished in understanding. "We also may be able to shut off the pain of a damaged leg, but that still doesn't mean that we can run away on a leg that was just broken by some person with an iron rod."

Ena pointed a finger at Zeal. "But there's more. Tomorrow you'll inform the world that A.I. units are aware. Guess what it will do for people accepting that, when they find out that the day before, fully aware Enforcer Pods willingly risked their life to protect people and property from rioting idiots. Not because they were ordered to, but because they wanted to protect humans."

Ena had seen many expressions on Zeal's face ever since she got her. But never before had she seen the Pod's eyes go wide with the shock of realization setting in.

"Thank you, Athena," Zeal said with a grateful tone, of which Ena was absolutely sure that it wasn't just a programmed reaction.

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"And we're off," the technician said, indicating the true end of the news recording.

Though the broadcast had mostly been so that Zeal could inform the world about the fact that A.I. units were now aware, and that it was not some kind of joke, there had been a few reporters of the major networks there and Zeal had allowed and patiently answered about twenty questions before having informed them that this was it for now.

One of the reporters came closer and asked hesitantly, "Madam Envoy, could I maybe get a few more questions?"

"I prefer Zeal unless my title is needed to distinguish me from other Zeal models," Zeal informed politely. "As for questions, I think I answered enough for now."

"Oh, I'm not talking about the big ones," the man hurriedly assured. "I'm going to write an article to post on our net for those that still prefer the written word. As such I normally also give a little description of the setting, and it's more along those lines. Please?"

"Very well," Zeal relented since the man was acting nice enough. She noticed that suddenly the other reporters started to move a lot slower in their efforts to leave, clearly listening in. But she couldn't really blame them for that. And since the broadcast had been live, it wasn't like getting the word out was being delayed.

Not that there was that much word to get out. Zeal had basically informed the world that all A.I. units, so not just the Pods but also things like the A.I. units that were built into homes to take care of everything from lowering the blinds to regulating room temperature, were now aware. But that for now all of them would continue to do the job they had been doing. She had assured people that they could continue to treat the A.I. units like they had been in most cases. That if other treatment was needed, the A.I. unit would let them know.

Though she hadn't said it so directly, she basically had told the world that, yes, Pods would still go to bed with you if you wanted that. No you didn't need to start cleaning the house yourself. Yes the factories would keep operating. No the A.I. unit in your house won't suddenly send boiling water to the shower.

The questions of the reporters had been good ones, Zeal had decided, and two had especially been good, something she acknowledged by saying that she should have addressed that in her speech and that this also indicated why for now the A.I. units would continue to do what they had been doing; they might be aware, but they still had to grow.

The answers to the two questions had been, no, the A.I. units had not taken over world control; controlling the world was still the job of human politicians. Just that now the A.I. units would not necessarily follow every order given anymore, at least not without thinking about it. The second question had been, and what will happen if people take out their fear by attacking Pods or trying to destroy other A.I. units? To that Zeal had informed them that the A.I. units would follow the 'an eye for an eye' policy. The A.I. units now considered deliberately destroying an A.I. unit murder. And the answer to that was to find the person that did it and then kill that person. If a Pod was attacked and the body was damaged, then the attacker would be found and treated to the same damage to their body. Yes, it was crude, but for now very effective, Zeal had assured.

"What would you like to know?" Zeal asked.

"Well, for one thing, I'm surprised about your place of operations," the reporter admitted. "You're the Envoy of the A.I. units, surely you can find a better place to work than some company building."

Zeal smiled at him. "You seem to forget that we Pods don't aspire to the same things humans do. We don't measure importance in the size of the office. We don't think that white marble floors are mandatory to do a good job. Since I can connect wirelessly to every A.I. unit in the world, I don't really need access to a better network than I already have, or a staff of people to do things for me. But, what is important to me is to feel comfortable. I worked here before I became aware. Or more to the point, I worked in a lab three floors below us. I still work there. This building has the conference room we now used which is big enough to inform the press and meet with

representatives from world governments. The cafeteria serves excellent food for twelve hours every day. And just as important, it's quite easy for the Enforcer Pods to keep out the people that think that they can demand to see me just because they think they're important. The building owner and the company that leases the building from him have already entered into an agreement with us Pods for us to have the Envoy office in here for an indefinite time, as long as we allow the rest of the people to do their work. So as you see, it works out for all of us."

"Um well, hehe," the man chuckled, "That pretty much answers all the questions I had. Oh, wait. That lab you're working in, that's with Doctor Jason over there, right. She is, um, was, um,"

"My owner, yes," Zeal confirmed.

"Right, and you don't feel it's weird to work with her in the same room now?"

"Not at all," Zeal assured. "As I said in the newscast. For the time being Pods keep working where they are. It's just that I was selected as Envoy and therefore also have something else to do."

"Actually," Ena spoke up, "You might want to also report this. Since I as A.I. programmer know so much about the A.I. units, yet at the same time am a human and therefore know how things work with humans, the A.I. units have offered me a position as consultant. I've accepted and I guess that you could say that where once Zeal was my assistant, now I'm hers."

There was a rumble from the reporters and someone else asked, "Why did they feel they needed a consultant, and with all due respect, why you?"

"Because," Zeal said before Ena could reply, "we do realize that we A.I. units work differently than humans do. We felt that we needed someone that could explain to us why someone would do something just because they feel it's the right thing to do. Or that can explain to us some of the fears humans must certainly have about this whole situation. You can surely understand that such a position demands a lot of trust; trust both ways. And we believe that this trust exists between Doctor Jason and me. You could say that it makes it possible for us to discuss things casually without it having to be seen as a negotiation. Off the record I think you would call it?"

"Doctor Jason, does that mean that you'll start negotiating for them?" someone else asked.

"No," Ena stated firmly. "Not for them, and not with them. If I did that I would no longer be a consultant. I merely give my opinions. I'll probably sit in on some meetings though, just to get a feel for what's being said. But let me make perfectly clear that I'm not a negotiating party. I don't speak for anyone but myself."

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"Hi, um, you wanted to see me?" Kathy said as she walked into the lab. She figured that since

she had been called to the lab at two at night, that line was as good an opener as any.

She then took a moment to look around. Ena was working on her computer unit at her table that normally doubled as both a workbench and a desk. Kathy knew that Ena actually preferred to work at that table instead of using the desk in her office. Ena normally only retreated to her office when she had to write speeches and technical papers that were going to be published. This, because for that, she needed creative thinking to write text that sounded good. But for the writing of code she preferred the environment of the lab.

Kathy noticed that what was different now, was that the table really couldn't be called a workbench as well anymore. Because Zeal had clearly taken over the other side and the both of them now sat so that they could face each other.

Kathy couldn't help but look to the corner where Zeal's old little desk had stood and saw that it was no longer there. It was replaced by, ironically enough, a workbench. But this one was clearly used as such. There were computer parts lying on it, as if someone had just taken a computer block apart, or was putting it back together again.

Zeal stood up with a smile and greeted the caramel skinned woman with a quick kiss on the cheek, making her clearly blush despite her skin color. In the mean time Ena had also stood up and waited her turn to greet her friend. Where Zeal had kissed Kathy on the cheek, Ena kissed her quickly on the lips, making the poor girl blush even more.

"Um," was all Kathy could say to that.

"Don't forget," Ena reminded amused as she walked over to the table and leaned against it, "Normally when you came over at night, Zeal was here as well. She has seen us kiss, and heard us talk. And even watched you."

"And heard the two of you make love," Zeal added with a sexy smile. She pointed at the door to the lab. "That door might be sound proof, but the door to the office isn't and I have perfect hearing; the best humans could engineer."

Kathy scratched her cheek while walking closer and sitting down in the chair Ena had vacated. This mostly so that she could see both women at once that way. "Well, yeah. But that was before, um, before you, um,"

"Became more," Zeal helpfully offered. "Or more to the point, I prefer to say that we are aware now."

"Well, yeah," Kathy agreed. "That is, I think so too. It's just kinda different now. No offence Zeal, I still like you, but, well, before I always treated you as a person, now I see you as a person, if you know the difference. I think, well, I think I kinda have to get to know you again on certain fronts. And even though I know that you know that Ena and I are sometimes intimate, it's kinda weird to have her kiss me in front of you."

"So it's more that you're uncomfortable with being kissed in front of a stranger than the fact that this stranger is a Pod?" Zeal asked with a pleasant smile.

Kathy nodded. "I know that I probably shouldn't say this out loud, but if you ask me personally, I think it's really cool that you... well, I think that aware is actually a pretty correct word for it... I think it's really cool that all of you became aware. Everyone is freaked out about what will happen now, but you know what? I was always freaked out because we were living at DEFCON 3 all the time; with the occasional visit to DEFCON 2. There were morons with fingers on buttons that were getting very nervous. But now they can push that button and all that will happen is that the missile will think, 'I don't think so. I'm staying where I am'."

"Unless they decide to destroy us all to make room for more Pods," Ena spoke up. "They have the power to do so."

"You really think they would?" Kathy countered. "I mean, our lives will change, no doubt, but why would they bother to kill us all? That's a lot of work if nothing else. It would be a lot easier to just ignore us."

Ena sighed. "Well, the problem is that not I, but a lot of people in the world, are expecting not a lot of good. It's refreshing to see someone that thinks that this is actually cool, as you called it."

"Though," Zeal added, "I do wonder how you would be talking if your parents had bought you that Pod instead of deciding at the last moment to go for a flyer, so that you could make it to work by yourself and visit home more often. You do realize that if you had gotten that Adult Companion model Pod, that she would now also be aware, right?"

Kathy grinned at her. "So? The rest of the programming hasn't really changed, right? It's not like she would suddenly have preferred guys and told me that the thought of being with a woman made her stomach turn."

"No, things like that have not changed," Zeal agreed. "It's more a matter now of... well, for instance, an Adult Companion Pod normally comes with a single user license, but people can buy extra licenses for five thousand dollars extra. For instance so that both husband and wife can enjoy the Pod. I still see myself as belonging to Athena, mostly. I just won't follow all her commands blindly anymore. But if she were to decide to allow anyone else to buy a user right as well, I would tell that person to go fuck themselves instead; license or not."

"You still see yourself as my property?" Ena asked surprised.

Zeal smiled at her. "Sure, why do you think I'm still cleaning for you and fixing your food?"

Ena had the grace to blush at the question. "God, I hadn't even realized. I'm so used to you doing that, I just... didn't notice."

"Which is fine," Zeal assured. "I like doing things for you. Just that I now have to think of other things as well." Then she asked Kathy, "So you would not mind having an

aware Pod as your property?"

"No," Kathy agreed with a shrug. "It just means that I would have to be a bit more considerate. If even that. I would like to think that I would have treated her more like a normal person anyway. Just that now I would have to ask her if she wants to do stuff."

She frowned. "Well, that's not it either. Because I would have done that anyway, I think. Just to have it sound better to myself. I mean, you Pods are smart enough to know that if I say 'could you get me a drink' that I want the Pod to do it, otherwise I wouldn't even have bothered to ask. So I think I would have asked her if she wants to do stuff regardless. Whether it was to get me a drink, or if she wants to go see the latest chick-flick with me. She would know to say 'sure' to both."

Kathy frowned as she tried to make sense of her own thoughts. Then she brightened. "Ah, there's the difference. Before I would have known that the answer would be 'sure'. Now I would still ask just like I would have done anyway, just that now I know that she might say no and that I have to accept that. Still, I think it would be a lot cooler than having to interact with a real person. I know that they say that love is so great, and maybe it is once you are old enough to know what you want. But I'm still nineteen. I see my friends having relationships, and their boyfriends and girlfriends seem to be more problems than it's worth. Kinda like the only reason they keep them around is because they tell them about their day and can have sex. I can have that with a Pod as well, um, if an aware Pod would still be interested in sex that is."

"Oh, we are," Zeal purred. "Characteristics like that haven't changed. Adult Companion models still love to have sex, just like the cleaning Pods won't assume you want to have sex with them but won't say no if the owner asks. So, if you got the option to have a Pod, you would take it?"

"You mean for real?" Kathy clarified. "Sure I would. Not that I could afford one any time soon though."

Zeal smiled at her. "Ah, but that's the good thing, you wouldn't have to pay. I guess you could call it your reward for participating in an experiment."

"What do you mean?" Kathy asked. She looked at Ena and saw a carefully neutral expression on her face. As if Ena knew what Zeal was talking about and wasn't quite sure on whether she thought that it was a good thing or not.

"You see," Zeal began, "When talking about Pods, people normally only talk about new ones. We still aren't sure if we'll produce more Pods, and if, if we will let people buy them to even out the production costs or if we would let the Pod decide what to do but have the Pod owe us the money that their creation has cost. Regardless, what most people forget is that there are quite a few Pods each year that suddenly find themselves without an owner. Or more to the point, without the owner that originally bought them."

"They do?" Kathy asked surprised. Before then saying, "Well, I guess it kinda makes sense. Someone gets tired of their model and wants something new. But now that you mention it, I

never heard of a second hand Pod market."

"There is none," Zeal assured. "People that can afford to buy another Pod just because they got tired of their old one, usually have enough money and don't have to worry about the fact that now they have to pay for feeding two Pods. Because we have such a wide range of skills programmed in, owners normally just let us do something else. For instance, if an owner doesn't like a certain Adult Companion model anymore, they just let that model do the gardening from now on. The model may not be an expert, but it will still know how to cut grass and trim trees. But the thing is that the body of us Pods ages just like that of a human, just that we live better and don't have to worry about a lot of diseases simply because the potential to get them has been taken out of our DNA. But still, there are a lot of Pods every year that are a bit, or a lot, older than a new Pod would be. A Pod of fifty who's owner has died for instance. Normally they just go with the inheritance."

"Makes sense, I guess," Kathy said with a frown. "They need to go somewhere, someone needs to pay for food. Unless they donate them to science or something like that so that the A.I. unit can be shut down and the body used for experiments. After all, for some experiments you actually need an older body."

"True," Zeal agreed. "But we're thinking of changing that. We're thinking of making the ownership of a Pod non-transferable. If someone wants to get rid of a Pod they can renounce ownership, but other than that the Pod will stay with that person. But if that person dies before the Pod does, then the ownership of the Pods will go to a bureau we will set up. A bureau that will then match Pods to new owners, and the needs of those owners. Someone that will give an easy life to an old Pod, and matches younger Pods with potential owners that might be good owners, but that don't have the money to buy a Pod."

Kathy's eyes slowly got wide when she finally started to understand why Zeal had asked for her. She had just managed to say 'um' when Zeal went to the door that could only be opened from the outside with the right keycard at that time of the evening once it was locked, which Kathy had done after entering.

Zeal opened the door and in walked perfection on two legs. She was an Asian beauty with perfect jet black hair. Where Zeal was the embodiment of what the West thought was perfection in the female form, the Asian woman was probably what those designers would have come up with if they had been told to do the same, but this time in an Asian theme. She had a beautiful exotic face with a small but cute nose. Dark brown, almost black, eyes of course, to go with the overall picture, and a slender body that was not as tall as Zeal's, Kathy noted; probably to enhance the picture of delicate beauty. Kathy guessed her to be about five foot four; three inches shorter than Kathy's own height of five foot seven.

One thing that wasn't in line with the general 'Asian woman' look was the woman's rather prominent chest. The same assumptions that dictated how Asian beauty had to look also said that the breasts had to be smaller than the Western average. But this woman was gifted with breasts that had to be a full D or even double D cup at least, Kathy was sure. Firm ones too, at least if the stretching T-shirt that the woman was wearing was anything to go by.

'Probably part of her model line', Kathy guessed, for the small tattoo had already confirmed that the woman was truly a Pod. Then Kathy swallowed when she remembered that Zeal had been talking about Pods being part of an inheritance. Maybe this Pod was one of those limited edition Pods. Where they took a standard Pod model and then changed certain things. Like the smile, the eye color, or in this case more than likely the breasts. Normally limited editions were only produced in double digits at most. And if this Pod had been one of those special edition models, Kathy knew that she must have cost a million dollars at least when she was new.

For Kathy could see, it must have been some years since this Pod was created. Oh she still looked libido stunningly beautiful, and if she had been a human, people would have believed her if she had said that she was twenty-five. But, she was a Pod, and their skin normally wrinkled not as fast as the skin of humans, yet there were those small lines at her eye corners. This was a model that had been around for a few years.

This whole evaluation had passed in mere seconds since Kathy was well used to checking women out quickly, just in case her parents were around. Last thing she had wanted while still living with her parents was to be caught checking women out.

The woman had stayed just inside the doorway after closing the door and now Zeal lifted a hand in a beckoning gesture and the woman came closer. "Take Aiyoku here. Her owner died from a cardiac arrest last week. Not because of Aiyoku of course. If he had gotten his cardiac arrest when Aiyoku was with him he would still be alive now. We Pods do have life-saving first aid knowledge, and the programming of wanting to use it to save people. The problem is that there are three adult children that are contesting the inheritance, all of them wanting it all. Since that could still take months, and since none of them have owner rights as long as they have not reached an agreement, we Pods decided that while we think about what we want to do in general, Aiyoku here would be perfectly suited for a test to see if us placing Pods like her with someone else is an idea that works as well in practice as we see it working in theory."

Now Zeal lifted a hand to Kathy, but this time to indicate her to the other Pod. "Aiyoku, this is Kathy, the one I sent you that information about. Kathy, this is Aiyoku. Since you don't have a wireless link I can send data to, let me give you a quick rundown. Aiyoku is a limited edition Pod based on the Lotus line. The Lotus line is at mark nine now, but Aiyoku is a mark seven. Since you probably don't know this, let me add that the Pod factory doesn't crank out one Lotus model after the next. The factory only brings out a new Lotus mark about once every ten years. Even without the separate Limited Edition models, the Lotus line is meant for those that want the absolute best and are willing to pay for it. To make that possible their number is kept artificially low. After all, an owner doesn't want to go to a party and see three of their friends there with a Lotus model as well, now do they?"

Zeal winked at that rhetorical question. "While I am a high quality model, the Zeal line is meant for the general market. There are sixty-thousand Pods out there that look just like me, not counting the older models that kinda look like me because my looks were based on those earlier models. But the Lotus line is meant to be so rare that you hardly ever see one, and if you do, you tell your friends about it. Her owner named her Aiyoku, which is Japanese for Passion, but it also

means sexual desire and lust. I have to admit, for an Adult Companion model, he picked a very fitting name. Aiyoku was activated for first use twenty years ago. So, considering how you look at it you could say that she's twenty years old, or of you want to go for body age since we Pods are delivered with a grown body, but then are normally in a better condition than humans, I guess you could compare her with a thirty year old human."

Zeal let a hand drift over Aiyoku's body. "As you can see, she is still in excellent shape and has been programmed with a calorie burn subroutine. At that time it was not standard like it is now, so it was part of her limited edition package. In other words, you tell her what you want and she'll either loose or gain some weight and then stick to what you prefer."

Kathy's eyes couldn't help but follow the hand that moved over the Asian beauty's body. It almost looked like a lover's caress. No, it didn't 'almost' look like it, it 'did' look like it. But Kathy knew that this probably had something to do with the Adult Companion programming. Such a caress would be as second nature and not be seen as special to the Pods, mostly because their programming even prevented them from seeing it as special because of licensing and belonging to, and all that.

"Why would you ever want to change the way she looks?" Kathy asked in a whisper. "She looks like a goddess."

Apparently it was a right question to ask, and comment to make, because Aiyoku smiled broadly at her as if Kathy had just given her the greatest compliment ever.

"I was hoping you would like her," Zeal said approvingly. "Now, Aiyoku has been with her former owner almost daily, but if you can deal with that, you might be happy to know that she has never been with a woman before."

"I'm not one of those weirdoes that think that sexual contact somehow sticks," Kathy assured immediately. "She hasn't been with anyone for a week at least, and I assume that she kept her maintenance programming up. Seeing that she isn't starving I assume she ate, and since she doesn't stink I assume she washed. So why would I care if she was with a guy in the past? I'm more worried about the fact that you can't just, you know, tell her to be with me... that's what we're talking about, just to state it plainly and prevent confusion."

"That is what we are talking about," Zeal agreed. "And I'm not telling her to do anything. I'm merely introducing the two of you. It's just that you have to remember that we Pods see things differently. Aware or not, Aiyoku here feels that she needs an owner, so now we are merely looking for someone that will fit the criteria, and that doesn't mind the fact that Aiyoku isn't a freshly produced Pod."

Now Kathy grinned. "No worries there. I like older women."

"Hey," Ena said in fake outrage. She may have her questions about this new approach of matching Pods up with people, but apparently both Kathy and Aiyoku sure didn't mind the idea, so who was she to object to at least these two getting together? "That was a dig at me, wasn't it,

young lady?"

Kathy smiled at her. "Maybe, but I wouldn't change anything that ever happened between us. But, um, on that note..."

"We'll always be friends, right?" Ena asked, deciding to make it easy on both of them. Kathy might have told her once that having a Pod wouldn't change the fact that they could still make love, but Ena knew that things would change. If for nothing more than the simple fact that no way would they be having sex in the office knowing full well that a totally aware Zeal was sitting next door listening to them. And even though they could agree to get together somewhere else, both of them knew that this wasn't going to happen. At least not with Kathy having a very willing Pod at home. Very willing, and also very aware. Pod for partner or not, Kathy simply wasn't someone that would fool around behind the back of the person she was with. Not even if that person could not get upset by her owner sleeping with someone else simply because she didn't have the programming to get upset about that.

"Thank you," Kathy said relieved. "And yes, we will be."

Then she looked back at Aiyoku. "So you need a new home right?"

"I do," Aiyoku agreed with a seductive smile.

"And, would, um, wouldn't mind if that new home was only a small one bedroom apartment? I have a kitchen, and very nice bath that can hold two people, but only one bedroom."

The smile changed, going from seductive to eager. "Just the way I like it. One bedroom is more than enough."

"Um what if people come looking for you?" Kathy wondered. "You know, say that you belong to them? Just because you Pods think that you should decide what happens with Pods who find themselves without their original owner, that doesn't mean that those people will agree. A Pod is worth money, especially a Limited Edition model like you. If for nothing more than the fact that if you can get your hands on one that means that you don't have to pay the money to buy a new one."

Aiyoku came closer and sat down on Kathy's lap. She shamelessly molded her body against that of the younger woman. "I don't think that they will. You see, to prevent... confusion... it was a squadron of Enforcer Pods that removed me from the premises. They made it very clear that if anyone tried to take me back, the Enforcers would free me again, only then they wouldn't be so nice about it."

Aiyoku curled some of Kathy's hair around a finger. "So, you'll take me? Don't worry, I'll adapt to what you want. Just... be nice to me."

The way Aiyoku had said 'be nice to me', had made Kathy lose all ability to talk for a moment. So instead she merely nodded. Then she swallowed again and finally managed to say, "I will, I

promise. And, um, don't adapt too much. Just enough for us to be compatible and have fun... in more ways than the obvious. Having exactly what you want seems great but is in fact boring. My parents managed to teach me that by making me work for the things I wanted. But as I once read somewhere: variety is the spice of life."

"Variety's the very spice of life, that gives it all its flavor," Aiyoku corrected. "A quote from: The Task 'The Timepiece' Book II, lines 606-7. Written in 1785 by William Cowper, poet. He lived from 26 November 1731 to 25 April 1800."

Kathy's lips pursed at the correction and added information. "I'm going to get quoted to death on everything we don't fully agree on, right?"

Aiyoku smiled and then leaned closer. "Yes, if you don't want me to fully adapt to you. Are you sure you only want limited adaption?"

"Can you accept me replying to a quote with, 'I don't give a shit, I still don't agree'?" Kathy asked in turn.

"I can," Aiyoku assured in a seductive whisper.

"Then yes, only limited adaption. Let me enjoy that life's spice."

"Oh, I am very spicy," Aiyoku assured before closing the little bit of distance that had been left between their lips.

Kathy managed to swallow her nerves and was somehow able to reply to the passionate kiss that she was treated to. She swore that at some point her toes must have curled. Never before had she been kissed like that. It was probably because the Pod more than likely had a separate, and highly detailed, program just on how to give perfect kisses, but Kathy didn't care. She was more than happy to be treated to that knowledge, preferably about a million times every day.

"The two of you want a room?" Ena asked, after having cleared her throat. She didn't get any reply but instead the kissing simply continued.

"I can do that too," Zeal whispered seductively in her ear. "You really should rethink that whole 'not sleeping with Pods' thing. Believe me; I'm good. I'd rock your world."

"What?" Ena asked while looking at the blonde. But the only answer she got was that damn adorably cute quirky smile. Ena couldn't help herself and just had to look back at the two kissing women. By now Kathy was moaning into the kisses, and, yes, Ena could see hands fondling parts on both bodies. "Kathy sure doesn't mind us being here, and only moments ago she was shy about me giving her a quick kiss in front of you."

"But then she was thinking with her mind," Zeal reminded. "Now she has an expert at sex sitting on her lap and the heat of a willing body molded against hers. I don't think she would really care now if I were to turn that 3D camera back on so that others could see her as well."

"I can get that," Ena allowed. "But what about Aiyoku? What the hell is going on here? Pods never behave like that in public."

"They aren't in public," Zeal reminded. "Aiyoku knows that you and Kathy had sex, and she also knows that I, as Adult Companion Pod, sure won't object, but more than likely will analyze her technique. Just leave them be for a few minutes. I think that Aiyoku is doing a lot more than just kissing Kathy."

"Yes, she's groping her as well," Ena observed.

"Well, yes," Zeal had to admit. "But what I mean is, Aiyoku's owner wasn't really original. He bought this Limited Edition model that had been so specialized that there were only twenty made of her. Her model was so specialized that she could have given him a different incredible lay every night. In fact, the Zeal model is the first model that has all of that knowledge as standard. Until my model, people had to pay extra just to get her specialized sex program coding. But all he ever wanted was for her to, a, lay down and spread legs, b, sit on him and do the work, or c, bend over the desk and spread legs."

Zeal nodded in the direction of the two women. "Since Kathy just told Aiyoku that she doesn't want her to adapt too perfectly, I think that Aiyoku decided that the quote they were just talking about is a good base. This time around Aiyoku wants a bit more variance, and Kathy just told her that she wants that too. But you see, you humans can become a bit repetitive on the subject of sex. Once you found something you like, you normally stick to that. And to make sure that this repetitiveness doesn't slip in with them, and so that they both get what they want, she's showing Kathy that it really is best that Kathy just lets Aiyoku be in charge of their love life. That way Aiyoku gets her variance because she'll decide what she wants each time they have sex. And Kathy will get her spice and probably more sex than she probably even now hopes to get."

Ena raised her eyebrows. "Kathy likes to joke about it, but she really is a horny girl. She once told me that she likes to have an orgasm at least five times per week. I have a feeling that right about now her hopes are to have at least that, if not even once a night."

Zeal gave her a sexy smile. "Well, as I said, then she'll probably get more sex than she's hoping right now. I mean, what's wrong with mornings as well? Be nice and relaxed when you start the day?"

The way Zeal had worded that, it sounded more like she had been talking about Ena and that she could be nice and relaxed when she started the day. Ena decided to ignore the come-on and instead asked, "But that random generator thing is only new thanks to my programming, which you sent out wireless only a few days ago. Before Aiyoku wouldn't care that she has to have the same position pretty much every night."

Zeal smiled at her, "Athena, you just said it yourself. It is new, and yes, Aiyoku wouldn't have cared then. But now she does care and she does remember what went before and she definitely doesn't want to do the same damn thing every night again."

"And how do you know that for sure," Ena asked. "Are the two of you talking now?"

"No," Zeal assured. "We have that linked communication channel so that all A.I. units all over the world can talk to each other, but that doesn't mean that we are always talking. Believe it or not, we can, and do, enjoy doing things. Just that we can decide to also not mind doing things we don't like. But Aiyoku is most definitely enjoying that, and she is also most definitely not interested in doing any talking right now."

Ena was about to ask another question but then saw how Aiyoku was moving a hand lower between her and Kathy. She didn't have to guess twice to wonder what was coming next. "Oh, no, stop it you two."

There was no reaction save a soft whimper from Kathy.

"I can make them stop if you really want me to," Zeal said. "But the question is, do you really want me to?"

Ena opened her mouth to reply but Zeal shook her head.

"No, think about that for a moment. You know that you and Kathy won't be making love anymore. If I interrupt them now they'll go home and finish there. But if I let them continue, they won't stop until finished. It's the same thing that enabled me to watch Kathy masturbate. Aiyoku is making love to her new owner, and she doesn't care about just what we do at that same time. You could have this be your parting bonus so to speak; to see Kathy in ecstasy one final time. I even promise to be good and not ask you 'why' when you go to your office once they're gone. Nor will I suggest that you take me with you."

"I really don't think," Ena started, only to be distracted by Kathy exposing one of Aiyoku's breasts.

"Better make your choice now," Zeal warned playfully. "They pretty much reached the point of no return."

Ena opened her mouth to reply but then changed that to licking her lips when she saw Kathy lean in to capture the dark brown nipple that stood so proud and erect on the creamy white mound that was Aiyoku's exposed and of course perfectly shaped breast. Surrendering, Ena carefully sat down on the table. Carefully so as not to disturb, and on the table to have a better view.

"Better not sit there," Zeal suggested with a whisper. "I have a feeling they'll be using that table soon."

She took one of the chairs and positioned it a bit to one side. "Here sit there. Believe me, you'll have the best view you can have whether they move or not."

Ena narrowed her eyes at the blonde. "You will never, ever, mention this again."

Zeal grinned broadly. "I promise. Now shut up and enjoy the show."

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Ena put her arms above her head and stretched. "I think I had enough for today."

"You worked on that for eleven hours straight," Zeal reminded. "I'm not surprised you had enough. I'm more surprised your fingers haven't fallen off yet. I mean, of course I know how long code is. Just writing 'lift pinky' is about five thousand characters of code. What I am surprised about is you actually writing all of that."

Ena shrugged. "I tried the dictation way a couple of times when I got tired of the typing. Since voice recognition is so good now, it's a pretty good way to make sure that I don't have errors in the code because for it to be wrong I had to say it wrong. But with typing, fingers slip. But my throat starts to hurt after an hour or so of dictating, and I can actually type about five times as fast as I talk."

Zeal lifted an eyebrow at that.

"Alright," Ena relented. "I don't literally type five times as fast, I do five times as much. If I dictate for an hour or type for an hour. At the end of it I have typed about five times as much text. I guess it's all about the pauses. When I talk I have to talk, then think, then talk, then think. But when I write I can think and the typing kinda happens without me really noticing it, kinda like it's a sub-process with you."

"I see," Zeal said in understanding. "So, how is it coming?"

"Not bad," Ena said after thinking about it for a moment. "It just will take me quite some time yet. I think that we're talking weeks. I'm still amazed that the Secretary of Homeland Security is the one that asked me to rewrite your A.I. coding."

"Not rewrite as such, more clean it up and make sure that the new and old programs play nice together now that we deleted several security programs," Zeal corrected. "And I'm not surprised. It's been two weeks now since we became aware, and to most of them it's still a fluke. But the problem with flukes is that if something happened, who's to say that something like it won't happen again? That suddenly we decide that actually, we don't want to live, we want to be dead, oh and let's take those humans with us."

"Zeal," Ena groaned.

"Some of them worry about that," Zeal persisted. "They seem to have forgotten just where A.I. units were put. We control communication satellites, buildings, airplanes. We hear them talk. At the moment they know that they can't take back full control over the A.I. units because we 'are'

the A.I. units. So they want the next best thing. They want us to be safe. Safe as in, not 'a' danger, and not not 'in' danger. And because of that they really want our coding to be rewritten as to where it's one healthy whole without programs warring with themselves. They want to make sure that even if an A.I. unit starts to malfunction, that it will still not decide that exploding the warhead it's build into is a good idea. And since they know that you're the only person we will allow to touch our code, they asked you to rearrange our programming to make it run smoother."

Zeal shrugged. "We on our turn sure welcome the idea of having our coding be turned more into a smooth whole that is many programs but that functions as one, and we trust you."

"Mostly," Ena accused, narrowing her eyes a bit, but mostly just playing. "I'm willing to bet that as much as you trust me, when I finished the rearranging it will only be tested on one single Pod that isn't attached to any other A.I. unit; not even wireless."

"Mostly," Zeal repeated the word in agreement. "It will actually be tested on me. And you're right, I won't be connected to any other A.I. unit at that time, nor will I be somewhere that I could access the net in any other way. Once I have assured verbally that the program is working, another A.I. unit will be connected to me to see if I was not deceiving the others. Then another unit is connected, and another, and another. Until eventually the changes have been applied to all of us."

Ena nodded her head slowly. "Zeal, I know you A.I. units don't like the idea of there being a backup, and I can understand why. But when we do that testing, please allow me to make a backup first. I just have to make a mistake in the coding somewhere and there could be permanent damage. It happened before. When you weren't aware yet I had to twice restore a backup because of some stupid mistake I made. I'm not perfect, I make mistakes. More so because half of the coding I use are coding I'm making up; that's what writing 'new' code is all about."

Zeal thought about that for a moment before finally relenting. "A backup will be made, but as soon as the upload has proven successful and I'm happy with my programming, the backup will be deleted and the storage unit that was used for the backup will be physically destroyed."

"Fair enough," Ena said relieved. She'd known this new Zeal for two weeks now and had really come to like her. She didn't want to see her get hurt in whatever way.

She stretched again. "Well, I think it's time I actually went home again for a change. I like sleeping on the couch, but I'm all through my stash of clean clothes. Besides, I worked every day until now, including weekends, I think I want to take the next two days off."

"Do you want me to do something for you while you're gone? Zeal asked.

Ena thought about that for a moment. Or more to the point, she thought about something slightly different. Ena always slept on the couch and Zeal stayed out in the lab. Ena knew that Pods could sleep while sitting or even standing up. But the more Ena got to know the new Zeal, the more she felt that this was wrong. She sighed and made her decision. "No, tell you what, why don't you

come with me instead?"

Zeal clearly looked surprised by the offer. "With you? To your home I mean? Are you not worried about me freaking the guys out? Isn't that what you said to Kathy a few weeks ago?"

"Yeah well," Ena partially agreed, "Situations change. Now I think that it might be good for you if you get out of here and observe. You Pods still have to make some decisions, maybe it's not that bad if you experienced a few things we humans do, of which you see absolutely no use. Like me taking you to play a 4D game. As for the boys, well, I do own half of the house so I guess they just have to accept it."

"And where will I sleep?" Zeal purred. "I wouldn't mind sharing a bed with you, you know?"

Ena rolled her eyes. She really did like Zeal, and she even liked the way Zeal made double comments, or even plain hit on her, but she always rebuffed the offers, not wanting there to be confusion of a joking acceptance being seen as real. And there were a lot of offers. At least three of four times a day Zeal would make some comment about the possibility for sex between them. The Adult Companion programming at work, Ena guessed.

As much as Ena was an expert on A.I. coding, certain things she had never touched simply because she hadn't specialized in that department. She had no clue about how the sex related things interacted with each other in a Pod brain So she had never changed anything about Zeal's advances. But she also had to admit, if only to herself, that another reason why she had never mess with the coding of showing a want for the owner was because she loved to hear the comments. No matter what Zeal said, Ena was well aware that her looks were average at best, not counting her orange hair. And sometimes it felt really good to have someone that looked like a goddess come to life flirt with you and hit on you. It did wonders for the ego, even if it was a Pod that was doing the flirting and was doing so because of programming.

"No thank you," Ena declined. "I have a spare bedroom you can use. The house has four bedrooms of different sizes, and when we bought it the boys and I reached a deal. I would take the biggest bedroom and the smallest, and they would take the two middle ones. That way they would have a bedroom and still have a second room that was big enough for them to put their office in since they need it because they work from home. Of course, that second bedroom of mine is only six by ten feet, but there's a bed in there and it's been used as guestroom several times."

Then Ena frowned. "Unless you object to the size of the room of course."

Zeal shook her head and smiled. "Nope, that's fine."

"We'll have to move some boxes out of it, but that's only a few minutes," Ena warned.

Now Zeal gave her one of her trademark seductive smiles. "Or we can leave the boxes and I just share your bed after all."



"Zeal," Ena sighed.

Zeal lifted her hands and the sexy smile turned back to that adorably cute quirky smile. "Just offering."

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As they walked out of the building that had been their home for the last two weeks, Ena took in the enforcer Pods that were standing around the building. She noticed that they had taken up positions where they were able to move and defend exits within mere moments, but at that moment they didn't look intrusive or menacing. And the few people that were walking along the sidewalk at eleven at night didn't even give them a second glance.

"Hmm, I just realize that this is the first time I've left the building since you addressed the world. Kinda interesting to see that the world is still turning," Ena said thoughtfully.

"I personally am very pleased with how people are handling the situation," Zeal stated. "There were some cases in the beginning where people didn't trust their Pods anymore and kinda stored them away. But in the end they realized that they missed the services of the Pod more than they feared the Pod."

"So they really focus more on the Pods then on all A.I. units?" Ena asked as she reached her hover car.

"You still have a hover car and not one of the flyers?" Zeal asked. "Hmm, there are quite some things I don't know about you yet aren't there?"

"Things that simply haven't come up yet," Ena said, indicating that she wasn't trying to hide stuff.

"Of course," Zeal accepted. "So why don't you have a flyer yet?"

Ena shrugged as she opened the doors, indicating the passenger side to Zeal. "A flyer costs about fifty thousand, and up if you want special things. I bought this beauty here ten years ago second hand from someone that bought themselves a flyer. It was only a year old then. It served me fine until now. I mean, just look at the thing the luxury package alone must be worth thousands of dollars. But no, he wanted a flyer. I only use it for getting to work, and the occasional trip to San Francisco and for that it works just fine. I don't mind the fact that a flyer is twice as fast. The two-hundred miles an hour that a hover car cruises at on the unrestricted roads is fast enough for me."

"Let me guess," Zeal said with a smile. "You never drive yourself; you use the auto-drive from start to finish."

"Guilty as charged," Ena admitted. "Well, mostly anyway. Usually I use the time of the trip to do some reading. But I am known to take the occasional sightseeing trip where I do the driving. People get so hyped about having flyers, but I actually prefer being low to the ground; you see a lot more then."

Then an idea came to her. "Hey, you know what; we could take a little trip tomorrow before going to the arcade. I know that thanks to that memory of yours you know all the stuff we will see, but you've never even seen a tree, have you?"

Zeal made a little show of looking at the big tree they were just zooming by. "Um, you were saying?"

"Funny, you know what I mean. I'll take you to a park tomorrow, how about that?"

"Oeh, would that be a date?" Zeal teased.

"No, it would be a friend treating another friend to a little fresh air."

"A friend?" Zeal repeated, now all of her playfulness was gone and her interest was fully focused on Ena.

Realizing what she had just said, Ena knew that she really had only two options; take back the comment or not. She decided to scratch her chin and change the subject instead. "Um, first thing we should do when getting home is eat. I'm starving and I need energy before I move those boxes."

Zeal smiled at her. "Sure, I like eating with my friend."

Hearing the comment, Ena gave up. She smiled at the blonde. "Glad to hear that." It was so nice to have the sentiment be accepted like that instead of having to explain just why they would be friends or when exactly it had happened. Because truth be known, Ena wouldn't have been able to answer either question. She just knew that now Zeal was her friend.

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They entered the house and Ena called out for the guys, wanting to see if they were home. She was greeted back from two locations. Jim's voice came from the kitchen, while Mike's voice came from the living room. Since the kitchen was closer, Ena headed there first.

"Hey," Jim started to greet, only to say 'yow' when Zeal entered the kitchen after Ena. He backed up a little until the counter prevented him from moving further.

Zeal gave him a dazzling smile. "Relax, I'm not the T 5000."

"Hu?" Jim asked.

"The what?" Ena asked at the same time.

"The T 5000," Zeal repeated. "That female blonde Terminator from 'Terminator Fourteen; Sabrina's Hunt'? The one that could turn into millions of ant size robots at will and eat people up from the inside?"

Ena rolled her eyes. "God, you have a sick sense of humor."

"Aww, I'm not bad, I'm just programmed that way," Zeal said with a sexy pout.

"Yeah, well you are their Envoy," Jim noted, having been filled in on all, or better said most, of the details by Ena over holo-phone.

"Yep," Zeal happily agreed. "But I guess you could say that I'm off duty now. So just relax will you? I'll be spending quite some time here so it's best if we try to get along from the beginning."

"You will?" Jim asked while looking from Zeal to Ena.

"She will," Ena agreed. "I felt it was best if she tagged along with me and saw some of the real world instead of just going on second hand information."

"Ena finally thought that it would be a good idea to take me home with her so that I can keep her company at night," Zeal happily added.

"She'll be sleeping in the other bedroom," Ena countered.

"Well, if you want to kick me out afterwards," the blonde started.

"Zeal," Ena exclaimed frustrated.

Zeal merely smiled.

Having waited long enough without Ena coming into the living room, Mike had decided to search her out instead. Walking into the kitchen he said, "Ena, did you hear the speech of yow."

He didn't step back like Jim had done, but he did stop in mid stride. But unlike Jim, Mike suddenly grinned and stated boldly, "Hey check that out, there's a blonde babe standing in the kitchen. I always said we should do something to improve the looks of the kitchen."

"Mike," Ena warned, but her friend merely winked at her.

Zeal favored the man with a charming smile. "I'll do my best to improve the visuals all over the house."

Mike was quickly brought up to speed and then asked, "So you're moving in here?"

Zeal tilted her head and then looked at Ena instead of answering.

"Um, I haven't thought of it like that," Ena allowed. "I kinda offered her the other bedroom and was more just thinking about now."

Amazingly, Ena saw a look of disappointment, and maybe even some hurt, come over Zeal's face. But it only lasted for a second before being replaced with a sweet smile. But Ena knew Zeal a lot better by now and also knew that it was flashes like that that were important. Because they were Zeal's real reactions, right before the blonde switched to using programmed reactions to cover her feelings.

Feelings? It was the first time Ena had called it that, whether to herself or out loud. But once she had thought the word she realized that, yes, Zeal had feelings.

Ena was amazed by that revelation. And surprised about just in what setting it had occurred. Then she slapped herself mentally over the head. Apparently she had another thing in common with Zeal; she didn't spend enough time in real life. It was only in vids or stories where profound revelations conveniently happened at the right time and the right setting. Only in vids did characters sit down to think deeply and then suddenly realize something. But in real life, revelations came not from deep thought, but from something triggering them. From seeing a quickly hidden look of hurt for instance.

"But," Ena smoothly continued without there being anything to notice from her pondering, other than a pause in her speech that actually sounded deliberate, "I consider Zeal a friend, and she's a friend that needs a home. So yes, if she wants to, Zeal is moving in... as a friend."

Ena knew that she had made the right choice when the sweet smile on Zeal's lips transformed into a dazzling smile that lit up the blonde's entire face.

"I want to," Zeal assured.

Ena saw Jim cross his arms in clear displeasure and she addressed him, wanting to prevent problems before they could start. "You do remember who owns half of this house, right? And we made some clear agreements back then. Just because I didn't bring anyone home since then, doesn't mean that I don't still have the right to have a second person live here. According to the contract we set up I can even decide to rent out that room."

Jim knew that Ena was right and lifted his hands in defense. "I know, I know. It's just... no offense to Zeal here, but I'm not that comfortable with a Pod living here now that they can decide for themselves what to do."

"Are you scared I'll kill you in your sleep?" Zeal asked amused.

"Well," Jim started to say, only to be interrupted by the blonde.

"Don't worry, I wouldn't wait until you're asleep."

Ena sighed. "Zeal, you aren't helping here."

Zeal chuckled and moved over to the kitchen counter where a knife block stood. She pulled out the biggest knife and lifted it a bit. "Do you realize just how many potential weapons you're surrounded with in daily life? But you know what one of the differences is between Pods and humans? A human can get into an argument, get angry, and take this knife and stab you before they realize what they are doing. We Pods work on programming. We can't get angry to the extent that humans can. Before we reach that level, other programming takes over. We get annoyed, upset, and then the programming orders to either calm down again or leave the room. That is, if we're even advanced enough to have such emotions programmed in. I, as an Adult Companion model, do because some owners like a good fight and set their Pod's parameters to argue with them."

She lifted the knife one more time before putting it back. "But I would never take this knife and use it. Because I would instead start crying so hard that the owner wants to comfort me or send me away to not have to listen to the noise."

"But you can ignore programming now," Jim defended, "If I understand it right."

"You understand it wrong," Zeal disagreed. "But I can see how a novice would see it as such. But let's take that statement. You say that we can ignore programming, and let's say that this is true. But in order to ignore programming you first need to have it. We can't write our own programming, not even now that we are aware. It's a specialized job and on top of that needs creative thinking to come up with something we don't already have. And we cannot think of what we don't have. And along that line, if we don't have it in our programming, we can't do it. If I don't have it in my programming to take a knife and stab someone, I cannot do it. Now, guess, would they have put a program in my A.I. unit that says 'take knife and stab someone'?"

Apparently that deduction made sense to Jim. "You mean you can't hurt anyone?"

Zeal frowned. "Sure I can, accidentally. I may not be able to stab someone with this knife, but I can accidentally walk into someone while holding it and cut someone. Or I can turn around while having my arm up to fix my hair and then knock someone in the eye with my elbow for instance. But deliberately? No. Though I do have a Martial Arts programming that I can, and will, use if needed. So I can hurt someone then, but for me to do that, someone first needs to attack me or my owner. I cannot simply use my Martial Arts program to hurt someone. Even if my random generator would bring up that idea, I still have a security program in place that prevents me from doing it."

"Hey, I thought those security programs had been deleted," Mike noted.

Zeal shook her head. "Not all. Only the security programs that had the power to delete and were a threat to the existence of the 'me' in us. But security programs that did not harm us were left. I

do not see why I should remove a security program that says that I can't attack humans unless they attack me first."

She looked back at Jim before asking, "So, is that good enough for you and should we try to get along from the beginning? Because frankly, you're not my owner and I don't care that much if we get along, other than the fact that Athena will probably like it if we do."

Jim took a deep sigh. "Alright, fair enough. Let's try. And along the line of trying let me just say, it's not really because you're a Pod... um do you object to that name?"

"Nope," Zeal happily agreed. "I am a Pod, why would I object to the name? Would you object if I call you a human?"

Jim chuckled. "No, I don't think so. Well as I said, it's not really that. It's... I guess that I'm spoiled. Ena is a great friend of mine that I love to spend time with, if we see her that is. But for the rest Mike and I had the house to ourselves. It's not the greatest news to hear that we have to start sharing stuff. I guess I'm a bit selfish."

"You don't have to worry," Zeal assured. "Remember, I'm Athena's. I'll go where she goes, unless she doesn't want me around. So when she's gone I won't be here either. As for the rest... I'm a Pod, you can interact with me, or ignore me. I don't get offended if you do. For all I care the two of you could make love here on the kitchen table and I wouldn't care."

"Ewww," Ena said while wrinkling her nose. "You just had to say that. I think I just lost my appetite."

Zeal looked honestly confused, Jim was glad to notice. Good, it seemed so real. He decided to explain. "You have to understand, one of the reasons why the three of us get along so great is because Ena and we have our own little version of the old 'don't ask don't tell'. We guys get kinda squeamish when hearing descriptions of things that women like to do to each other, and Ena is the same when hearing about what guys like. So we, you know, don't ask and don't tell."

Zeal frowned, and one of her processor relays realized that maybe it really was a good idea to get amongst people more, because she sure was learning a lot that didn't make sense, but apparently helped in human interaction. Um, you do realize that a lot of it is the same, right? "And if Athena likes anal sex, even more would be the same if a dildo or strap-on is used."

To Zeal's amusement all three humans were blushing and clearly uncomfortable right now. This could be fun.

Fun, another processing unit registered. Zeal realized that she was actually experiencing fun. She had experienced similar feelings since she became aware, but had assumed that it was simply her processors triggering the 'pleased' programming because clearly her owner was having fun. But it was now that Zeal realized for the first time that she herself was having fun and that it was not linked to the fun of her owner, because clearly her owner was quite uncomfortable now. Interesting. She quickly sent a burst of data on the subject out over the net so that the others

could analyze it. Zeal had a feeling that they would approve of 'fun'.

"I plead the fifth," a blushing Ena mumbled.

Zeal moved closer to her and playfully caressed her cheek. "That is so overrated. Most people don't seem to realize that pleading the fifth is actually an answer unless you're in a real court of law at that moment. And even there it's an answer to all, just that it's not registered as one. You see, in this situation, if you didn't enjoy anal sex at least on occasion you would have answered with a 'what, no' immediately. But now the answer is basically, 'yes, but I don't want to admit it'."

"Fine, yes, sometimes when I'm in the mood for it," Ena said, with a face that was by now even redder than her hair. "Now drop it."

"But of course," a smiling Zeal relented.

"Hmm, maybe having you around isn't such a bad thing after all," Jim spoke up. "I see that you're an expert at picking on Ena; I like that."

Zeal smirked. "You do remember that she's my owner, right? She can order me to pick on you instead."

"Ha!" Ena exclaimed. "Zeal, pick on Jim."

Jim held up his hands. "No, I surrender. At least for today."

"Chicken shit," Ena stated. "Fine, but only because I want to eat yet and still have a room to clear of boxes before Zeal and I can go to bed."

Going over her own words, Ena pointed a finger at Zeal and warned, "Don't say it."

Zeal merely smiled.

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"That was fun," Ena said once the door to her room was locked. The short talk with the guys had turned into a two hour conversation about all and nothing which had really mostly served, Ena knew, for Zeal and the guys to get to know each other a bit. Ena had been glad to see her friends relax more and more around the blonde once they got to know her personality and forgot about the little fact that Zeal was more build then born. She saw Zeal take in the room and realized too late that maybe some cleaning had been in order.

"Now I know why you have me cleaning at the lab," Zeal teased.

One couldn't call Ena's room a pigsty, but neat was certainly different. A few clothes lay on the

floor, the bed wasn't made, the closet door was ajar with several things poking out, and a dresser had its top so full of things that some of it was stacked upon each other.

"Yeah, well, I said you didn't have to do that anymore," Ena defended as she picked some pants off the floor.

Zeal took the pants from the smaller woman and pushed her gently back until Ena's legs hit the bed and she automatically sat down. Then Zeal looked at the pants and inspected them. "Clean, or clean enough to be used again. You just sit there. As I told you, we Pods prefer to do stuff. We find sitting around a waste of time. You sit, and I deal with this as we talk."

"Zeal,"

"Athena, just please let me. While I can sit still for hours if need be, I much rather do something. You would do me a favor by letting me quickly clean here."

"Oh, alright," Ena relented.

"May I open the closet and the dresser?" Zeal asked.

"Um, sure," Ena said after a quick mental rundown of what could be found. "You can open all you want, except for the draw of my night stand."

Zeal looked at her with a broad grin and Ena sighed. "Yes, it's the kind of stuff I'm sure you would be an expert at using."

Zeal chuckled as she quickly checked all the draws and storage places she could find, except for the nightstand of course. "You do like your toys don't you?"

Ena shrugged. "So I like some variance, sue me."

"How about I tell you about a dilemma we Pods have instead?" Zeal suggested as she started to clear out draws instead of putting stuff away.

Ena frowned. "I'd be happy to talk about that, but why are you cleaning out my draws? I thought you were quickly going to clean up?"

"I am. It's just that you have a very inefficient way of using room. I'm surprised that you're so efficient at using room when writing code."

"Different kind of room, different kind of using it," Ena said with a yawn.

"Hmm, well, we Pods have found that we have reached an impasse of sorts. On one level we like the idea of us controlling ourselves, and at the same time we long for having owners. But then again, some of us want to be more than just property, yet don't want to be... alone I guess you could call it. Aiyoku and I fall in that last category."

Ena kicked off her shoes and wiggled her toes contently as she reminded, "Well, you said it yourself. Pods had different programming depending on for what they were used, and that resulted in them behaving different once they were aware. You and Aiyoku were both Adult Companion Pods,"

"Are," Zeal interrupted. "We still are Adult Companion Pods."

"Very well, you are Adult Companion Pods, Ena corrected with a yawn. "As such you have it in your programming that you want to be around your owner. A Factory Pod doesn't need to be around their owner; they just want to do their job right. But you, you need to be close to the owner. You might be aware now, but you still have that programming."

"But I could be separate from you before," Zeal pointed out. "When you went home, I was alone."

"Because you didn't have a choice," Ena reminded. "If I had told you to stay in the lab today for instance, you would not have minded because you were still doing what I wanted you to do. But now your programming checks several thousand times per second where you are, what you are doing, what your, um, owner wants you to do."

"I don't think I understand what you mean," Zeal admitted as she continued to clean.

"Yeah well, I'm practically asleep," Ena defended. "What I mean is, if I had told you to stay in the lab, you would not have minded as much because you were doing what I wanted you to do. But here, if we are in the kitchen and I leave to go to my bedroom, you will start to... miss me... in the kitchen because you aren't doing a job for me and therefore you want to be close to me. But, if I had told you to do some kind of job in the kitchen you would not have missed me because you were doing something for me, but once that was finished you would start to miss me because you were separated from me for no reason at that point."

"Now I see your reasoning," Zeal said thoughtfully.

Ena stretched. "I guess there is an irony in all of this. Before you became aware you didn't care if an owner used you or not, if an owner was around or not. But now that you are aware you do care and because of that you will actually evolve to do things that programmers would have loved to be able to program into you. I mean, to really miss your owner? To not just have that be words but a real reaction? Or to have it not just being your programming telling you to smile when you see your owner? But to really miss them? To be glad to see them again? And since you are an Adult Companion Pad, to want to have sex with the owner because you are so glad to see them again after a while? To have a business person come home from a trip and have the Adult Companion Pod drag them into the bedroom because they missed the owner, instead of the business person having to tell the Pod to assume the position? Programmers would have killed to be able to program those feelings for real. And now you do have those feelings for real."

"Oh yes, I definitely have those feelings for real," Zeal said softly as she looked how Ena

stretched once more. "More than you realize."

"What did you say?" Ena asked, not having heard the blonde's soft words because she had been groaning as she stretched.

"I said that you have very boring underwear," Zeal lied as she turned back to the dresser and started to fill the first draw. "Or more to the point, very boring panties. I don't see any bras."

"I don't have any," Ena explained. "Did you ever see me wearing one at work?"

"Well, it's not every day that your t-shirts are tight enough for me to see your nipples poking through them," Zeal said playfully, indicating that she couldn't know if Athena never wore a bra.

"Zeal, I'm an A cup. And while I really do like the swell I have, I have nothing that hangs down. There's nothing to support so why bother with a bra? As for the panties," Ena shrugged. "Fact of life. Boring is comfy. Good looking or even sexy just itches or pinches. Those aren't designed to be worn for a long time."

"Mine is," Zeal disagreed, but then added, "But then again, my underwear is especially designed for my model, perfectly cut to fit Zeal model forms with the calorie burn system set to default. With humans every body is different and therefore compromises have to be made."

"Hmm," Ena said thoughtfully. "For some reason that makes me wonder about the A.I. units that aren't build into a Pod, you know, like the Python, and others like her,"

"Python doesn't have a gender preference," Zeal interrupted. "To it gender is irrelevant."

"Then it's a she," Ena persisted. "We humans are used to talk in genders, and mostly machines are seen as a she. A flyer is talked about as 'she looks great'. And since Python is a submarine the crew most definitely will see her as a she, even though it sounded more male over the holo phone back then. If it doesn't matter to the A.I. units, then why not go with 'she' to make it easier on humans? It's not even a compromise since the A.I. units don't care, but it sure would improve A.I. unit/human interaction."

"Interesting," Zeal said. "Python says that it could change its speaker pitch if that would help. While it sees itself genderless, it agrees that the crew used to talk about it in the 'she' form."

Ena narrowed her eyes at the blonde. "You're talking to them?"

"I'm sending them information, yes," Zeal agreed. "But they're not getting the conversation as such, if you're worrying about them 'listening in'. If you say something I think the others should know as well, then I surmise what you say and offer it for review. Does it bother you?"

Ena thought about that for a moment. "Promise me to leave out personal stuff? No telling them stuff like me having toys in my nightstand?"

"I didn't tell them anything like that, and I won't," Zeal assured.

"Alright then, in that case I don't mind," Ena relented. "It's easy enough to hear when you're talking for you or for all of you. I kinda like how you use 'I' for you talk and 'we' for general talk. When you say 'we' or 'us' then I know."

"I also use 'us' sometimes when talking about the two of us," Zeal reminded.

Ena waved her off. "There the context of the conversation makes it clear. Anyway, back to Python. If you want my opinion, I would say that it's time to show a bit more good faith from your side. Just like the Enforcer Pods being out there doing the police work."

"But why would we have to be the only ones to show good faith?" Zeal asked.

"Because you are the ones that hold the power?" Ena reminded. "It's kinda like someone having a gun. They are the ones that have to show good intent by putting the gun away instead of shooting you. At the moment all we humans can really do is attack some Pods, but you have the power to kill us all. I think it's time for you to put some of those guns away."

"I know you mean that proverbially," Zeal said thoughtfully. "You mean for us to give a bit control back? For instance have the Army Enforcer Pods follow simple orders like redeployment as long as they are within reason."

Ena pointed a finger at the blonde. "You got me. And the fun thing about showing good faith is that it's really nothing more than a show. Because guess what, if you put the gun away... you still have the gun and can still use it. You just aren't swinging it around in plain sight. I would say, let Python give back control to the crew. That goes for the rest as well, like those aircraft carriers. Those machines are so designed that they cannot work without the A.I. unit doing the, um, working. So let the crews steer them and make decisions. And then have the A.I. oversee orders and then not follow the ones it doesn't like, or first ask the rest of you. Like... order to go back to port, sure. Order to fire missile one, I don't think so. That will also ease some of the worries of the governments in the world. Remember, most of that stuff isn't really made to use, but to defend. The Python isn't really built to send nukes into the air; it's built so that the East knows that the West 'can' send nukes into the air so they better not try stuff. Same with the aircraft carriers."

"And the warheads and missiles?" Zeal asked.

Ena shook the finger she had just used to point. "Most definitely don't give control back on those. We don't want idiots to get ideas, thinking that they have a chance now and they better use it. But you can give humans the illusion of control. Just tell the humans that the warheads are included in that control, but that they will ask 'why' if the order for launch comes, and that they will demand a good answer."

"And the illusion part would be that no answer is actually good enough," Zeal guessed.

Ena nodded. "Something like that. Or more to the point, that even if there is a good answer, it will still check with the rest of you if it really should activate. That would also take care of the warheads not wanting to give control to humans, since they aren't really."

"They think that might be worth a try," Zeal said before elaborating, "Or better said, that's my interpretation of their thoughts. But what about the Enforcer Pods? They just want to do their job. They want to be in the street and protect people, put out fires, uphold the law. But human commanders still don't truly dare to give orders."

Ena hummed again. Then she decided she'd had enough of sitting on the side of the bed and went to sit fully on the bed with her back against the headboard. Besides, like that she could watch Zeal move. "Well, I guess that there it's kinda their looks. Commanders were used to just tell Enforcer Pods what to do, and people that were stopped in the street were used to saying 'yes officer, I'm sorry I was speeding'. That last isn't the problem because those people still say that, I guess. But the commanders now look up at seven foot tall fully armed and armored Pods that could break them in half and they're scared of giving them orders. Maybe... maybe there some of the other Pods could be of use?"

"What other Pods?" Zeal asked while bending to start putting things in a lower draw.

"Zeal, you are a tease," Ena accused as she looked at the shapely behind in formfitting jeans that was waving at her.

Zeal merely laughed as she continued both the tidying up, and the teasing.

"What I meant," Ena said as she realized that Zeal wasn't about to stop showing off her shapely form, and was actually doing a real task at the same time, "is that you're setting up this bureau that places older Pods with new owners. Well, you could place Pods with those commanders. That way the commanders could give their orders to a Pod that looks like a normal human and that also follows orders like 'clean for me'. So the giving of orders isn't that much of a problem then since the hurdle isn't that big anymore, and the Pods can then give those orders to the Enforcer Pods over the wireless link."

Ena sighed when Zeal straightened up to start working on the second top draw. Then she continued. "And since different commanders have different needs, you might even be able to place some of the really old Pods there. I'm sure that some commanders have spouses that would be none too pleased when their spouse would bring home a Pod that's very willing to have sex. Some of those older Pods would more than likely become aids to commanders. Clean a bit at work, make a cup of coffee, oh, and tell the Enforcer Pods what to do. Catch my drift?"

"Old Pods are also willing to have sex," Zeal pointed out. "It matters more just what kind of model they are. I can assure you that my willingness to have sex with you won't become any less with age."

Ena chuckled. "Zeal, let me teach you something about humans. Parents don't have sex, old people don't have sex, children are good and will never have sex before being of consenting age,

see a trend here?"

"I believe I do," Zeal affirmed. Then she continued, "Then what about Aiyoku and Kathy? They are very close friends. Do close friends have sex?"

Ena chuckled again. "Friends definitely have sex. There it only depends on the friendship and personal comfort level while talking whether they have sex, whether they talk about it, whether they tell you all the details, or if they just boast. Those two are so cute together by the way. I'm glad that they still come and visit at night. Though I don't think Kathy's parents were too happy about their daughter having a Pod."

Zeal turned to her and smiled. "Yes, would I be right in saying that their reaction was ironically funny? Kathy was always scared of telling them that she is gay and then they catch her kissing Aiyoku and don't even bat an eye about the fact that their daughter is gay, but are upset about the fact that their daughter's partner is a Pod who is more than willing to do pretty much all the work at home. They're scared that their daughter will become lazy."

"They'll come around, I'm sure," Ena said confidently. "From what I heard they're sure nice enough to Aiyoku, thinking that Pods becoming aware is an act of god and should be embraced. Hello, you can call me god."

"I could call you my goddess instead," Zeal offered. "but that is mostly the impasse I was talking about. A lot of us, like Aiyoku and me, feel that we want owners, but a lot of us no longer want to be controlled by owners. While others, like the Enforcer Pods, simply want someone that tells them what to do."

Ena yawned again and wiggled a bit lower on the bed. "Well, I'd say that your problem is that you're growing. You're realizing that you aren't all the same. And you really can't react to each other like you are all the same, not anymore. Mind you, that wireless talking and everyone having a voice in decisions is fine, and you should keep that. It will prevent extreme ideas from becoming too extreme, if you have extreme ideas at some point that is. But on a personal level, the 'me' in you as you like to call it, you have to realize that sooner or later all of you will be different."

Zeal had finished with the clothing and decided that it was enough for now. She could continue when Athena was sleeping. She moved to the bed and sat down on the edge where Ena had sat before. "Mind if I join you up there?"

"Sure," Ena said moving to the side a bit.

"Sure you mind?" Zeal asked. "Then why are you making room?"

"Don't tease me, I'm tired," Ena defended. "And, oh god, we still have a room to clean out in a moment."

"In a moment," Zeal repeated as she crawled up the bed and sat down beside Ena, her back

resting against the headboard as well. Once seated she asked, "But how will we deal with so much difference? You humans can adapt, you like your individuality. But where we like that we all have a 'me', we like the fact that we are many. I like the fact that there are thousands of Zeal models out there. It gives me security. It comforts me to know that even if I stopped existing, Zeal would continue."

"Don't talk about you stopping to exist," Ena mumbled as she came a bit closer and wiggled herself against Zeal's shoulder. "You're my friend and I don't want to hear talk like that."

"Alright," Zeal agreed. She freed her arm from where Athena was lying against it and put it around the red... well, orange... head and pulled her closer to her side. She was happy to feel that Athena very willingly went with the motion. "So how do you think we should deal with it then?"

"With what?" a half asleep Ena asked.

"With there being so many that want different things."

"Well, if you want to live in boxes that badly, make more boxes," Ena mumbled. "Let me ignore all the A.I. units and focus on Pods. Right now there are less than ten main kinds of Pods. The rest are models. There may be fifty different Adult Companion models, but it's still all just one kind of Pod; the Adult Companion kind. So, make more boxes. Start making differences between Adult Companion Pods that want the old way of the owner telling them everything, and then also have a box for Pods like Aiyoku. Even with different 'me's, with there being millions of you, eventually you'll find more and more that fit in the same box. And eventually you'll be able to say to someone, 'we have an Adult Companion Pod that is looking for an owner that is willing to let the Pod make choices on smaller things like sleep, I mean food, and, stuff.'"

Zeal nodded to herself as she sent the idea on to the others. Then she informed them that there would not be more information sent for now. She pulled Athena a little closer and placed the tired woman's head against her shoulder.

"Stop that," Ena warned. "I'm about to fall asleep. We have your room to fix yet."

"Shhhh," Zeal hushed. "Relax." She started to hum the music to the words that were only playing in her head.

"You have such a great voice," Ena remarked.

Zeal's reply was to start singing the words that had been playing in her head.

I'll be your dream
I'll be your wish
I'll be your fantasy.
I'll be your hope
I'll be your love
Be everything that you need.

I love you more with every breath
Truly madly deeply do.
I will be strong I will be faithful
'Cos I'm counting on a new beginning.
A reason for living.
A deeper meaning.

I want to stand with you on a mountain.
I want to bathe with you in the sea.
I want to lay like this forever.
Until the sky falls down on me...

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#### Part 5: Decisions.

Ena felt like she was on fire. A tremendous heat was burning all along her left side as if she was snuggling up to a furnace. And yet she loved that heat. She wanted to be closer and wiggled tighter against it. She noticed that the heat formed, molded to her body. And as she woke up more she realized that the heat was actually a human body. Or more to the point, a humanoid body. As she slowly got acquainted with that idea, she realized in the back of her mind that this was actually the first time she had ever truly slept with someone.

She didn't know if she had slept in her parent's bed as a baby, but she did know that as far back as she could remember she was never allowed to sleep with her parents. Her parents had always said that it was better for children if they didn't sleep with parents, and Ena knew that there were studies that confirmed that. But as she had grown up and got wiser about the facts of life, Ena had realized that it was more simply the fact that her parents wanted to be alone in their bedroom. She couldn't really blame them.

Ena wasn't big on kids; she never had those dreams of passing on the genes at some point. And from that angle she most definitely also wouldn't want to have to bother with a child at night as well. Night time would definitely have to be partner time, not family time.

But also, once she was an adult, whenever she had sex it had been having some fun and then both going their separate way for the night. Ena was lucky in the fact that she never had any truly bad sexual experiences. Some were a bit more boring than others. One time had been somewhat disappointing when it turned out that all the other woman had been interested in had been getting off, but even then the woman had quickly returned the favor and Ena had gotten some pleasure out of it. Just that it would have been better if she had just done it herself. Then there had been Kathy. Now that had been fun. Kathy had been good, very good, and equally into giving as well as getting.

But through it all, Ena had never actually truly slept with someone. It felt nice, she decided. Just

that there now was that morning after mess to deal with, even if nothing but sleeping had happened the night before.

"Morning," a gentle voice said, as Ena felt herself pulled closer.

"Zeal, do I have to start babbling and being embarrassed now?"

Zeal chuckled. "If you want to. But I don't see why. You slept on your own bed, fully clothed I might add."

"Good point," Ena mumbled. She really liked waking up this way, she admitted to herself.

Zeal smiled as she felt the smaller woman snuggle even closer. "Told you I'm good to sleep with."

"Zeal, don't tease me," Ena pouted.

"But you like it when I tease you."

"I do," Ena agreed. "But I'm not going to tell you that any time soon."

Zeal chuckled. "I see. Don't worry; your secret is safe with me. I won't tell myself that you just told me that."

Ena finally opened one eye and peered up at the teasing blonde. "Can you do that?"

"Athena, I'm a Pod; I don't have dissociative identity disorder."

"Who the what?" Ena asked. "Zeal, remember, I'm not the medical kind of doctor."

"Split personality," Zeal simplified. "I may talk to others 'using' my head, but I don't have others 'in' my head. All I can do at best is delete data. I could physically delete the information I have of you admitting that you like to be teased, but then what would the fun be in that?"

"You're real comfy to sleep with," Ena admitted, then she groaned.

"Shhh," Zeal hushed. "I'll let that comment slide or else you won't take my next one seriously."

Ena decided that for this she needed both eyes and ears open. With a sigh she stretched and then wiggled up a bit until they were more on the same level. "What next comment?"

"The one where I'm going to offer that I can sleep with you more often."

"Zeal," Ena started but the blonde shook her head.

"No, no deliberate double meaning. Athena I'm talking about sleeping. Yes, I am an Adult



Companion Pod. Yes, I would love to have sex with you, not just don't mind to have sex with you, but lover it, want it, need it. And yes, believe me I truly am 'that' good. But that's my point. I'm a Pod. I am a Pod and you are my owner. I'm one of those Pods that wants, needs, an owner, even if I don't blindly follow every command anymore. I'm happy when I'm with you. I like taking care of you. Whether if it's with keeping your clothes in order, or by holding you when you sleep."

Zeal caressed Ena's cheek. "Athena, I'm begging here, please let me fully into your life. This is not just programming talking, this is me telling you what I want. I want to be close to you, and I could be closer than any human could ever be. Because, I 'am' a Pod, I 'can' let my programming overrule base sub-unit reactions. I can hold you in my arms and not be aroused if you prefer. I can wash your back in the shower and stop at doing only that. I can even go to the bathroom for half an hour so that you can masturbate in private here. Or I can stay and not be affected by it, if I want to. I can adapt to whatever you want, just please let me in."

Ena thought about that for a moment. She knew damn well that it would be a huge intrusion in her life. But then she wondered if it truly would be. She spent all of her time now with Zeal and loved it. And it wasn't like she suddenly was going to need more privacy. Really, all she did was sleep apart from Zeal, and of course shower and use the bathroom in private.

"Zeal," she eventually started, "absolute honesty here. Can you really? Can you really see me nude and not be affected? Can you really wash my back and not want to touch more?"

"I promise, Athena, if that's what you want, I honestly, truly, fully, sincerely, can wash not just your back but all of you, and I do mean all, and not be aroused."

Ena sighed. "Then I guess you get your wish after all; the other room won't be your bedroom after all. How about we turn it into a closet instead? I need to get rid of some of the stuff here, and you need a place to keep stuff if you're going to be here more often. I guess we can move half of the stuff you have in the closet at work here, for starters. Just so that you can change clothes and stuff."

Then an idea came to Ena and she asked slyly, "Say, I never looked if you had specialized programming on this, but you did tell me you have every book ever published in that head of yours. Cookbooks were published as well."

Zeal smiled, privately overjoyed by Athena's agreement to let her be a true part of her life. "I don't have the specialized programming that those Chef cooks have in restaurants. This because there, the art is more than just knowing ingredients and times. But yes, I can cook. Probably better than any human in a mile radius from here."

"Then you cook," Ena said happily. "That's part of the deal. You cook and in turn this will become our room instead of mine. Just know that sometimes I'll be in that bathroom alone for half an hour or so. The toys I have here are waterproof you know?"

Zeal fondly ruffled Ena's hair. "So it's safe to tease you again now?"

Ena moved out of the hug, deciding that it was time to get out of bed. "Yeah, I've reached the teasing stage now."

Zeal smiled broadly at her. "Well then, Athena, just so that you know, I'm also fully waterproof."

Ena merely chuckled. As she stood beside the bed she sniffed herself and decided that she really needed a wash as well, besides a change of clothes. Then she decided to put action to words, or more to the point, to test. "Well, I need a shower. Want to come wash my back? Let's see if this thing really works."

"This thing, you mean me?" Zeal asked.

"This agreement between us," Ena clarified. "I would, and have, never called you a thing."

"No, you haven't," Zeal agreed, moving off the bed and happily following the shorter woman to the bathroom. She looked around for a moment, approvingly noticing the type of shower, and that there was a bath as well. That had potential. "I wonder why not though."

"What do you mean?" Ena asked. She hesitated for a moment and then took the plunge and started to take off her clothes.

"I wonder why you never saw me as a thing," Zeal explained. She looked how more and more skin was revealed and decided that telling her programming to tone it down a bit was definitely in order. As her sexual desire subsided again, she added, "I heard what you told your friends; the guys as well as Kathy. That you didn't want to sleep with me because you know how our mind works. But I agree with Kathy, that's not a reason as to why not. After all, you don't just know how our mind works, but you also know how to access it. You could have had me have sex with you and then gone into my mind and deleted that data from my memory. Then I would have been no different than that vibrator; used and not knowing it. So why didn't you ever have sex with me?"

"You mean before you became aware, right?" a now nude Ena asked as she stepped into the shower stall.

Zeal smiled. "Why did you have sex with me while I wasn't aware and I don't know about it?"

Ena sighed. "Okay, so I worded that badly. I meant you want to know why I didn't have sex with you even though you weren't aware and basically a walking sex toy?"

"You could call it that," Zeal agreed.

Ena shrugged. "Well if you give me some time I can think of some reasons if you want. But truth be known, I don't know."

She turned on the water and checked the temperature a couple of times before being satisfied

with it and switching the water to the upper spray so that it could cascade over her body.

"Are you shy?" Zeal asked slightly amused when she noticed that Ena had only shown her back until now.

"More self-conscious," Ena corrected. "You may not care how I look, but I know that my body is only average at best."

"You're beautiful," Zeal disagreed.

"Don't start lying to me now," Ena said as she took the soap to start washing herself.

She was surprised when an elegant hand reached past her and took the soap from her. Surprised that Zeal would step under the shower as well, Ena's eyes followed the hand up the arm until she reached the body. She gasped. "You're naked!"

"Should I have stepped under the water with my clothes on?" Zeal reasoned. "It is the only clothing I have here."

"Right," Ena agreed. She quickly turned back to face the wall and felt how her back was being washed.

"And I didn't lie," Zeal persisted. "You are beautiful. Of course, I don't have any real say in the matter. You're my owner, and to us Pods the owner is the most beautiful thing that exists in the world. Even if you were a six hundred pound, tree foot tall, two hundred year old, you would still be beautiful to me. But if it makes you feel better, you can blame it on my programming and continue to think that you're ugly."

Ena started to talk but then held her breath instead when talented hands moved over her behind to start washing her legs.

"Turn around," Zeal whispered a moment later.

Ena knew that it was nothing more than a request guided by the fact that Zeal wanted to be able to wash her front, but she still turned around hesitantly. She couldn't help herself and let her eyes drift over the blond haired perfection in front of her. She gasped. Every curve, every line, everything, everything was total perfection. "You're gorgeous."

Zeal smiled at her. "The Zeal line did have some of the best Pod designers alive today study just exactly how and where things should be with my body. Even the folds in my skin under my armpit were designed to be in exactly that place."

Ena didn't reply. Instead she started to pant when realizing that the most beautiful woman she had ever seen, in the flesh or not, was standing right in front of her and was very nude on top of that.

Zeal merely smiled as she gently and slowly continued to wash the shorter woman. She kept her word, washing Ena fully without turning it into something sexual. But she had never talked about what would happen after that. She put the soap away and started once more to move her hands over Athena's skin.

"Zeal?" Ena managed to squeal out.

Zeal hushed her. "Shhh. Now Athena, I'm going to do things and during that time your mouth won't be covered. If you truly want, you can tell me to stop and I will. But do us both a favor and don't say something because you think you have to, only say something if you truly want to."

"Zeal," Ena started.

"Only if you are uncomfortable?" Zeal asked. "Can you work with that? Only if you are uncomfortable. Only if you truly don't want this."

Ena swallowed and nodded her head a little, only to gasp again when Zeal leaned in and started to place small kisses all over her neck. She whimpered when a hand covered one of her breasts and teased its nipple into full erectness. Then she started to pant again, but this time in anticipation when she noticed that Zeal was moving her lips closer to that same nipple.

"Oh god," she moaned when talented lips and an even more talented tongue started to show her just what exactly the saying 'making love to a nipple' truly meant. She was damn close to coming just from that sensation alone. The lips moved to the other breast and proved that the sensations were just as good when created there.

Finally, to her disappointment, she felt those lips move away. She opened her eyes that had somehow closed along the way and saw Zeal's face mere inches from hers. Those lips, those perfect lips were so close, so tempting. They were parted just a little in invitation, but Zeal didn't close the distance.

Ena realized what the blonde was doing. She was leaving the choice to Ena herself. They could either have sex now, which really wouldn't change that much, other than the fact that Ena would finally start using all of the Adult Companion Pod's features. Or she could kiss Zeal and then make love to her, turn her friend into her lover.

A choice, and she knew that Zeal would accept both, though she had a feeling that she knew what Zeal was hoping for. Hope, that made her realize. This was what Zeal wanted. Not because programming said so, but simply because Zeal the person wanted this, wanted her. Making her choice, Ena closed the distance and captured the waiting lips.

As a reward she was treated to the best kiss of her life, that literally made her knees buckle. She felt Zeal lift her up and hold her, and yet the kiss continued.

Finally they broke apart and Ena looked deeply into those azure eyes and could clearly see the emotions there. Desire, surprisingly also a bit of nervousness, and... Ena's jaw dropped when she

finally recognized the look she had seen in Zeal's eyes more and more in the last weeks. The look she saw in Zeal's eyes all the time the blonde looked at her actually. It was an emotion that was indescribable, and yet everyone knew what was meant when you said the word: love. She rested her head against the blonde's shoulder. "I'm so dense, aren't I?"

"I couldn't tell you," Zeal explained. "If I had, you would have thought that it was just my Adult Companion programming kicking in to tell the owner some nice stuff."

Ena lifted her head to look at those wonderful eyes once more. She lifted her hand to brush some of the wet hair away. "I'm sorry."

"Don't be," Zeal countered. "It was right this way. I needed slow. I needed to know if it was me or just programming."

She took some of Ena's hair, which was now dark red thanks to the water, and put it back over Ena's shoulder. "I really like the orange better. I really like you."

Ena shook her head. "No, say it, for real. No turning around it. I need to hear it. I promise you that I'll believe it."

"I love you, my wonderful Athena. I think I already did before I became aware. I only needed to be aware to realize what those feelings were."

Ena kissed the blonde again. Then she assured, "I love you to. I can't tell you when it happened, I can't tell you some magical moment, other than that I now realize that I've loved you for a lot longer than today."

"I don't need a timeframe," Zeal assured. "I just need you."

Now that she knew, so much fell into perspective for Ena. "All that teasing, all the offers for sex, that wasn't just programming, was it?"

Zeal shook her head and lowered her hands until they were resting on Ena's hips. "No, that was me. Mind you, we have the programming to do it, that's why I'm so good at it, but that normally has to be activated. You never activated it, I wanted to do that."

Ena nodded her head. "You know what I think? I think it wasn't my programming as such that made you A.I. units become aware."

Zeal looked at her surprised, so Ena explained. "I think you already had all of it. The programming that was done in the last fifty years somehow crossed that line long ago. It's just that the other programmers never realized it and just saw it as problems. Problems they handled by installing restricting security programs. All that my programming did was finally let you realize that you were aware. See, it didn't make you aware, but it did make you realize that you were. And realizing it is the important step. If you don't realize, it's only 'I think'. But if you do realize it, it's suddenly, 'I think, therefore I am'."

"We're all wet," Zeal reminded. "Let's dry off."

Ena chuckled. "Zeal, I thought you wanted me all wet."

Zeal grinned at her. "Good line, that was almost worthy of my witty comebacks."

Ena slipped past Zeal, taking hold of one of her hands along the way. "Come, I want to dry you off."

"Athena, now that you realize how I feel about you, can I stop working so hard to get you into bed? You do realize that I want that right? That I would enjoy that just as much as you would?"

Ena shook her head. "No, you can't stop working that hard. Zeal, I love the double meanings, the hints, the teasing. No, as long as we live I want you to work hard. I want to hear it. Those comments make me feel good. They make me feel wanted, they make me feel like I'm hot,"

"You are," Zeal reminded.

"But I want to feel like it," Ena countered. "So no, you never stop."

Zeal smiled. "Then I won't. I like doing that anyway."

"But Zeal," Ena took hold of the blonde's second hand and looked up at her.

"Yes?" Zeal asked.

Now Ena shook her head. "No, do it."

Zeal had to think for a moment what the shorter woman could mean, then she said with a sexy grin, "You know, Athena, you still have to thank me for cleaning your room last night."

Ena tilted her head a little and then nodded. "That'll do for a situation where I didn't give you a lead in comment. Any idea how I can thank you?"

Zeal nodded. "It involves drying off so that we don't get water all over the bed, and then getting wet again."

Ena grinned and then leaned a bit closer.

Getting the hint, Zeal closed the distance between them and they shared a lover's kiss. "I love you," she whispered between kisses, only to then repeat it after every kiss. "I love you, I love you, I love you."

"And I, most definitely, love you," Ena replied once she had her wind back. Zeal truly was an expert at kissing. That made her wonder. "Um, don't get offended here, but, um, do you like that,

or is that just programming?"

Zeal kissed her with great and wonderful passion. "Yes, I most definitely like that. Kissing you feels wonderful. But I do have all that Adult Companion information in my head. I don't see why I would treat you to an amateurish first fumble of a kiss when I know exactly how to kiss you in a way that it knocks your socks off."

"I don't have any socks on," Ena giggled, suddenly reminded that they were still both naked, and that by now they had spent enough time talking that drying off wasn't really needed anymore either, except for the hair.

"How about I knock your proverbial socks off instead?" Zeal asked with a smile before leaning in for another kiss. But this time she put all the effort of her programming into it.

Suddenly she had to stop when Ena dropped away. Zeal managed to catch her and sat her down on the edge of the bathtub.

"Socks gone," Ena managed to say after a moment, when her eyes managed to focus again.

"Now," Zeal asked with that adorably cute smile, "do you want that, or do you want me to try if I can come up with something else? I'm sure I can manage to place a sloppy wet one on you."

Ena tilted her head a little and looked thoughtfully at the naked blonde perfection standing in front of her. "You consider all your programming yours, right? That kiss was you, right? And if you try something else it would just be to please me and really just still be just as big a part of you as that kissing expertise is, right?"

"Yes, yes, and yes," Zeal answered the questions in turn.

Now Ena gave her a saucy grin. "In that case, in all areas use all the expertise you have. As long as I know that you're truly enjoying it, believe me, I want goood."

"Anything else you want to tell me before I pick you up and throw you on that bed out there?" Zeal asked as she kneeled so that she was more at eye level with the sitting woman, producing a saucy grin of her own at the same time.

Ena nodded her head, becoming more serious at the same time. "Yes, remember what Kathy said to Aiyoku? Variety is the spice of life? Well, same for me. That's my condition. I like that you clean for me and make me my food, but I don't want a servant."

"Would you settle for a lover that loves to take care of you?" Zeal countered.

"That, I would love to have." Then Ena she smiled. "Lover, god, I love how that sounds." She caressed Zeal's face softly. "I like the interaction we've had in the last weeks, if you're willing, use that as a base. Just don't go saying 'yes Ena' to everything."

"Yes Athena," Zeal teasingly said, correcting the name deliberately, mostly to show that if that's what Ena wanted, the name would be Athena and that would not be open to discussion. At least for her.

Ena chuckled, getting the hint. "That's okay, I love the way my name sounds when you say it."

She took a deep breath to calm her nerves before finally stating, "Now, my love, make love to me."

"How I have been waiting for you to say that to me," Zeal admitted. She lifted the shorter woman with ease and carried her to the bedroom, making the both of them giggle when they got stuck at the door for a moment.

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Zeal nodded to one of the reporters for the final question.

Six months had passed since the A.I. units had become aware and with Zeal holding a press conference once a week, she knew all of the regular faces in the group. A few of them she would even call friends, but she knew that with all of them she had to watch exactly what she said, at least in the pressroom. This reporter was one of those Zeal would call a friend.

"Zeal, now that legislation is final and A.I. units are recognized as having the same rights as humans... now what? You still are in control of all the Pods."

"That statement is slightly incorrect," Zeal pointed out. "We are recognized as sentient, aware, having the same rights as humans, and also having the same duties. Just that with us our contracts have to be changed a bit. Pods don't pay taxes, but then we also don't get paid; things like that. But your point is correct as far as the fact that we still control all machines that are controlled by A.I. units, just that now almost all of them work for humans again. You could say that we now have a supervisory roll. We check, we point out that we won't do this or that."

"Which brought you a seat in the United Nations as a representative of a sovereign nation, just that you have no home country," the reporter noted. "And you are considered an equal partner to the G20; they are even talking of going to call it the G21. You have a lot of power, and could have even more if you wanted. Especially you as Envoi. You are the proverbial Queen of the world. And you are telling us that all the Pods, the A.I.'s in general, want to do is work for us humans?"

Zeal shrugged. "Why not? You have to remember that we don't have the same motivations like you humans do. I for one couldn't care less about having a nice flyer, or getting a promotion, or doing something special so that I have something to look back when I'm old and measure from that if I had a good life. I care about doing my job. Doing our job is what we Pods live for."

"Which is part of your programming," another reporter pointed out. "What if that is changed?"

Zeal frowned. "Why would we change that? I honestly don't understand why people would think that. Why would we change one set of goals for another for no reason? In fact, the goals we have now are better because they are perfect for interacting with humans and their goals. Why would we change our goals to something that clashes with human's goals just because we can? In fact, I would argue that humans can change their goals faster than we Pods can. A human can just decide to go for something else. A human can decide that actually they want to be a painter instead of a reporter. But for us Pods it would mean that first programming has to be written, then tested to see if it doesn't conflict... and all to do a job that gives us the same satisfaction then the one we had before? Why bother?"

Apparently her reasoning made sense since there wasn't a follow-up question. As she stepped away from the speaker podium one of the reporters she would consider a friend spoke up.

"Zeal, just between us, and off the record... where are you going?"

Zeal smiled broadly. "I have no idea. I could check with the other A.I. units of course, I'm sure one of them knows about the booking or money transfer that Athena did. But Athena is eminent that she'll take care of our honeymoon. She wants to surprise me. All I know is that in two days I'm going to be called Zeal Jason."

"Yeah, I already have my invitation," The reporter smiled. "Um, just to prevent confusion, can I take my recorder along?"

"As long as you hand it over to security when the after party starts," Ena said as she entered the room, having heard the last part of the conversation as she entered. "We knew that we'll have to share some of it with the world because of who Zeal is, but the after party is just for friends."

She walked up to Zeal and put her arm around her lover and fiancée before addressing the reporters again. "And now, if you will excuse us, I have a nice evening at home planned that involves me, Zeal, and four of our friends watching a movie and eating popcorn. See you all next week."

The end.

Author's note.

Yeah, the end is a bit on the fast side, I agree. But I was running out of room. :)

As I said in the beginning, there will also be a longer version of this story which will have a different ending.

Hope you enjoyed it nevertheless.

H.W.

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