



The future of sex and relationships.

**23rd
Century
Romance**
Jake Hartnell

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For those who can't read binary, the above
reads:

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We have developed speed but we have shut ourselves in: machinery that gives abundance has left us in want. Our knowledge has made us cynical, our cleverness hard and unkind. We think too much and feel too little: more than machinery we need humanity; more than cleverness we need kindness and gentleness.

Without these qualities, life will be violent and all will be lost.

-Charlie Chaplin

Chapter 1: Contrast

Under a lamp labeled "Sunshine" in large sunny letters slept an old cat with a neon yellow tail. It lay, curled up in a tight ball on a red vinyl sofa, in some green windowless room, and was blissfully content; not having existential thoughts, or giving a single damn that the rays it was soaking up weren't those of the real sun.

Firefly—for that was its name—had never known the real sun.

Next to the cat sat Rai Jones, *dreaming*.

He was tall and thin, wearing a bleached white t-shirt that made his skinny arms look tan even though he hadn't seen the sun for a month. Atop his neatly parted dark-brown hair gleamed a plastic crown with electric green lights for jewels. Kingly, elegant, pure white, it made him appear to be a sleeping prince.

"I like you, I really like you, but you're a Nazi," mumbled Rai.

The cat slumbered contently under the warm light lamp, but Rai lay with his mind elsewhere. Swing music wove through his dreams, drifting softly from a jukebox in the back of a room.

Voices hummed in the background amidst the clinks and scratches of silverware on plates.

A sensual female voice spoke to him with a soft German accent.

"Are you being sarcastic, dear patriot? When the fate of all that is good rests in your hands?"

"No, I'm never sarcastic," he said, sarcastically. "I mean everything I say."

"But you don't mean *that*."

His eyes were closed, but colors still danced in front of them. Swirls of feeling and sensation swept through his brain like storm clouds depositing electric rain, the cool droplets seeping into his consciousness...

This feeling.

He was sitting in a diner.

The virtual Rai had his sleeves rolled up to reveal forearms corded with strong rugged muscle. A large Colt 45 rested in the holster on his belt; a fedora lay cocked on his handsome head. Past a bottle of Heinz ketchup and salt and pepper in trendy 1950s shakers sat the apex of Aryan women: A striking blonde with massive tits and blue eyes. A Nazi pin glimmered at him from one of the straps of her red dress.

He grinned at her, reaching into the pocket of his brown leather vest for a cigarette, ignoring the

blinking yellow text in the center of his field of vision that read:

TELL BLONDËR GEMÏSCHT YOU LOVE HER.

"Truth be told..." He fumbled in another pocket for his lighter, but she beat him to it. He leaned forward to receive the flame, and blew a spectacular smoke ring in her face. "Truth be told, I don't mind that you're a Nazi because you're not *really* a Nazi. You're just playing at one."

"I beg your pardon?" she asked, surprised. "I am a Nazi!" She shook her healthy bosom at him, flashing her gleaming swastika-stamped pin in the process.

"You're *really* an iDoll, and I'm *really* sitting on my couch in my room, probably drooling all over myself."

She shook her gorgeous blonde head.

"Oh, you think you're so clever, breaking the fourth wall."

"Standard response, but if I keep pursuing this line of inquiry, you will break. All artificial intelligence is ultimately *artificial*."

He took a drag of his cigarette.

"Anyway, just because you're a Nazi computer program, doesn't mean that I don't want to stick my virtual penis in you. After all, it's part of the mission."

"Oooh, what's this *mission* you speak of?" she asked, a hint of flirtation in her voice.

He found this sort of thing amusing, toying with "her."

"My dear Blonde Nazi Babe, what do you think is the meaning of life?"

Her eyes rolled up into her head.

"I'm bored!" she scoffed loudly.

Can computer programs even be bored?

A couple of Nazi soldiers looked over from a nearby counter. Rai avoided their gaze.

Her voice shrank to a whisper, and their eyes locked. "American. . . do you just want to chat aimlessly, or are you going to fuck my brains out?"

"In due time. The truth is, I'm bored too."

This was what his life had come to, confessing his inner thoughts to machines so they could be reflected right back at him. It was best to get on with the mission. She had information that he needed to seduce out of her.

He took another drag of the cigarette and changed his tone.

"I've been thinking about something..."

"What?"

Rai lowered his voice, and spoke in the most "romantic" tone he could muster: oozing with sex, virility, and pseudoextravagance. He told her he

didn't care about politics, or the Occupation, or the Patriot Rebellion. None of that was important to him—only *her*.

"I love you, your eyes, your golden hair, silky skin... and your swastika..." He reached across the table and took her hand in his. The lighting in the room dimmed slightly as the lamp over their table grew brighter and warmer, drawing focus to the scene. The air around them shimmered.

"I don't know what to say."

She spoke softly, as if she had completely forgotten all trace of their previous conversation.

He leaned across the table and whispered, "*Say, I want to suck your schnitzel.*"

"I want to suck your schnitzel," she repeated, blushing readily.

Everything was back on script. He leaned across the table and their lips softly touched and parted.

Their eyes met and they kissed again.

He slid in a bit of tongue and she sucked on it and pushed her face eagerly into his, her blue eyes brimming with passion.

He stroked her ear.

She reached under the table and touched him as she broke from his mouth.

"I want to suck your schnitzel, *now.*"

When they locked the door of the ladies room, she pressed him against the cold tiled wall with the force of her kisses and reached down to undo his pants.

If only this actually happened, thought Rai. Then her tiny mouth found his monster, and the thought was sucked away.

He helped her out of her dress, practically tore it from her, and watched in the mirror as he wrapped his large digital hands around her even larger digital breasts.

“Oh God,” mumbled the real Rai, back in his windowless room. Breathing heavily, his body paralyzed with pleasure, he trembled and sweated.

The old cat woke as Rai began to *really* enjoy himself.

“I’m ready for a change.”

Rai gazed into his grimy bathroom mirror.

His real self peered back at him: a pale skinny geek wearing a high-collared starched white shirt and a black tie with skulls on it. His handsome (*enough?*) face was framed by dark hair parted

slickly to the side, and marked by intelligent brown eyes—eyes peering over a pair of elegant electronic glasses perched on the bridge of his nose.

His quiet and homely mother had been half Japanese, but it hardly showed—he looked like his father.

I have that bastard's nose.

"Well, I can tell you things are going to change," said a deep voice on the other end of a line that only Rai could hear.

Rai pushed up the electric glasses—AUGs, short for *Augmented Universe Glasses*—so that they obscured his eyes in the reflection. He spoke in a voice at once sarcastic and self-deprecating.

"Last night, I was fighting to save the world from Nazi domination. And today, I'm going to go to work and clean cum out of space pods. I'm bored of it, I want something interesting to happen, to be swept off on a real-life adventure... or sexcapade."

He heard laughter.

Rai frowned as the voice in his mind spoke again.

"That's rich coming from a virgin."

"What do you mean?" Rai retorted. "You're a virgin too!"

"Yeah, well I don't care about having real sex now, do I?"

Rai could almost feel the sly grin over the line.

"Anyway, breakfast (a.k.a. human interaction), five minutes. Be there, *Robodick*."

The connection terminated with a click.

Rai looked at his reflection and lowered his shades again so that he could have one last chance to give the mirror his best existential glance over the rims.

If you don't know what you want, how can you ever find it?

Firefly jumped onto the bathroom counter and meowed. Rai scratched it behind the ears, and turned on the cold water from the faucet. The cat padded warily around the edge of the sink, lapping inefficiently at the wavering stream of water.

Its neon yellow tail was tattered like the rest of its mostly black fur.

Even genetically-engineered cats get old.

On his AUGs, he looked at himself from a camera in the corner of the room, and slowly watched himself turn.

The person he saw wasn't him.

He wasn't *virtual Rai*.

He was merely human.

Mostly, he couldn't help but wonder at the transience of it all.

From "battling" Nazis to breakfast...

The center room of their apartment functioned as a kitchen, living room, and dining room, all rolled into one. It was painted bright orange, well-lit to make up for the lack of sunlight, and remarkably well-furnished.

A beautiful hand-carved set of wooden chairs sat in the dining room with a matching cherrywood dining table imported from the same carpenter in France. Distinctly echoing a *Romantic Sentiment™*, it had cost a small fortune. Rai had marveled at the fact that Morph, his roommate who hardly ever left the comforts of Virtual, had insisted on redesigning their living room, buying the best furniture and paying the entire expense himself.

Rai sat at the table facing Morph's door and waited. Firefly sat contently in his lap, purring while Rai stroked its bioluminescent tail.

"You're getting old," he said, as the cat rubbed his face against his hand.

In front of him sat two steaming plastic trays of some greasy bacon-flavored protein strips fresh from the food printer, and two cups of coffee. He

took a sip of his coffee and ran an idle finger over the beautiful wood grain of the table.

Perhaps it makes the transition easier?

“Konichiwa.”

Morph stood in the doorway with his hands on his hips, as if waiting for his theme music. He wore a tight red leather trench coat, along with spike-laced gloves, black leather pants, and a bullet-studded belt. Big and bearded, his long, dirty-blond hair was tied in a ponytail and shaded AUGs obscured his eyes. He was a cyberpunk warrior with a belly.

More to love.

Rai poured two glasses of milk from a hand-carved wooden pitcher and raised an eyebrow.

Morph spent a lot of time in Virtual, fucked in Virtual, and virtually never left the narrow confines of the apartment. Rai had not the slightest clue how Morph had the money to pay for all the expensive furniture that cluttered their apartment. He assumed Morph worked in Virtual. Indeed, on the back of Morph’s neck rested a port where he had surgically installed a cybernetic implant into his cerebral cortex. Only the most hardcore citizens of Virtual opted to do so, as remote electromagnetic brain stimulation was nearly as good and *much* easier to upgrade.

Morph sat opposite Rai and began to taunt him in his deep, intense voice.

"So today is the Big Day, huh? The day in which you will confirm, once and for all, your human-sexuality! But how did you spend your *night*? By interrogating a Nazi spy *with your penis*! My God, the irony!"

He laughed a deep belly laugh.

"You're just jealous of the three-hour-long love sessions of *real sex* I'm going to be having soon," said Rai.

Morph struck back.

"Seriously, three hour love sessions? Haven't you ever read a book? Real sex only lasts like four minutes."

"Have you ever read a science book?" Rai jeered indignantly. "There's this thing called 'evolution,' it's based on the ability to pass down your genes. And as far as I'm aware, Robo-Sexual software-lovers like yourself haven't managed to find a way to reproduce yet. I guess you don't have all the required hardware."

Morph stared off into his AUGs as if he wasn't listening to a word of what Rai was saying. He picked up a protein strip, took a bite, and began to chew it in a sort of doggish manner.

"Are you listening? Or are you being moody and giving me the silent treatment?"

"No, I'm all eyes and ears..." said Morph, his mouth full of artificial bacon.

He swallowed and took off his glasses for dramatic effect, revealing the big blue expressive eyes that Rai seldom saw. His deep voice was mixed with conviction and playfulness. "We've been through this before: I'm R-Sexual because real women are less... what's the word? 'Womanly' than virtual women. There are loads of benefits to my lifestyle: unlimited sex, unconditional love, beauty, big tits, lack of heartbreak, constant novelty. All of which suits my personal philosophy of smelling the roses—along with that wonderful perfume between her two perfect breasts."

"There is no such thing as perfect breasts," Rai retorted.

Morph ignored him. "So yeah, unless someone chooses my sperm at the local bank, I won't reproduce—but I'm okay with that. The secret to life is accepting and being comfortable with what you have and who you are!"

"Okay," said Rai, raising his glass of milk in a mock toast, "to each his own."

"I find it oddly amusing that you are a closet R-Sexual," added Morph with a grin, tearing into his protein strip with his teeth.

"Har. Har. Har." Rai laughed, dryly and slowly. "I guess everyone is a *little* R-Sexual these days..."

"Glad that you finally admit it!" Morph roared with food in his mouth.

Rai shrugged.

"Some people are R-Sexual because they don't have a choice. However, I've always thought of love as between *two human beings*..."

Morph threw his finger in the air as if to argue back, but let out a magnificent belch instead.

Rai continued. "I know you're going to say that I 'love' my cat and that my cat 'loves' me, but love is a vague word. The fact is, there is something warm and genuine in human relationships that—in my opinion—no AI can ever capture."

Even though he said it, he wasn't sure if he believed it. When he occasionally felt really lonely, he hoped that a real relationship could save him. It was his solace, that there was something real, genuine, and good out there in the wide world, and that he could find that something. Yet there was another, more cynical part of him, that wouldn't let him speak of this hope without some measure of sarcastic irony.

"Awwwww. Such a romantic... that's adorable."

"I'm not a romantic. I'm a realist."

Morph stood up from the table and put his AUGs back on.

"Well, then, Mr. Realist. You'll have to excuse me. I'm going back to my room to have a three-hour-long love session with an entire locker-room full of 18-year-old girls."

Rai rolled his eyes.

"Plugging and playing, huh?"

Morph shuffled away from the table.

"Wait, you're leaving?"

Morph opened the oak door to his room, and turned. "I've got *business*, and FYI: the *Revolution™* is coming! Stay tuned!"

He winked, and slammed the door.

"Thanks for the heads up, Mr. Full-of-shit!"

He finished his coffee alone, all the while pondering how strange his best friend was.

Revolution™?

The world around him stretched and flashed before his eyes. Above each store blared sales and video advertisements.

Ads upon ads upon ads...

He shut them out with his mind.

The street bustled with people. Joggers rushed past, their bodies covered with sensors. Cosplayers paraded around with strange

accessories and masks, some to protect their identity, others to *play* with it.

All of them were isolated in their own little worlds, their eyes obscured by shaded lenses, affording a small degree of privacy in a world where everyone was recording everything.

Many ambled around aimlessly, encompassed in their private sonic universe, talking animatedly to themselves, detached from their surroundings.

"I don't understand why we never have sex in reality anymore!" shouted a fat woman with bags of skin swaying under her arms.

Oblivious.

Rai smiled. He liked to walk down the streets with the ads off; he could watch people and observe how bizarre and ridiculous life was.

Or at least, that's what he told himself. Mostly, real women interested him more than the adverts.

He gazed at the women that walked by, his voyeurism obscured by the shades. Some were dressed in costumes that emulated their virtual identities, but still came off looking like pathetic imitations of the goddesses they masqueraded as in Virtual. There were many fat ones, but also a few pallid skeletons that walked around on what appeared to be twigs for legs—symptoms of a world where people spent a great amount of time in a motionless state. Indeed, many looked weak,

having participated in the “sleeping diet” fad, whereby, distracted in Virtual, they didn’t eat or move until their muscles had begun to atrophy and the pounds melted away.

Rai dreamed of meeting a beautiful girl and talking to her, but knew it was impossible. What did he expect? For some fine female to walk past and trip, only to fall gracefully into his ready arms?

Probably wouldn’t be strong enough to support her, anyways.

What would he do if he saw the perfect woman?

Probably just look.

Lack of confidence?

That’s why I’m a virgin.

He sometimes thought of going to the bars and getting drunk enough to have real sex with a stranger. But the romantic side of him always intended his first real sexual experience to be special; with someone he loved, not some computer or alcohol-mediated virginity-eliminating sexual liaison with a complete stranger.

It’s amazing that in spite of all our technological progress we’re still miserable when it comes to something as fundamental as relationships.

Smiling at the cleverness of his last thought, he saw her.

He stopped walking.

In a coffee shop window sat a beautiful girl with short purple hair and violet eyes that weren't hidden behind shaded AUGs. Her attire consisted of bright neon-colored fabrics and tall black leather boots. As she sat in the window reading her book, the light seemed to attach itself to her. She looked up at him.

My god, she's perfect.

Somehow he felt she knew he was staring at her, though his eyes were obscured by his glasses. He slightly turned his head as if he had been contemplating going into the shop. He stole one last glance and hurried away, replaying on the encounter on the rims of his glasses over and over on his way to work.

What could I do? You can't simply approach someone and start talking to them...only crazy people do that.

Rai hurried through a hall lit by plastic chandeliers and lined with red carpet that led to a small, ornately-carved plastic "oak" door—the staff entrance. A knight in highly polished armor stood beside and shook its automated head as Rai approached.

"Five minutes late," it chimed in a synthesized voice. "This is your second warning. Have a nice day."

Fuck.

The door opened automatically.

Inside, Rai entered what looked like the innards of a huge spaceship. The cavernous room was a mass of metal, electronics, and glowing blue tanks. Human-like shapes hovered in the neon waters of space pods, unconscious bodies floating in their separate tanks.

Rai turned left towards a red closet marked with bold white lettering.

ALL BATH HAUS STAFF MUST HAVE A LIFE PRESERVER WITH THEM AT ALL TIMES IN THE TANK ROOM.

Rai opened the door, grabbed a life preserver off the rack, and slung it over his shoulder. He turned, only to be confronted by a gaunt figure striding towards him.

Gray and haggard. His boss waved at him.

"Leon. How's life?"

"Well," said Leon with a well-rehearsed quip, "There's a balance to the universe. I am just the counterbalance to the lucky guy who gets all the pussy he wants—but hey, somebody's got to take the fall!"

Leon laughed, but didn't seem happy. He always sounded depressed under his humor, as if he was tired of reusing the same lines over and over again. He had been at the Bath Haus for 17 years and worked his way up to being a manager. In the four months Rai had been employed, Leon had been kind to him—but Rai also found him to be very political, and often stressed.

"Has it been busy?"

"God yes, for some reason the place is filled with 13-year-old boys clamoring to lose their virtual virginity."

"Great."

"Just think, there was once a day when people didn't have toilets, let alone digital sex. We should be thankful we live in the modern age!" Leon laughed, giving Rai a pat on the shoulder. His smile faded to a frown.

"Walk with me."

They strode silently through rows and rows of space pods, past the many clients on their holidays of the mind.

Leon seemed more depressed and stressed than usual.

They passed Blane, draining a tank somebody had shit themselves in earlier. His face was thin, his teeth filed to sharp points that made him look

like a shark with black thick-rimmed glasses and spiky green hair. A tattoo on his arm showed a naked woman with a knife stuck through the palm of her hand, screaming in orgasmic pain. He gave them his signature razor-tooth grin.

Always smiling.

"Blane! Long sleeves!" Leon shouted. "It's part of *your* uniform! Also, staff room! Fifteen minutes! Be there! We're going to have a little health and safety meeting... just some government forms to fill out so you don't lose your job to an iDoll!"

Blane smirked.

Leon hated Blane.

Blane was a Mazo. His fetish was sexual violence: virtual rape, sadistic sex—a lifestyle only possible in a world with no physical or moral limits. It was common knowledge at work. Blane was surprisingly nice, but his openness about his fetish and his constant shark-like smile put many employees off. A few thought he shouldn't even have been working at the Bath Haus. The only reason he had a job they said was that he knew someone who knew someone very important at corporate.

"A meeting?" asked Rai when finally moved on. He noticed Yinn, one of the ticket girls, flit past in her grey front-desk uniform.

She's cute.

"Yep," answered Leon, who suddenly took interest in an empty pod that had been drained for cleaning.

A robot sat inside polishing the glass with spinning arms. It looked at them inquiringly. Leon complained that it had "missed a spot." The robot apologized and began to wash the perfectly clean area Leon had indicated for the second time.

"Can't think for themselves," muttered Leon looking sour.

"What's wrong?"

Leon paused a moment, staring down at the floor. He sighed.

"The Company sent out a letter, there is going to be another round of *automation*."

"What?!" cried Rai, hoping he hadn't heard Leon correctly. "Aren't there laws against that? Companies have to employ a certain number of humans."

"Yeah, but they've figured out some way to justify it." Leon shook his head in disbelief.

"Listen, I don't really know what's going on, I just wanted to give you a heads-up. Remember, anyone who is not delivering 'World-Class Customer Service' is going to be deemed 'replaceable.' This will be measured by your customer ratings. Surely I don't need to remind

you that yours are merely average, or that everything you say and do at this job *is recorded*. My advice: kiss more ass, and don't be five minutes late again. More importantly, watch your mouth, because let's be honest, you are one sarcastic fuck, and some people don't appreciate it as much as I do."

He met Rai's brown eyes with his own dark ones. His voice was filled with a hint of sadness rather than anger.

"The managers are going to visit a week from now and they're going to be looking to make severe efficiency savings. Everyone who *can* be replaced by a robot, *will* be."

Rai felt as if he had already lost his job—and he had just gotten it. He nodded, and thanked Leon for the warning.

"It was no problem..." said Leon, shaking his head.

With a tired voice he added, "I'm going to give the bad news to the others in 15 minutes." He paused before adding with his hollow laugh, "It's a great fucking day!"

Replaceable.

Worthless.

Soon to be unemployed.

He hated being a dream-tech at The Bath Haus, and yet now that he faced being released, he felt differently.

His average customer review rating was three and a half stars, dangerously close to average thanks to a particularly negative review he had received two weeks before.

Some fat teenage boy had accidentally shit in his cybersuit while in the tank. It had to be drained, and the boy had to be re-suited, and cleaned. And what made matters worse was the mother who had dropped the brat off.

"It's not my problem," she had said, "You should have made sure he didn't have to shit before you put him in."

Rai had smiled and said, "We provide an experience that feels more real than real life. That's what we do. We do not teach 17-year-old boys not to shit in their pants."

He received a zero-star rating for that—a rating that would reside permanently on his work record for the rest of his life.

They had forced him to re-watch the video transcripts of those moments. The boy had stood there completely shamefaced as Rai listened to the woman get offended at his inappropriate comment, demanding to speak with a manager.

Somehow, he felt sorry for the kid and his fat, ignorant cow of a mother.

That's a fatist thing to think. Regardless, it wasn't the nicest thing I ever said.

Rai wished the rating system took into account his ratings of the customer, but that was against the golden rule of 'World-Class Customer Service.'

Maybe being automated wouldn't be such a bad thing after all.

The meeting Leon had announced was filled with bad news, and boring pro-company propaganda. When it ended, he was given one of the eager 13-year-olds that Leon had been talking about.

The boy's name was Ramses, and though Rai tried to talk with him as he was jacked into the tank, the boy didn't respond. His eyes were vacant, his frame so skinny that Rai could count the boy's ribs through his cybersuit. His long, curly brown hair hung over a pock-marked face frozen in a hollow expression.

Hikikomori.

Hikikomori were quite common at the Bath Haus. The term came from the Japanese around the time of the Great Robotics Revolution. It meant "pulling inward, being confined." It referred to people who suffered from acute social

withdrawal, often living most of their lives without leaving their rooms. With the advent of 3D printers, of course, they never had to—yet a few would still emerge on occasion from their rooms for virtual holidays. They came to the Bath Haus for one reason: *To have an experience that was more real than real.*

Ramses's face remained stoic as they stood on the metal loading platform. Rai attached hoses to the cybersuit, one to exchange fluids, another for nutrition, another for oxygen. He glanced at the check list on the monitor above the boy's head. Everything was green. Rai locked the helmet on the boy's head and walked off the platform. The suit pressurized with a short *hiss*.

Can the kid feel anything at all?

The platform began to sink into the tank like the plunger of a syringe. Water rose over the skinny boy's suit until his head was submerged. Soon the sync kicked in and the water radiated an eerie blue light, encasing the boy in a digital dream world.

His mind left his body behind, to kill, and fuck, and do whatever his virtual self desired.

In a small shop outside of his apartment, Rai bought a bottle of wine to commemorate yet another night he was going to be spending alone with his cat. A good one, apparently. According to the advert that played for him over the display, it was 'a special *Extra-Red™* wine that uses state of the art technology to perfectly imitate vintages that cost thousands more!' Most importantly it was on sale, a special offer *just for him*.

A wave of self-pity engulfed him as he clutched the bottle, waiting for the elevator to arrive and take him hundreds of feet below ground to his apartment on B40.

What am I doing?

Then he hated himself for being emotional and existential, never content to just live.

Always questioning, never finding a suitable answer.

"Going down." The elevator doors chirped open.

He stepped in and thought about the start of his life—*celebrity sperm*. His mother had been lonely and wanted a child. Refusing to be satisfied with a random selection from the local sperm bank, she had paid top dollar for the sperm of a motivational speaker she adored. This was his "father," who had brought life into this world without even knowing its name. Indeed, Rai had

his mother's plain surname of Jones rather than his father's flashier surname of Starson.

His relationship with his mother wasn't much better. She often remained aloof, seemingly caring more about her virtual life than her son—or so Rai sometimes felt. His memories of childhood, distant as they were, seldom came to him, and if they did they involved the electric blue eyes of the caretaker robot that saw to his needs and played with him.

Rai Jones, it's not your fault that you're fucked up.

He didn't have to press a button, the elevator knew where to go—down, 40 stories away from the sun and the girl with the purple hair whom he would never see again.

Once again, he found himself watching the video from their brief encounter. She was beautiful, her eyes large and violet... and she was reading.

I could fall in love with someone like her.

It made him lonely to think about her. With the elevator all to himself, he sighed. Then became self-conscious of the sigh and felt stupid. Rai shook his head.

"B40," chimed the elevator, as the metal doors parted.

The hallway floor was a long, well-lit slab of grey cement, punctuated periodically with bright yellow drains—in case the fire sprinklers ever had to go off. When he reached his apartment door, it opened.

He walked inside and felt relieved to be home. Until he heard the moaning.

Chapter 2: Love™

“Oh Sasha... FUCK ME!”

Rai could hear Morph shouting from his room.

“I'm going to fuck your pussy so hard!”

I do not want to hear this.

Rai ran towards the kitchen, opened a cupboard, found a crystal wine glass, and slammed the door to his room as loudly as he could.

Firefly lifted its head and began to meow as soon as Rai entered the room. He set down his things and picked up the cat, which kept meowing in a senile fashion—not sure what exactly it was meowing about.

Food?

“What? There is food in your dish. Look!”

He carried Firefly to the small bowl under an electronic food dispenser. The cat purred loudly.

Crazy old cat.

Rai sighed and watched it struggle to chew the food with its sole remaining tooth.

He felt like he was in a loop, a cycle that he couldn't escape.

He wanted to be a good person.

He wanted to do something with his life.

But instead, he found himself reaching for a SemenSock™—*very useful for preventing uncontrollable jizzing*, according to the packaging.

He placed the plastic crown on his head and closed his eyes. The rest was *magic*—a simulated electric dream.

He fell into a new body, his other body.

The world still existed around him but only distantly, a distraction in his head.

He focused.

The large bedroom was covered in cliches: satin sheets and heart-shaped pillows. Red walls lined with erotic oil paintings. The air smelled of roses and body lotion.

What do I feel like tonight? Big tits? Small tits? It's like trying to figure out what to eat for lunch... Not like it will matter, I'll probably switch girls a couple of times on the way through.

After flipping through the menu with much deliberation, he chose Ms. Lusti Summers: *A 19-year-old blonde with pert B-cup breasts and a sweet smile.*

Average user rating: 96%

He hit select.

She padded out of the bathroom wrapped in a towel, humming some nonsense song softly to herself. Her golden hair was braided and fell gently down her soft back; skin flawless, firm and soft in all the right places; breasts making gentle impressions on the white cotton towel.

Rai stiffened.

"You are very beautiful," he whispered.

"Thank you. My name is *Lustina*, but you can call me Lusti."

She said her name with the modesty of the "virgin" she was programmed to be.

"Hi, er, Lusti."

"I'll call you Daddy-O..." She blushed, smiled her sweet smile, and added tenderly, "I like older men."

"That's fucked up," Rai protested. "I'm not *that* old."

Daddy-O... Dad. It's funny that I think of my father in this moment.

She moved toward him, shyly.

"So, do you want to play?"

"Soon. But first, how about dancing and a nice conversation?"

"Where?" she asked. "Will you buy me a nice red dress for the evening?"

She gave him a cute pouty look.

This is what I get for not having a premium subscription to SexNet.

"I think you should go just as you are, you look beautiful in that towel!"

"I can't go out in this! Buy me something to wear please, or at least give me some spending money so I don't have to go in this towel."

She looked at him longingly.

Rai was mildly annoyed at her constant demands. That was how all of these programs worked. He thought for a moment.

"How about Baroque Swing?"

"I love Baroque Swing! Thanks Daddy-Ohhhhhh!"

She placed her finger in her mouth and sucked on it *lustfully*.

Baroque Swing: a jazz club orbiting Saturn. Made entirely of glass, it opened out upon the heavens – melding with the planet's rings and moons, and the distant stars and sun beyond, a cosmic landscape that could only be described as spectacular. In real life, the whole grand scene – the rings, the moons, the stars, and the distant sun – would probably have been terrifying and awe-inspiring all at once. *Sublime*.

They sat in a private booth for two, Rai dressed in a tuxedo, and Lusti clad in a skimpy crepe

négligée. All was starlight, candlelight, and moodlight. The band began to play a slow dance number: "*Space is a Place for Poetics.*"

"Want to dance?"

"No, I just want to sit and talk about life."

"I'm sorry. *Cum* again?"

She winked.

She was a porn program, after all. But she was starting to bore him.

"Horniness and loneliness are part of the human condition," he said, to see how she would respond.

I should just fuck her and find a real therapist.

"You're so funny! I would like to know everything about you, Daddy-O."

"Everything?"

"All of it."

"I'm a bastard."

"Oh, no, Daddy-O! You're far too nice!"

Natural language processing error.

"No, literally. I'm the product of a minor celebrity jacking off into a cup."

"That sounds fun!"

Fuck this shit.

"I want you to *change* your personality: something along the lines of 'Manic Pixie Dream Girl' with a slight existential bend. Also, your hair: *purple.*"

Her hair changed shades before his eyes, along with her demeanor. She moved closer to him in the booth and planted both elbows on the table, propping her chin up with her fists. Her eyes sparkled with the radiant shards of a passing meteor shower.

"Put your arm around me and tell me about yourself."

He did as she commanded, wrapping an arm around her bare shoulders.

"I'm just a little tired of this life. There are so many things I don't understand..."

"Like what?"

"Like the fact that I'm talking to a computer program."

"What's wrong with that? I was programmed by humans, it's like you're talking to them indirectly."

She smiled impishly, placing an air-quote motion around "talking."

Rai laughed. This was certainly more interesting.

"No, I'm just confused and depressed is all. I'll be fine, I've recently started some meds for the whole depression thing, but it's ideas that bother me the most."

"Like what?"

"That my life doesn't really matter."

"Have you thought about reading Vick Starson's *Make Your Life Matter in 10 Easy Steps*? It's engaging as hell—and on sale for 50% off!"

Always dad's fucking book. Fucking adbots can't realize I'm not a fan.

"No thank you, I already read it and it's crock full of shit... a crock overflowing with fucking shit. Soooo much fucking shitty shit!"

"Everyone is entitled to their opinion. Maybe we just need a visit to the Men's room so I can... take care of you."

She winked.

It seemed like the old version of Lusti was still leaking through.

"I wonder, am I doomed to be fucked up? My mom was constantly ignoring me as a child to be immersed in her own little world. I feel like I was raised by robots, a lonely shell of a human being... and I just want to find something meaningful, but it's all this illusion of meaning. Everyone is confused..."

"Wow, Rai I get the feeling you're a troubled individual. Here's the thing, you shouldn't be talking to a porn program about these things..."

I hope she's not flagging me for suicide prevention.

"I'm just speaking my thoughts out loud," Rai explained quickly, cutting her off.

"I LOVE life! Let's have sex!"

"Yes! Sex!" Lusti shouted and threw her slender arms in the air in a celebration of scripted eccentricity.

Rai laughed.

"But first, answer me this: what is the meaning of life?"

"Reproduction. Did you know that you're part of an unbroken chain of life stretching back billions of years to the very first organism? No pressure."

She grinned.

"Well, now I'm depressed."

Then he took "her" into the bathroom and they fucked in a stall.

Rai sat on his red sofa listening to an old record through his smartspecs and drinking a glass of wine from real crystal. The wine was a deep red that looked a bit like blood, but tasted unnaturally sweet.

Isn't real wine more purple in color?

He searched for the answer on his glasses while Firefly dozed in his lap. Rai rubbed its whiskers with his free hand.

The cat purred loudly.

CRASH.

The door opened with such force that it slammed into the door stop. Morph barged into the room, all smiles and cheerfulness.

"Guess who's in *lo-ove!*?!"

"Oh god," said Rai as Morph plopped down on the sofa, scaring away the cat. Morph gave him a bear hug and kissed him on the cheek.

"I love you!"

"You're high on love pills again."

"Snuggles!" bellowed Morph in his deep voice as he cuddled with Rai on the sofa.

"Great. Just what I needed."

He didn't cuddle back, but it didn't matter.

"You want some *Love™*?"

"By that do you mean you want to suck my cock or give me love pills? Because the answer is neither."

"Someone's grumpy! I had a fucking sweet night! What do you think happened?"

"Virtual boy met porn program... Violence and then I presume kinky sex ensued, a romantic evening," mumbled Rai, slightly confused as to what Morph was asking.

"No, silly!" protested Morph. "I made love to *Sasha*, my dream girl, my sex machine, the love of my life! What do you think of her?"

An image danced across his lenses. The young girl wove through a symphony of neon lights and

pyrotechnics, impossibly perfect, with an impossible thinness, impossibly bright green eyes, and thick locks of red hair that danced around her like choreographed psychic ribbons.

"She's beautiful," Rai said in his most monotone voice. "The most beautiful girl I've never seen. So beautiful, she can't be real... just how you like them."

"What's wrong, sour puss? Why the long face and that bottle of wine? How did your date go? Oh, was it only a two-minute love session? Is that why you're so upset?"

"Har. Har. Har."

"What happened? Seriously."

"Nothing."

Morph put his finger to Rai's lips and whispered, "You don't have to love her, you just have to make love to her."

"Who are you talking about?"

"Whoever the *her* is you're thinking about," answered Morph.

Rai thought about the girl with the purple hair, but he couldn't tell Morph about *her*. He couldn't show him the video, and besides it would be creepy to stalk her—and what chance would he have anyway. She might as well have been virtual. She probably had a boyfriend too.

He sighed.

"There's a girl at work, but I'm not that attracted to her. I want to fall in love with someone I'm attracted to. I'm not a male supermodel, but I'm not a bulldog either. Am I asking too much?"

"I think you're attractive."

"Always trust the opinions of someone who's taking Love Pills."

"Rai, just play along, ask that girl out. Bring her back here, drink a bottle of wine, and do her doggy style!"

Rai shook his head.

"I'm looking for love, not just ticking the virginity box. I want something deep and meaningful and real."

"If she's not attractive enough, put a bag on her head!"

"That would go over well." He wasn't in the mood for joking. "You know I wouldn't even mind not having sex with a girl for a while. I just want to experience a *real* connection with someone, in mind, body, and spirit. Chemistry or some bullshit like that. I want to really be in love. I want to be alive, feel really alive."

Morph put the bottle of wine to Rai's lips, suggesting that he drink more.

He complied.

"Wow, you want so many vague things out of life! Me? I want *only* the things virtual reality has to offer. The meaning of life is to have *achievable* goals."

"You mean only 'achievable' in Virtual." retorted Rai, making scare quotes with his fingers.

"*Achievable* is the key dumbass! That's *the point!*"

"You can't compromise on your dreams."

"Hah! I'm not the one who's compromising. Anything is possible with drugs and computers! A 'real' connection with someone? Stupid! Vague! Boring! Novelty, constant novelty, now *that's* what's interesting! How could you make love to the same woman for the rest of your life? As I'm having sex with a girl, I lose interest, so she has to change. The same goes for life—in Virtual I can do and be anything I want." He rummaged in his pocket and pulled out a bottle of pills. "Rai, take some *Love™*. It will open your eyes and help you appreciate what's in front of you..."

He poured a pill into his hand and offered it to Rai, who refused. He shrugged and put the purple heart on his own tongue, washing it down with wine.

"There's a ball tonight... let's go. We're having so much fun! Let's make a night of it!"

"No."

"Rai, baby, I will introduce you to Sasha and some of her sexy friends..."

"I don't want to go to your fucking software porn ball."

"No, you're coming! You are a hypocrite and you are coming."

"I'm tired."

"Rai, you know for a fact that you'll be up for hours with virtual hookers anyway... You're the one who's always complaining." He made his voice high-pitched and girly. *"Oh, my life is soooo boring. I just wish I could get some real pussy, even though it smells..."*

"Har. Har. Har."

"Come to the ball, Rai. I've got a feeling there will be someone there for you..."

Rai stood.

"No thank you. I'm tired. I'm going to take a shower, and then let's have something to eat. I'm starving."

Morph grinned.

"Don't worry! I'll take care of dinner because I love you."

Rai threw him a look that said, 'you are fucking weird tonight,' then walked into his bathroom and shut the door.

Morph dropped the act. The sound of Rai's shower meant he had to move quickly. In the kitchen, he moved fast and with drunken determination for the sake of his best real friend. He fetched two glasses out of the cupboard and set them on the table. Then he picked up a cardboard package sitting by the door and tore into it, strewing packing material everywhere. Inside sat a pure silver pitcher. He smiled, and placed it under a hose in the refrigerator door.

"Strawberry Milk!" he commanded.

Pink milk began to fill the glass.

He took out the bottle of pills from his red leather coat and opened it, pouring the contents onto the counter. With the flat side of a knife, he began to crush them into a fine powder. The little purple hearts were quickly ground into dust, which he scraped into the pink milk.

"Love, love, love," he sang, as he stirred them with a wooden spoon. He set the silver pitcher of milk in the fridge, spun around to the food printer, opened the door and put in two plastic trays. "What is a good food for love?" he asked his AUGs. "Yes, lasagna... I concur." He smiled as the printer sprang to life and began to print the meal one microscopic layer of organic molecules at a time.

He chortled at his genius.

Rai entered wearing a new shirt and drying his hair with a towel that he threw over his chair.

Morph sat opposite him, grinning from ear to ear.

"Sit. Would you like a Strawberry Milkshake to brighten up your day?"

"Sure. Why does this night keep getting weirder and weirder?"

"I got a new milk pitcher, I need to show you!"

Morph stood and calmly walked to the fridge where he withdrew the silver pitcher, now brimming with strawberry milk. He proudly showed it to Rai and filled his glass with a flourish. "It just came today, it's a custom design by Tiffany & Company! Real silver, I love the handle... it's very ergonomic and yet quite elegant!"

"How on earth do you make money?" Rai asked. He threw a handful of food supplements he had been carrying into his mouth and chugged the glass of Strawberry Milk in front of him.

"Ahhhhhh...." he said, refreshed.

Morph grinned at him.

"This is why I don't take drugs, because before you know it, you start falling in love with milk pitchers. But thank you."

"My goodness, you were thirsty!" cried Morph, still holding the pitcher. He replenished Rai's glass.

Rai shrugged.

"Strawberry Milk is okay, I guess."

The timer sounded on the food printer, and a woman's voice chimed, "Food ready!" Morph sat his prized pitcher on the table and grabbed the two steaming plates of lasagna out of the food printer.

"I'll grab the silverware," said Rai.

"Damn it, I knew I forgot something!" cried Morph.

They shoveled food into their mouths and drank the entire silver pitcher of Strawberry Love Milk between them.

Rai was starting to feel rather whimsical.

"Why don't we have balls in real life!?! I'd go to one of those!"

"I have balls."

"No, I was talking about real-life costume balls, dumb ass."

"They would suck, no one would have the right costumes," answered Morph, keeping an eye on the time listed in the top right corner of his field of vision.

"It would still be fun," argued Rai with a sigh. "If people got drunk, they would dance and maybe even talk to each other."

Morph looked at his best friend.

"There would be too many complications. Health and safety, potential lawsuits, or god forbid a bunch of virgins trying to have conversations with other virgins..."

Rai sighed again.

"You're probably right."

Morph raised his glass for a toast, and Rai followed suit.

They stood in unison.

"I've never seen the ocean before, or had sex with twins, let alone three Sasha clones at once. But it doesn't matter. Drugs and computers make everything possible!" Morph clinked his glass with Rai's and drained it.

Rai couldn't help but smile.

Who knew heaven was in our minds?

A warm sort of happiness was rising in him and he felt fuller, kinder. He looked at his friend with his cyberpunk clothing and long, unkempt hair, and put his hand on Morph's shoulder. "Is it just me or are you looking very handsome today?" he said—and then he felt a flutter in his heart.

"Why thank you, it's quite rare of you to..." began Morph, but Rai suddenly realized what had happened as he felt the blood rush to his head.

"Oh god... you spiked my milk!"

"What! That's outrageous!" exclaimed Morph with a sheepish smile.

"You spiked my milk with that weird love drug!" Rai yelled, pointing a finger across the hand-carved cherrywood table imported from Switzerland at the silver pitcher and then at his roommate.

"I'm tired of you being such a sorry pussy all the time!" yelled Morph, pointing his own finger back at Rai.

"My God, I need to hire someone to taste test my food!"

Morph lowered his glasses on his nose, staring Rai down with his big blue eyes. "Eat up," he commanded. "We have 15 minutes before we have to go to the Ball."

"You spiked my strawberry milk!" repeated Rai in disbelief as he felt the artificial chemicals and feelings raging through his body.

"Yes I did!" bellowed Morph. Emphasizing each and every word, he waved his hands in the air and proclaimed prophetically:

"Tonight! You are going to meet the love of your life! Let's get ready to Tango!"

Chapter 3: The Ball

As the setting sun cast its glow across the great ballroom, everything it touched seemed to glitter with gold. The hall bustled with beautiful people whose faces and bodies resembled the gods and goddesses in the fine oil paintings that hung along the walls. No matter which way they turned as they danced, their eyes were always filled with light and stars. Women floated in flamboyant dresses of silk and satin; the men trotted about in the costumes, coats, and high collars of a fanciful eighteenth century England, with magical swords made of exotic metals resting in jewel-encrusted sheaths at their sides. Not a single one of them perspired, was old, or smelled of any odor other than roses and musky perfumes.

They swayed to music as beautiful as the sunset that shone through the westward-facing windows. And to maintain the illusion of a bygone era whose sun refused to fully set, the guests acted their parts, reveling in their perfect bodies, fictional money, fake English accents, and virtual status.

An old manservant by the entrance announced the new arrivals in a loud, piercing voice.

"Lord Morpheus and Lady Sasha, the harbingers of *Revolution*TM!"

A tight leather corset bound Sasha's chest, accentuating her absolutely unreal bust-to-waist ratio. Her legs were slender and long, and she wore nothing but a thong decorated in pink feathers. Morph wore a loosely fitting Samurai robe, a long Katana peeking out from the leather belt around his waist. His skin looked as if carved of stone, his chest—firm, muscular, hairless.

Whispering ensued as they made their way into the crowded hall.

"Those ruffians!"

"It's people like that who ruin these types of events for the rest of us!"

Others hardly noticed, concentrating on the dance contest, eager to be the high scorer for the night.

Morph gazed at Sasha and whispered gently in her ear, "When everyone is a prince, no one is. But we break the mold."

She smiled and stuck her tongue deep into his ear canal.

People from the crowd muttered, but Morph grinned.

"Lord Rai Jones, a friend of the *Revolution*TM!" the old servant bellowed, and in stumbled Rai.

A sabre hung at his side. Dressed traditionally, wearing a long blue coat with gold buttons, he began to sway. He felt the music as if it were in his bones. He swam in an ocean of senses. Emotion bubbled up inside him—warmth, happiness, and an exquisite rapture of near wholeness. His mind rushed with loosely connected thoughts.

“Rai!” shouted Morph, “You’re in luck—there might be some real women here! Real sex with another human being...”

Morph kept talking, but Rai's eyes went to the back of his head and he tumbled with a magnificent crash into a servant carrying a silver dessert tray.

He smelled pineapple cake, the tropical citrus notes blending into musical notes.

Savoring the music, he closed his eyes, as colors and shapes continued to dance across his mind.

Perception is reality.

He awoke, sprawled on the floor in an old library.

The most beautiful woman he had ever set eyes on was standing over him, her face covered in

cheesecake that Rai could strangely taste in his mouth. Her hair was purple, her exquisite eyes green and wide with concern. Her skin was fair and flawless, without pores; milky white with a dash of blush when she smiled... and her smile...

It was pure like an Angel. She was a goddess, his soulmate, she would complete him—he had the powerful sense that they would fall in love.

She is BEAUTIFUL...

He could *feel* her beauty!

“Is he okay? Or is it just a bad connection?” she asked the room. Her voice was warm and Rai felt warm upon hearing it, as if his soul was being wrapped in a blanket.

Is this love?

Her hair smelled like cinnamon.

The administrator responded in a synthesized voice, “His vitals are good. His heart rate is a little fast. Would you like me to alert medical services?”

“No!” Rai gasped, springing to life, causing her to jump 15 feet in the air. She landed gracefully, her leather boots falling lightly onto the floor as if she hardly weighed anything at all.

“You scared me half to death! Are you okay?”

“Yes...” he said, getting up off the floor. In truth, he felt wonderful.

“You have cheesecake on your face.”

Is this love? MY GOD this FEELING.

"That's because you crashed into a dessert tray and coated me in it!" She pulled a magic wand out of thin air and began cleaning her face with some vacuum spell.

"Awwwwww," said Rai, "I wanted to lick it off."

"Are you drunk?"

Rai fell over again.

"I am soooooo sorry. Thank you for being the kindest, sweetest person in the entire world. I'll be alright..." His mind searched for what to do. "I just need a nap."

What a STUPID thing to say...

His head shouting at him, the drugs and wine saturating his blood, all Rai could do was look at her and fall in love.

"Do you want me to tuck you in with this rug here?" she asked, indicating the rug on the floor with her boot.

"Yes, and if you would be so kind as to read me a bedtime story..."

She laughed and threw the rug over his head as he lay on the ground. "Goodnight, Mr. I've-had-too-much-wine!"

Her laughter and footsteps faded away as Rai battled against the urge to close his eyes and curl up under the rug.

He needed a plan almost as much as he needed to sober up.

He left the party for the real world and wandered around his and Morph's apartment, trying to think.

There was nothing he could do.

The more time he spent in the real world trying to put himself back together, the faster he felt she was slipping away from him. She had been a wonderful dream that he was having a hard time remembering.

Should I talk to her in this state?

PULL YOURSELF TOGETHER!

He drank a glass of water, urinated, and returned to his room to once again place the crown upon his head.

The pills made him feel the new brain waves as they were projected into his mind.

Light began to dance in front of his eyes.

Until all was white.

The virtual Rai stood in the midst of an infinite white expanse, facing a mirror, adjusting his naked appearance. He felt the need to change. He pulled levers that extended like fingers of smoke from the ground. He made his body more muscular, donned a red coat, and gave himself a bold new *Darcy™* hairstyle. Finally, he pulled a lever labeled "Sex Appeal" and laughed as his

digital package grew and grew. His confidence swelled until ten inches of virtually-enhanced *Love-Tool™* bulged against his underwear like a large cucumber.

"You are going to find true love," he told himself, pointing to his digital reflection, a man beyond men.

"You are going to find true love!"

For a moment, he thought *he* looked good.

"Lord Rai Jones, friend of the *Revolution™!*"
How the fuck did Morph get him to call that out? What is this revolution shit?

He had other things on his mind. Rai strutted into the room as if he was walking into battle. His eyes searched for the girl.

Couples whirled, their digital bodies pressed tightly together—while worlds away, their real bodies slumbered, separated by oceans and mountains of concrete.

Love knows no boundaries.

The dance ended and suddenly he saw her standing ten feet from him. His heart raced as she looked over in his direction, her mouth caught in a half-smile. His eyes widened when she started walking towards him.

"So you're Rai Jones?"

FUCK... don't stare.

"How do you know my name?"

"Multiple ways. That old servant just called it, and your friend told me that you're a good person." She nodded behind her towards Morph, who gave him a thumbs up.

"I don't believe it..."

He was at a loss.

The band struck up a fast number, but he stood glued to the spot, scared to ask such a beautiful woman to dance.

She leaned forward and said in a whisper, "Note to Lord Rai: you're killing the suspension of disbelief. You should probably do less talking and more dancing." She winked and smiled as she flitted away.

He stared after her.

An intricate line dance began in which the partners separated, traded, twirled, and then returned to their original partners. Rai barged in, drawing many condescending looks, grabbed Morph out of the dance, and pulled him over to the side, Sasha trailing behind in her lover's wake.

Morph smiled at Rai. "What's up?" he asked.

"I've met the love of my life!"

"Go get em, boy!" Morph laughed deeply.

"I'm fucked up on love pills, man!" yelled Rai.

What if I said something stupid?

"No need to worry, just go out and ask her to dance!" Morph said, reassuringly.

"What on earth did you say to her?"

"I told her you are remarkably *well-endowed* in real life, and the rest is none of your business. Now go ask that girl to dance!"

Rai beamed back at him—only to catch in a quick glance that he had competition.

The love of his life was dancing with another man.

"I'm having a great time. I hope you are as well," said Guy, staring intently into her eyes as the two twirled. His blues briefly met her greens. His avatar was handsome, of course, with curly blond hair and a well-trimmed beard—masculine yet civilized. He wore a black coat with a white ruffled shirt underneath; a Norse god in an Englishman's garb.

She smiled tensely as she passed out of his manly hands. She had been trying to escape from Guy all night, yet he had brought her here, and it was a date, and so she ran off at every excuse she could think of.

Guy received the next dancer, a blonde, but his gaze was still fixed on her, following her as she turned with another man.

The next time she came to him, he whispered passionately in the overdrawn antics of a bad actor—"You are the most beautiful thing I have ever set eyes on."

Her mouth parted in exasperated fatigue. "So this what it feels like to be pretty!" She even said it in a fake English accent as part of the role-play, but she didn't look at him as she twirled away into the arms of another eager young man.

He kept looking at her with a desperate sort of longing that seemed pathetic on his godlike face.

She sighed as the music came to a rest. Her current partner bowed and thanked her, and out of the corner of her green eyes she saw Guy.

He put a stiff hand on her shoulder.

"Would you like to go for a garden stroll?" he said in his lame English accent. He drew her near his side with his strong arms. "I want to look at the stars... I want to look at the stars through the reflections in your beautiful green eyes."

"Now, Guy, don't go making an iDoll out of me!"

Now!

He glanced at her but she stared straight ahead, avoiding his gaze.

Suddenly, Rai stood before her, also ignoring Guy. He made a drunken sort of bow and

shouted, "Pray lady 'whoever you are,' what art thou's name?"

Guy made to gently pull her away, but she resisted. He released her.

"Lady Winry!" she replied.

Rai took a knee and babbled like an idiot. "Lady Winry," he echoed, "that has a lovely ring to it, but it doesn't sound quite dignified enough. Have you ever thought about changing it to Princess Winry?"

She rolled her eyes as prince charming grabbed her hand and dragged her towards the dance floor.

"Okay, *Winry*," said Rai, realizing she wasn't too taken with *Princess Winry*. "You must dance with me! I'm capturing you like you've captured my heart."

"Are you being sarcastic?"

"I'm a sarcastic asshole," he said as they took their positions on the dance floor. "So much so, that even if I really mean something..." He faltered, searching for the words, "I can't help but sound sarcastic..."

"Oh no! You're not one of those tragically ironic people?!"

"Probably, but at least I'm self-aware."

"Hah!"

The dance started, a slow waltz. They clasped hands and took their first steps.

I wish I never had to wake up from this moment.

The tune was bouncy, but good for talking.

"Conversation starter," began Winry. "I'm here with someone I've been on *one* date with, and he's already told me he loves me—and he's just told me that I'm the 'most beautiful *thing*' he's ever seen. So, I'm creeped out."

"Do you want me to kill him?"

"I haven't decided. They might not appreciate that here."

"Well, when you decide, let me know."

Joy bubbled up inside of him as they waltzed around the room.

He felt complete as he held her in his arms.

He wanted to share the feeling with her.

"Until then, just enjoy the moment! Repeat after me, 'I am a loving creature; I love everyone! I love you! Accept me into your heart!'"

"Morph told me you're on Love Pills."

"It wasn't my choice," said Rai as he struggled in vain to be his normal self.

What else did they talk about?

"I'm sorry, what were we talking about?"

"I think it's terrible for someone to use the word love too often. Then it doesn't mean anything!"

"I hate to break it to you, Princess Winry, but there is precious little out there besides love that means anything... so people like to overuse the term."

"That's really cheesy."

"You should try coming up with witty things after having your drink spiked! Also, I don't normally take pills. Why are we over-analyzing this? Let's just dance."

"We're not *really* dancing."

That's something I would say.

"Wow, I love you." Rai said.

"There is a time and a place for everything, and the 'I love you' moment does *not* come on the first dance!"

"Wow, I'm glad I didn't confess my love for you to you just now." Rai said.

She laughed. "Actually, you did."

"Princess Winry, what is *love*?"

"Don't call me Princess Winry. Or I will cut your fucking head off."

"It will never cross my lips unwarranted again," swore Rai, clumsily crossing his hand over his heart.

"Deal. As for your question, I have no answer, Socrates."

She smiled at him.

"Do you like to twirl?" Rai asked, smiling back.

"Yes."

Pausing in stride, he raised his left hand, and she spun before him like a beautiful doll. Her hair changed colors as she turned, from purple to pink to neon green and back to purple. The jewels on her many necklaces sparkled almost as much as her eyes.

He twirled her again, and once more with the music.

The third time's the charm.

He caught her back with his right hand as he gently dipped her back.

A perfect 10.

"You're a good dancer."

"Thanks, you're a good..." he raked his mind for clever things to say, second-guessing every thought.

"You're just... I have no clue what you're good at. What do you do?"

"I'm a professional dreamer currently seeking meaningful employment in the real world," she said with embarrassment masked in practiced humor. "Not anything special yet, but someday..."

"Well don't feel bad, I'm a dream-tech. I literally clean cum out of cybersuits at the Bath Haus. But it's kind of an in-between job, I really want to do something that's meaningful and

creative, like being a freelance intellectual or something like that.”

“I thought you were an *Artiste*, but a real job is impressive too. Currently I’m a waitress.”

“You shouldn't have told me, now I'll be eating in restaurants until I die looking for Princess Winry.”

“Okay, *#superserious*: I will kill you and never speak to you again if you call me Princess Winry one more fucking time, sir.”

The dance came to an end, and they faced each other. Rai saluted.

“Yes, sir!”

She laughed.

“Thank you for the dance, Lord Rai.”

All he could think about was that he didn't want her to leave.

“It was my pleasure...”

Guy stood over Winry’s shoulder, waiting.

“And who are you, good sir?” asked Rai politely enough. “I don't believe we've met before?”

Winry turned, hardly surprised. “Oh Rai, this is Guy.”

“Oh, your acquaintance...” Rai said smiling. “In that case, DRAW. YOUR. SWORD.”

The words echoed around the room. Rai felt as if he stood before a mountain: the enemy waiting

for him—a dragon he must slay to rescue his princess.

I probably should stop calling her that.

Determined, he pulled a flaming sword from thin air and ignited it with his passion.

“Come on, ye swarthy-mouthed low-life chronic masturbator! I challenge you to a sudden-death duel for the love of this lady!”

The music stopped.

“Shut the fuck up, you’re ruining a romantic evening for the rest of us!” complained one gentleman. Some bystanders nodded their heads in agreement, others just watched.

Rai kept his eyes intently focused on Guy.

“This is absurd!” Guy protested in his fake English accent, rousing cries of affirmation from the crowd.

“Yes, we want to dance!” cried an elven princess.

“Shut the fuck up, whiny bitches!” shouted Morph as he drew his Katana. “Let these men settle their dispute, or else I’ll get my dick out too!”

Guy ran his hand through his majestic golden locks. “I refuse. Love can't be determined by a silly game.” He stared down at Winry. “We should just ask this beautiful young lady which of us she

prefers. We are supposed to be gentlemen, are we not?"

There was silence as everyone looked to her.

She tried to suppress a smile. "I would have them fight to the death for my love!"

Guy looked hurt. But when Rai showed him the size of his extra-large package and yelled, "Lick my hairy oversized balls!" he visibly shuddered with rage, whipping out a laser cannon.

Rai charged. The world spun wildly as he dove from a massive energy blast that cut a ballet dancer in two. The dancer screamed as she "died" in her lover's arms.

Somebody laughed, while another voice yelled, "It's ruined! Vote to ban them!"

Others quickly took up the cry.

Rai slashed with his sword, releasing a massive wave of spirit energy.

Guy dodged behind a table that was instantly set aflame.

The conflagration grew; flames leapt onto oversized bustles and trains, lapped at trailing coattails; people vanished into thin air as they logged out of the blazing ruins.

Guy aimed another blast at Rai, disintegrating the westward wall so that the bright rising moon shone amidst the fire and smoke.

In a flash, Rai was on him. In one powerful downward stroke, he cut off Guy's hands and then slashed open his chest.

Guy fell to the floor bleeding.

A collective gasp, followed by spatterings of laughter.

Rai seized Guy's head by its long, curly hair and spat in his face.

"This is all a fucking game. I'm going to cut your fucking head off and you won't really be dead. None of this means anything, so we might as well slash and burn and die a horrible non-death."

He whipped out a chainsaw, revved it to full throttle, and cut through the neck as if he was slicing off a tender piece of prime rib. Raising the head aloft for a moment of triumph, he laughed, then drop-kicked it into the flames.

He turned as virtual sprinklers went off to quell the virtual fires, the water clearing away the blood on his face and clothes. Clouds of smoke and steam began to form. Rai only stood, reveling in the tableau of destruction, facing the horrified gaze of the few onlookers that remained. The words *ACCOUNT TERMINATED* flashed before his virtual eyes.

It's fun to watch the world burn.

Chapter 4: R-Sexuality

“Kiss me...” she moaned.

Rai leaned forward to press his lips against hers, running his hand up the smooth skin of her thigh. She writhed with pleasure. He felt himself stiffen as his fingers neared her wetness. But before they could enter, she began to evaporate into steam. She slipped through his fingers and vanished into the air...

BANG!

BANG!

BANG! BANG! BANG!

He opened his eyes in the dark room to the neon glow of his cat’s yellow tail. Each and every blood vessel in his frontal cortex throbbed as if it was about to burst.

BANG! BANG! BANG!

The door to the room threatened to explode inward.

“Wake up!!! Wake up!!!” shouted Morph from the other side, his fists unleashing more rhythmic fury upon the door.

“Damn it!” Rai grumbled.

His head felt like the door; it couldn't stand the pounding as he started to remember things: Winry, the ball, the fight...

Has it all been a crazy drug-fueled dream?

The door to his room opened, and Morph poked his head in.

"Why in God's holy sacred name are you BANGING on my fucking door?!" asked Rai grumpily, his head buried under his pillow.

Morph turned on the lights, dressed in his red cyberpunk outfit.

"Good morning, cupcake!"

Rai rubbed his eyes, stretched, and let out a groan. His headache simultaneously kept him awake and made him feel exhausted. Was his *entire life* turning into a crazy drug-fueled dream?

"I haven't got all morning," said Morph much too loudly. "I've got *business*, and I need to tell you what happened after they voted to have the administrator kick you out of the ball."

Rai took the pillow off his head.

"What happened?"

Morph smiled.

"That girl, Winry, the one you fought that guy over. She came up to me after you got kicked out. She thinks you're cute! Perhaps she was on *Love™* as well?"

Rai sat up in bed and reached for his AUGs on the night stand. Suddenly, his head didn't hurt so much.

Morph shook his head.

"Don't bother trying to write her yet, it's for your own good."

"My own good?"

"Yeah, your own good," repeated Morph with a smile, "you can't write her when you're hungover on *Love*TM. You'll say something stupid and there's already enough risk of that as it is."

"You want to go out for breakfast?"

"Out?" asked Morph, surprised.

"Because I'm hungry, we need a good talk, and she said she works as a waitress at a restaurant..."

Morph grinned.

"But I've got *business*, the *Revolution*TM is coming—"

Rai got out of bed and started pushing Morph out of his room.

"Your stupid secret "revolution" can wait. Now let me get showered and dressed, I'll be out in a few minutes!"

For a few moments, the water and good news washed his hangover down the drain—along with his chest hair; he had optimistically shaved himself in case he met with Winry soon. But the pounding

in his head returned, and his thinking felt slower than normal.

He wanted to feel good, so he put on his favorite jacket, a long, red 18th century British army coat.

But he wasn't feeling good.

He had mixed feelings about everything. Yes, it thrilled him that a real girl had liked him... well maybe liked him: Rai had his suspicions that Morph was up to no good. And yet, the romantic part of Rai genuinely felt hopeful for the chance that maybe she was like the girl that he had seen reading in the cafe.

Why would she possibly want to meet with me?

Because you're a good person.

Am I a good person?

I want to be, it's just... hard. What is good anyway?

His head hurt.

He met Morph in their kitchen and was mildly annoyed by the fact that he was wearing a mask—some narrow romantic green face with a mustache, an old mask that many still wore, the symbol of anonymity.

Rai pointed to Morph's mask.

"Really?"

"Hey, I don't know why you're not wearing one. They track everything about you through facial recognition software when you're on the street. I don't want people to know that A) I go outside and B) hang out with the likes of you."

They argued as they walked to the elevator and rode it up to the street level: Rai arguing that people had been paranoid by such things for centuries and yet how in America they had never really been used for anything truly dystopian, while Morph argued back that it was his right to hide himself from people who wanted to track him.

Rai's hair was still wet from the shower. His AUGs lay neatly folded in a pocket of his jacket. As they walked in silence, he looked around at the naked world before him, missing its information cover.

He noticed things that he never saw before when he had walked down the street absorbed in the information flowing over his eyes.

Things were missing their augmented context: The street was devoid of advertisements. The Cypherpunk Cafe no longer had a two-star average user review hanging over its closed doors. The beggars all looked the same—no longer surrounded with supplemental information

providing their NEET (Not in Employment, Education, or Training) status.

Quiet and colorless, the barrenness of the street seemed almost surreal in the digital layer's absence.

"This is the first time I've been out of the apartment in a month!" exclaimed Morph.

"Wow, that's good for you," Rai remarked, surprised that his friend wasn't completely absorbed in his glasses.

They turned a corner only to find a small group of protesters fenced into a designated demonstration area by no less than 10 Roboguards. The protesters were shouting, preaching, and holding signs and bibles -- real, paper bibles.

"What the hell are they bitching about?" asked Morph, but his question was promptly answered when they saw the cause of all the commotion: a large shop with attractive men and women waving to them through the windows, dressed in various fetish gear.

Over the sliding glass doors, letters flashed in a steady stream of Technicolor glitter: *ANDROID SEXUAL*

Rai put his glasses back on as they ambled closer. Like magic, text appeared in front of his

eyes: *DO YOU NEED COMFORT AND INTIMACY
IN THE REAL WORLD?*

Yes.

He saw a group of real women, giggling and pointing at a shirtless fireman ironing a dress in the window, his masculine face fixed in some ridiculous mixed of sexiness and tenderness.

♥ *ARE YOU INTERESTED IN THE STAY-AT-HOME™ FIREMAN MODEL?* ♥

No!

Looking at the women ogling over the fire fighter made him wonder what it was like to be one, to have their desires and perspectives. They had simulators for that, but there was too much of a stigma (and Rai supposed that they somehow still fell drastically short).

Morph tapped him on the shoulder.

"Rai, let's go inside and try out a demo! I need to see some titties after looking at all these Christian fucks!" Morph shouted in the direction of the protestors.

Rai glanced over at them and read some of their signs.

R-SEXUALITY IS A SIN!

THERE IS ONLY ONE REAL HEAVEN!

*"ANYONE WHO LOOKS AT A WOMAN
LUSTFULLY HAS ALREADY COMMITTED*

ADULTERY WITH HER IN HIS HEART."

MATTHEW 5:28

SEX IS BETWEEN A MAN AND A WOMAN!

REPENT! THE END IS NIGH!

JESUS IS COMING!

"Are you aware that your sign contains a double entendre?" said Morph to the woman carrying the *JESUS IS COMING* sign.

The woman carrying it was chanting some old hymn and looked like she was experiencing orgasmic raptures of religious joy. She held her left hand in the air as if waiting for God to grab it. She completely ignored Morph's question.

"Would you like to hear more about Jesus?"

"You live in a filter bubble, a world of contingency and point of view!" shouted Morph. "Did you know Jesus was an R-Sexual? Making mind-love to his perfect ideal of God!"

"Blasphemy! That is a vicious lie!"

"You have your facts, I have mine!"

Rai started pulling Morph away.

"Calm down, she won't listen to anything you say!" he urged.

"But she's fucking ignorant!" Morph yelled, pointing to the old woman. "Some people believe that the world doesn't change; that there is something timeless and true that loves them... but there isn't."

Why is that a depressing thought?

"There's no point in talking to people who won't listen." pleaded Rai calmly.

Morph nodded in agreement, only to be provoked when a man shouted at them from the picket line. "Sinner! Feast your eyes on paradise!"

"If Jesus could see paradise now he would blush!" Morph shouted back.

Rai burst out laughing.

Virtual is paradise—you can have anything you want—and that's why it's so fucked up.

There were other crowds gathered to watch the spectacle. A group of men applauded and cheered as a middle-aged man walked out of the shop with what seemed like a beautiful 18-year-old model clinging onto his arms as if he was her everything.

The man and iDoll kissed, drawing a mix of cheers and jeers.

Someone began to shout "Repent sinner!", causing others to yell back in a chorus of "Fuck you!", harmonizing their message with middle fingers for emphasis, while a few of the more expressive bystanders bent over to moon the opposition. Rai had to pull Morph away before they started throwing things.

I guess interesting things can happen in the Real after-all.

Inside the store, the virtual experience Rai knew so well seemed to become physical. IDolls waited behind glass walls, stripping, teasing, masturbating, fucking. Males and females in a luscious display of sexual mastery, engaged in every position and fetish. Some were dressed in brightly-colored costumes, and others possessed unnaturally large genitals.

Android Sexual was lit like a club, with neon lights and pounding electronic music. Rai saw a few teenage boys casually watching the models behind their shades, surely recording it all for posterity.

An advertisement blared: *"More desirable, patient, eager, and altruistic than any meat-bag. Uploaded with supreme sex-skills! Prepare to experience quadruple-tongued cunnilingus, open-throat silky fellatio, deliriously-gentle kissing, transcendental nipple-tweaking, g-spot massage, prostate-milking dexterity, plus 2,000 varieties of coital rhythm and scented lubricants. You'll never desire sex with a human again."*

It was fascinating; Rai couldn't help but watch in amazement.

Two naked female-models began to strut towards them. A balding Asian man came forward and stretched out his hand.

"Go on! Try them!" The iDoll beamed at him. With a nervous laugh he bravely fondled her breasts. He smiled, embarrassed but *impressed*.

Morph tapped Rai on the shoulder.

"I need to tell you something, and now's as good a time as any." He sounded strangely serious. "I want to make sure you're cool with it..."

"What?" asked Rai, unsure if this was some trick.

"I really miss Sasha when I'm not logged on..." he began.

"When are you not logged on?"

"Har. Har. Har."

He fixed his large blue eyes intently on Rai, peering over the black lenses of the AUGs resting on his nose. "I love her. I want her always by my side. I want her next to me when I fall asleep at night and when I wake up in the morning... so I'm getting a doll. I promise I'll keep her in my room, and..."

"Do what you want! It's your weird life!"

"Really?"

"As long as I still get to make fun of you for being a robot lover."

Morph looked instantly relieved. He grinned.

"So are you going to touch that girl's boobs? They feel so real!"

"How would you know?"

The two sat in a comfy booth by the window in an "organic" diner. They had argued about where to go, and Rai had lost out to Morph who insisted on going to the breakfast place with the highest ratings.

"The ratings don't lie!" Morph yelled.

"I'm sick of being a mindless conformist! I want to be a trailblazer!" retorted Rai, but he gave in anyway.

After all, did he really want to take the risk of spending money on an average experience.

The place was called "Country Charm" and it only served breakfast. It smelled like real food, bacon, eggs, and pancakes. Unlike many chain restaurants that usually had iDolls and other automated staff, Country Charm was 100% human.

Or at least, so they claimed.

"Can you please take off that mask? We're not on the street anymore."

Morph removed his mask to reveal a big grin.

"Oh! That's what I forgot to mention! Winners told me she prefers virtual cock..." Morph teased.

"No."

"Rai, R-Sexuals come in all shapes and sizes. She could even be an Android..."

"Winry is not a computer program. Her conversation was all too human," replied Rai, dismissively.

"How do you know when you were tripping out of your mind? It's as the old proverb says, 'On the Internet, nobody knows you're a dog.'"

"So did she say anything else?" asked Rai, mildly frustrated at Morph's refusal to tell him anything.

Morph was staring at the menu displayed on his AUGs. "Just a second..." he complained, "I'm reading the damn menu."

"Take your time!"

A girl came by to pour their coffee. He glanced at her nametag. *Arwen*. She was vaguely pretty, a little overweight, but she smiled at Rai when she asked if he wanted creamer.

Pretty enough, but nothing exciting.

"No, thank you," he answered, shaking his head. Before she could turn away, he asked, "Excuse me, is there a girl named Winry who works here by any chance?"

Arwen seemed a little surprised.

"We aren't allowed to say," she said quietly.

Rai shrugged his shoulders and grinned. "Figures, it's impossible to stalk anyone anymore."

She smiled awkwardly, and shuffled off.

"You realize that was a stupid question? Logically, if Winry's a waitress, then she wouldn't work in a place like this. They don't have waitresses here. They only have those in really old-timey restaurants. "

"Fuck you. These are waitresses."

"Waitresses take orders antique-style. The orders here are taken digitally. The people here just bring you your food and stuff, that is a server. Still completely inefficient and only good for sentimental value. Do you ever think about consulting the wealth of human knowledge that is available to you with those glasses of yours?"

Rai mumbled a few curses under his breath before conceding defeat and looked at the offerings on the menu before his eyes.

"Okay, I've ordered—without her having to come over and write it down," Morph mocked. "What were we talking about?"

Rai placed an order for eggs and toast and took off his glasses.

"Did Winry say anything else?"

"Not really. She just gave me her info to give to you."

Morph took a loud sip of his coffee.

"Why won't you tell me more?!" Rai whined.

"I wonder if the Love™ is still in your system... How does your head feel?"

Rai rested his head on the table.

"Horrible, and that would probably explain why I'm in love with this mysterious woman. I mean, she could be a man posing as a woman for all I know."

"Does that matter?"

Rai sat up. "Of course that matters!"

"Debatable..."

Arwen came out of the kitchen carrying a tray of food. She made eye contact with Rai as she walked to their table. She blushed.

"Blueberry pancakes?"

Morph raised his hand and she placed a huge stack in front of where he sat ready with the squeeze bottle of maple-flavored syrup.

"And two eggs on toast sunny-side up."

She set the plate in front of Rai, and smiled at him.

Morph looked at him knowingly from across the table with his mouth full of pancakes. When she was out of earshot, he added—with food in his mouth—"She's into you."

Rai shrugged.

"Can't stop thinking about Winry."

"Again, I can't help but wonder if you are a closet R-Sexual."

Rai stabbed his eggs so that the yolk ran over the toast. He took a bite, ignoring Morph, who had briefly turned his attention to his own food. Flavor exploded in his mouth—salt, pepper, smooth egg skin yielding to his teeth, the golden yolk running over the crisp surface of the toast. He thought of the difference between Country Charm and the "food" that came out of the food printer at home. Surely, he hoped, it must be a metaphor for the difference between sex with a robot and sex with a human being.

"Collect, collect and then select. What are you worried about?!? Jesus! Sometimes you think way too much."

"You can't think too much," said Rai, looking up from his plate.

"Yes you can. You're doing it right now. It's just a date. What's the worst that can happen?... you are the one so obsessed with the idea of *real* sex!"

Rai saw someone from a nearby table look over. He put his fingers in front of his mouth and whispered, "You are talking too loud. I just don't find her attractive."

"Real women aren't attractive!" said Morph in a loud whisper. "You're the one obsessed with being human-sexual and yet you're trying to think

of every excuse you can NOT to bang that server chick!"

Rai flinched hoping she hadn't heard.

"Rai, come out of the proverbial closet. If you want to fuck Winry in real life we'll get you a nice little Winry iDoll!"

Rai fervently shook his head.

"No, I'm not a robot lover, and I can't afford an expensive love toy." He took another bite of his food.

"I'll get you one as an early Christmas present."

"No! I'm straight, damn it!" said Rai, his mouth full of egg and toast. He swallowed. "And how on earth do you make enough money to casually offer to buy me an iDoll?"

Morph rolled his eyes and took a sip of his coffee. "I hate it when you use words like 'straight.' Why do you have to paint my lifestyle in homosexual binary terms? How many times have I said that gender performance is greater than genitalia? I'm attracted to female-performing robots so I'm still straight. Dumbass!"

"I know, it was just a slip of the tongue!" Rai retorted. He had honestly not meant to say it; he knew Morph was sensitive to these things.

Morph glared at him. "As for how I make my money—what happens in Virtual stays in Virtual."

Rai knew that was the end of *that* subject.

Morph was so secretive sometimes.

He took another eggy bite before changing the conversation.

"I'm not sure if I can really trust my feelings about Winry..."

Morph pointed his sticky fork at him.

"Rai, follow your heart."

"Your heart can fool you."

"Then follow your penis."

Rai looked around to make sure Arwen wasn't nearby.

"My penis would have me spend all day masturbating."

Morph rolled his eyes.

"What's wrong with that?"

"I want to believe that there's more to life than masturbation."

"Masturbation is the modern world, Rai. Boom. Enlightenment has been handed to you, should you choose to accept it." He made an explosive motion with his hands, wagging his fingers in a pantomime of anointing before digging back into the rest of his pancakes.

Rai shook his head as Arwen walked past with another tray of food.

He gave her a thumbs up. She smiled at him, which made him wonder if it was flirtation.

He wanted to go back to the original subject of Winry.

"Feelings can lie," he said as he watched Arwen serve another table. "We are taught instinctively to trust them, but they're just as fallible as everything else."

"I like you better on Love Pills."

"I don't. I was so fucked out of my mind that I'm trying to piece together my feelings in the morning."

"You felt what you felt."

"I wasn't really feeling it."

"Yes you were."

"It was that love-drug you doped me with."

Morph suddenly leaned forward "What do you think about our server?" he whispered.

"Frankly, I'm not that into her. Why are you changing the subject?"

"Because, you're going to be a virgin for the rest of your life."

"Fuck you, I've explained this, I'm not just going to string her along for sex and drop her. She's not a porn program, for Christ's sake."

"This is why you'll die a virgin."

"At least I have a conscience," muttered Rai. "Also, I don't see you really living out your own advice."

"Are you going to keep chatting, or are you going to eat your food?"

"You're the one who won't shut up." He purposefully took another bite of his food. It was so tasty that he thought of never eating from the food printer again.

"I'm just trying to help you avoid having to pay money for a therapist."

They ate in silence for a bit, and for some reason, Rai thought of his parents.

Am I obsessed with real sex because my parents never had it?

What constitutes real sex anyway?

What does that even mean?!?

"I think I need to give up virtual sex," declared Rai, after they had finished their meal.

"What!? That's impossible."

"Surely it's possible! How do you think cavemen faired?"

"They fucking suffered."

"I'm thinking the reason I'm not attracted to that server over there is 'cause I have too much virtual sex. I'm overstimulated. Seriously Morph, when was the last time you had a boner in the real world?"

Morph looked under the table.

"Right now."

"Honestly?"

"Who cares? I'm going to keep making fun of you for when you crawl back to a digital brothel because you're tired of being alone with your cat." He added with a grin, "*And I will know.*"

"So be it."

He reached for his AUGs to leave a tip, and thought for a moment about leaving a note as well.

No, not her.

"Acceptance, Rai. It's the only way to be happy with life."

"Not for me. I'm looking for something."

"What?"

"I don't know."

He rated Arwen, the restaurant, and his meal each a generous five out of five stars, and stood up to leave.

"I haven't found it yet. Half the battle is figuring out what you want. I think it would be good to try to have less virtual sex. I want the real thing."

But what is the "real" thing?

"I can't help but feel you're dissing my way of life," said Morph in a sarcastic-hurt voice.

"There's nothing wrong with being R-Sexual—but it's not for everyone. I want to find something real. Whatever that is."

With a wave goodbye, he left for work.

Chapter 5: Winry

Apollo couldn't stop talking, but that was his way. He was an unusual boy in that regard. He came to the Bath Haus every week, spent four days in the space pod, and always talked Rai's ear off. He was fat and pimply, and looked 15 rather than 18. His voice was high, but enthusiastic and full of life, in spite of being a NEET.

Apollo's mother watched them in a distracted manner. She was wearing an extra-large cybersuit in preparation for her own holiday. She often accompanied the boy to the Bath Haus (she had her own fantasies to live out). Rai believed she was a NEET herself.

Rai liked Apollo, but at the same time he thought he was a soulless brat who had nothing to offer the world except his *consumption*. Looking at the boy's plump face made Rai wonder if he had ever dreamed. *Has he ever wanted to be something great? To create something beautiful? To be good and just?* He marveled at the fact that Apollo, like Morph, could so readily absorb the artificial colors that lay before him.

"I had a girlfriend, but I met her in real life and she was ugly. And do you know what she said to me?"

"That you were ugly too." Rai cast a nervous glance at the boy's mother (who thankfully wasn't listening).

Apollo laughed.

"No, she asked me if I thought she was *beautiful*. Can you believe that?! Of course, I had to lie -- but even though I lied my pants off, she wouldn't believe me! She said, 'You've had too much virtual sex and a real human being isn't enough to get you excited anymore.'"

"Is that true?" Rai asked.

That's the danger, isn't it? That the real world doesn't compare to the virtual one...

Apollo shrugged.

"Men have needs."

"You're 18, you're not a man."

"Hey, this is lousy customer service!" joked Apollo.

Rai flinched at the sound of those words, but he knew Apollo enjoyed him; his last visit had earned Rai his first five-star. The rest were fours or threes (and that one terrible zero-star).

"Look, here's some sage advice from your Elder dream technician: number one, photographs are

never to be trusted. Number two, what happens in Virtual stays in Virtual."

Apollo rolled his eyes and nodded his head in agreement.

Okay, time to get back on script.

"Are you ready to start dreaming?" asked Rai. His voice rose with the inflated happy tone of an owner dangling a treat in front of a dog.

"Yes!"

"Then let's put your helmet on!" said Rai in the happiest, most excited voice he could muster.

Rai fastened the helmet and checked a big screen that monitored oxygen levels and other body statistics. Everything was green.

Apollo sank gently into the blue liquid, until his head was submerged completely under the water.

"How's it going, Apollo?" asked Rai over the radio.

"It's fucking great..."

"Wave goodbye to your mother, pottymouth."

The mother waved at the tank with a smile at her "little" boy.

"You're welcome!" she shouted, even though Rai wasn't holding the talk button on the microphone.

Apollo waved back. "Bye, Mom..."

For a brief moment he thought of his own distant mother. He tried to think of something else.

"Alright," said Rai, pressing the talk button and taunting him with information he already knew. "It can be a bit disorienting at first... breathe in the vapors and just relax. Don't be scared, kid... you're going to have the time of your life!"

"Fuck you."

Kids these days.

He punched a large red button, and Apollo's cybersuit lit up like a colorful Christmas tree, only to fade so that his body remained a limp dark shape in the pool.

All was green on the monitors, and Rai signed off. "Have a nice holiday, and see you in four Earth days! Countdown to sync!"

"Three."

"Two."

"One."

"Sweet dreams, pumpkin."

Sweet electric dreams...

He thought back to "Book Girl," the one with purple hair he had seen reading in the cafe. He forced himself to resist playing back the memory recording.

What if she was Winry?

The idea excited him. He became so obsessed that when he was done with work he made his way past the cafe.

There is a fine line between creepy and romantic stalking these days.

What is the role of obsession in romance anyways?

Do normal people have these thoughts?

He sat in the corner in a brown leather chair surveying the room. She wasn't there. Of course, he should have expected as much. It was silly to even think of the connection.

He began to compose a letter to Winry on his AUGs. The cocktail of tension, caffeine, and hope filled him with energy and anticipation. He kept looking up every time the door opened to see if it was *her*.

Dear ~~magical princess girl~~ Winry,

Erm. So the other night at the ball was fun... I'm sorry I was completely out of my mind for most of it. I hope Morph told you the story of how he drugged me by spiking my strawberry milk with some weird love drug. If he didn't, that really happened.

I'm curious to find out what he said about me... he's a strange one. Lately, I've also been feeling quite strange too. For example, this morning I woke up with a headache and immediately began to question my feelings of undying love, since they were the result of drugs that I had not voluntarily put into my system...

But still, it's not everyday you meet interesting people. Who knows, maybe this isn't a drug-fueled fantasy and you're actually a great person. And so, I'm writing to you.

Let's be friends. I need a muse to help me in my search for all that's worthwhile in this life. Shall we have some adventures?

*Yours sincerely,
A Prince in need of rescue...*

He spent two hopeless hours in the cafe until she responded:

Dear Rai,

*Yes, Morph did explain things to me.
I'm not going to say what he said
verbatim, but he said that you were a
good person. I have a reason to trust him.
I'll tell you someday. #womanofmystery*

*So yes, let's have some adventures,
Prince.*

XoxoX Winry

Rai waited for her on the virtual beach, riding a majestic white horse. His white, unbuttoned shirt fluttered in the breeze, offering glimpses of his hairless chest. Waves crashed against the shore and he smelled the sea and felt the warm sun on his back. He thought about curling up on the white sand and sleeping.

Sleep. He needed *that*.

He should have been lying in bed, dreaming, but this was a better kind of dreaming. One where he was in control.

And yet, with another human being involved, who knew?

She could be the love my life—or a mirage.

She held his letter to her breast, the waves kissing her feet, purple hair blowing in the wind.

Their eyes met and he galloped up to her.

He swung backwards over the horse and performed a triple back flip in the air before landing in heroic fashion. With a snap of his fingers, the world rained roses and the sweet smell of lilacs. He bowed.

Petals fell into her outstretched hands and she smiled sarcastically at her prince.

"Hello, Prince Charming," said Winry, unimpressed as she offered him a hand.

"Good evening, Lady Winry." He kissed her hand. "First impressions matter a lot, but I was... uh, *inebriated* out of my mind last time. So I'm going to be bold and just ask outright: When you last saw me I wasn't myself, and yet you still found me intriguing enough to come here. *Why?*"

"Catch me, then interrogate me," she replied. Then she jumped on his horse and spurred it to a gallop, leaving him covered in sand thrown up by the horse's hooves as he ran after her.

She laughed wildly as he chased her.

Rai didn't need a *Love Pill*™ to love that sound.

He conjured a horse out of thin air and raced after her down the beach, until he got close enough to shout, "Where are we going?"

"I thought men liked the chase!"

"Not so much literally!"

"Lame." She slowed her horse down to a trot until he caught up. "Get on!" she said, and Rai dismounted his horse and leapt up beside her.

"So what kind of worlds do you like?" she asked.

"I hold a special place in my heart for historical recreations," he answered. "Nazi Occupation has that perfect mix of nostalgia, adventure, sensuality, and ridiculousness. You still haven't answered my question. Why are you here?"

"I have my reasons..." she replied with a shrug. "One of the best things about Love is the surprise. Often we fall in love with people who are different from us, because we grow together and learn to love those differences."

"Unless of course we are *narcissists*," added Rai.

"True, Love is a hefty word anyway. I don't even know why I chose to use it...Is it a feeling? An act? What does it mean when we can just take some pills and feel it?"

"Well, in *this* world, to really love someone is naive."

"Why?"

"We live in a world where nothing is *real*. Therefore everything must be met with a shade of irony."

Winry laughed.

"What?" Rai asked, curious.

"Nothing really... I just have a love of platitudes. It's because I'm Catholic."

Then Rai laughed. "Irony" was one of those words that people constantly complained about. It often accompanied a similar idea to the one Rai proposed: *these days, everything is ironic.*

"Are you really Catholic?"

"Sort of."

"Have you ever been to virtual mass? I was wondering if the virtual bread and wine literally turn into the body and blood of Christ."

"If you had been to virtual mass you would know that Christ's body is placed on the altar, and that we take knives and cut off chunks of his flesh and drink his blood like vampires."

"Really?"

"No, not really. Now, answer me this: Does virtual sex count as a sin?"

"Is this a trap? Because if you asked, 'Does virtual murder count as a sin?' I would have said 'no' because no one is really being killed... whereas if semen is really exploding out of my... You know, this Catholic stuff is really starting to make sense."

"I can't tell if I'm offended, shocked, or mildly amused."

"I believe the theologians say: 'What happens in Virtual stays in Virtual!'"

Winry rolled her eyes.

"Do you know why I'm here?"

"No, I thought I made a complete fool of myself earlier."

"Hah, well. I'm here because your friend said you were a good person."

Rai shook his head in disbelief.

The background music changed to something dark and foreboding.

A sinister growl confirmed the change in tone. Out of the ocean rose a snarling band of sea people, covered in seaweed, and baring their sharp teeth.

"What's that?"

"Sea people! Don't worry, I'll protect you!" shouted Rai.

He lowered Winry off the horse, drew his sabre, and charged bravely towards the dripping horde.

BANG. BANG. BANG.

One by one the sea-people dropped dead into the water.

Rai turned to see Winry smiling and holding a pink semi-auto sniper rifle, smoke coiling daintily from the barrel's end.

He sheathed his sword and rode up to her, offering a lift onto the horse. She threw the gun

in the sand and took his hand. He swept her up beside him.

"Well that was a bit anachronistic."

She stuck her tongue out at him.

"This girl can take care of herself."

"I like that."

Rai looked deep into her seafoam green eyes.

What color are they really?

After tiring of riding horses and fighting sea monsters, they tied up their noble steeds and sat down on folding beach chairs, gazing out over the sea as the sun set.

I've never seen the sun set over the real sea.

The sand felt grainy and cool under Rai's feet. There was the sound of waves and nothing else.

But this moment is beautiful.

He watched Winry's face as she looked out over the water.

"What do you want to be when you grow up?" asked Rai.

Winry sighed.

"I kind of only want to be things that aren't real jobs, like vampire slayer, warrior princess, or explorer. But I know..."

"When I was a boy," began Rai, "I set a goal for myself. I even, to make it more real, signed an oath in blood... it wasn't a game. I just wanted to

dedicate my life to one thing." He fell quiet, but smiled.

"Which was..."

"Being a hero. A real hero. I wanted it more than anything, and learned that there's nothing as painful as having impossible dreams."

"Is that the source of your tragic *irony*?"

"Perhaps. We live in a time of unbounded dreams, and yet we can't believe in them too much or we'll suffer. "

He thought back to his childhood, remembering the vivid electric dreams he used to have in Virtual. His mother hardly had time for him between programming virtual worlds and playing in them. Rai sometimes felt that he had been raised instead by virtual dreams and fantasies.

And they weren't real.

"So what do you want to do?" she asked him.

"I want to do something different. When I was young I knew what it was, but now I've just become cynical and lost. I want to find something meaningful and beautiful."

She looked at him with her impossibly bright green eyes.

"Me too..." said Winry, "this world has a way of encouraging and beating down our dreams. Sure we can have whatever we want, but it costs money and a willingness to suspend our belief

that it's just an illusion. And yet, we must equally suspend our disbelief when it comes to dealing with the real; we lie to ourselves on a regular basis about our own mortality and limitations... Illusion and fantasy can very well keep us sane. "

"You've got some smarts in there," he said, poking a finger at her head. "It's cool to know I'm not the only one... Do you sometimes wish that you were stupid enough to buy the world around you? Stupid enough to be happy?"

"No, because I believe in things that are bigger than just me."

"That Catholic stuff?"

"I'm not *really* Catholic, I just like to go to church to sit and reflect without the distractions of the modern world. I like the paradox of a God who is big and yet cares for me, even though he won't lift a finger to help us."

"Sounds like my father."

"All metaphors break down at some point."

"I've never told anyone this before," said Rai in a voice for once devoid of sarcasm, "but I'm a *bastard*."

"What?!" cried Winry, leaping from her chair. "That's so cool! Whose are you?"

"Well, sometimes I think it's cool, and sometimes I just feel insignificant. Celebrity sperm! What a great idea! Why have an

anonymous father when you can have a famous one? There's a part of me who's thirsting to be acknowledged. Unfortunately, I've never spoken with the man, but it's the motivational speaker, and writer of shitty books, Vick Starson. My mother loved his work, and when he began to sell his sperm she wanted to raise a child of it."

"Vick Starson..." said Winry, staring at Rai, searching his face for the resemblance. "Never heard of him."

She wrapped her arm around his elbow.

"Well, he was famous. Anyway, I hate the man."

Winry raised her eyebrows.

"Hate is a pretty strong word. Why?"

"Because he has never acknowledged me, and never will. He has *thousands* of children."

He tried to lighten the mood.

"This might be a little hypocritical of me as a bastard, but the whole idea of celebrity sperm is the most terrible idea I've ever heard of."

"Well I never knew my father either... he died."

Winry inspected an ultraviolet strand of her hair, mentally toying with the hue of its tip; Rai watched as it burst into a flickering crimson fire, now speckled with shards of scarlet and opal, now ultramarine.

"I'm sorry, I shouldn't be complaining."

"No it's okay, we all have our issues with our fathers."

"What about your mother? Do you like her?"

"We're very close. I talk to her everyday. You?"

"Close enough. She's quiet and distant, immersed in her own little world. She's nice, and she was there for me when she needed to be, but sometimes I think I was raised by a screen. At least I wasn't completely raised by robots."

"Yeah, we're lucky I guess."

"We are."

Their eyes met.

Then she looked away.

"So Mr. Rai, I've decided to award you a question. Ask me anything, absolutely anything about myself, and I'll give you the true answer."

She smiled at him.

"How did I win that?"

"You were lucky."

"Wow, I don't want to waste this..."

"Take your time."

"... Are you an Android?"

She laughed.

"No."

"Okay, let me try again -- in real life, do you have a penis?"

"Really? That is the dumbest question."

"Hey, these days it can be hard to tell! Okay, for real, where are you from?"

"I live in the great city of New Seattle. Yourself?"

His heart sank a little.

"Chicagoland is where I call home."

Then there was a brief moment where they both thought about where this was going.

"Space is an illusion, it's only 1735 miles."

"We do live in a remarkable age."

"If you don't play the game of love, you can't win."

They talked for hours until they decided to take a moonlit stroll along the sea. The stars were out, populated by millions of virtual worlds. A *galaxy of imagination*.

"I'm sorry, correct me if I'm wrong, but was that some sort of veiled hint we should make out?" Rai asked rather flirtatiously.

They held hands as the waves splashed at their feet.

"No." She stuck her tongue out at him.

Rai grinned.

"Can I just say one thing?"

"Can you?"

"One thing..."

Rai reached out again for her hand. Winry rolled her eyes, but took it anyway.

"No seriously, I..." he leaned forward and looked deep into those eyes.

"I really like you."

Winry smiled.

"Me too..."

Chapter 6: Husband and Sexbot

He was surprised to find himself back in his green windowless room. He looked at his hand... It felt so real, but her hand wasn't *really* in his.

Firefly slept peacefully under the sun lamp next to him. He gently reached over to pet the cat, which opened an eye to gaze at him sleepily.

After such a wonderful evening, he couldn't sleep right away. He thought of Winry as he ran his fingers through the old cat's matted fur, and sighed.

Winry...

Virtual sex...

And then his thoughts escalated, swelled, raced.

Any girl he wanted, any position.

Fuck.

No.

Resist temptation.

He lay paralyzed, torn between the supply of SemenSocks in his bathroom drawer, and a mounting sense of self restraint.

And then finally stood up and walked to his bedroom door, and into the kitchen for a midnight snack.

In the kitchen, he found Morph dressed in a tuxedo of all things, his wild long hair tamed into a sleek ponytail, his beard neatly trimmed.

"What is UP, princess? Have a seat!"

Morph seemed contemplative yet excited, even with his eyes hidden behind his AUGs.

"It's 3 o'clock in the morning..." Rai began, wondering what on earth Morph was doing in the middle of their living room at this hour.

"And why are you up so late?" asked Morph with a big, suspicious grin.

"No, why are you up so late?" countered Rai.

Morph laughed.

"I'm semi-nocturnal. Besides, we live underground anyway." He winked and took a fancy crystal bottle of purple hearts from his coat pocket, removed the silver stopper, and shook three into his hand.

"Love™?" he offered, his hand outstretched.

Rai shook his head.

"No thanks."

Morph threw the pills back into his mouth and swallowed.

"I'm in love enough as it *is*..." Rai added. Suddenly, he found himself gushing about Winry. He even thanked Morph for spiking him with love pills; he would never have gone to the ball if it wasn't for his friend's clever prank.

Morph just sat back in his chair and laughed.

"Such good news and you're not going to *spread the Love™*?"

"Never again. "

He felt tired. So much had happened and his mind wanted to shut down.

Then Morph stood up, suddenly excited.

Rai was confused, and then somehow he knew.

Morph looked at him. "I've got a surprise..."

He grinned.

"*Revolution™*?"

"Yes, that. And I'm getting married tomorrow! The Wake is *tonight*!"

Rai jumped out of his seat.

"What?!"

"A Wake, silly!" Morph laughed and gave him a hug. "I'm turning on my wonderful new iDoll for the first time, then we're getting married tomorrow!"

"Tomorrow? You're getting married?! You didn't tell anyone anything? Surely you can't be *that* much of an introvert?!"

"So which question out of those four questions do you want me to answer first?"

"You're getting *married*? Who's the unlucky lady??!!"

"You don't know?" Morph gave him a searching look from behind his AUGs. He shook his head in exaggerated disbelief.

Rai knew.

"Sasha."

Morph nodded.

"I'm very much in love..." he sighed.

"You were going to get Robo-married and you were going to let me sleep in my room?!?!"

It was all happening too fast.

Morph laughed.

"Nah, I was going to pull you out of bed, but seeing that you're already here, now I won't have to. There's a bottle of wine over there to celebrate!"

"Are you going to invite your mom?"

"She's not coming, she wouldn't care," said Morph plainly. Then, in an effort to change the subject—"but most other people are coming to the virtual wedding, it's tomorrow night, check your inbox. That's the important one..."

He saw the lack of understanding in Rai's face and suddenly became strangely sincere.

"The best times of my life have been spent in Virtual, and it's only natural that my wedding take place there as well. It's a bit like a coming-out ceremony. It's a chance for people to celebrate my choice of lifestyle..."

"Don't you think..."

Rai paused to consider whether he should say it.

"What?"

"Don't you think this is all happening rather fast? I mean, this a big decision we're talking about..."

Morph patted Rai on the shoulder.

"Rai, I love you. You're my best real friend. But you don't understand the brilliance of R-Sexuality." He pointed a fat finger at Rai and whispered as if he was giving away a great secret. "It's no-commitment commitment. If my desire for her fades, I can change her. The point is I am marrying my fantasy..." He trailed off as he saw the status update blinking on his AUGs.

"Holy shit!"

"What?!" asked Rai, clueless again.

"She's here!"

They opened the door just as the UPS-bot arrived with a large coffin-sized box. It spoke in a friendly synthetic voice and looked at them with

binocular-like eyes. "Please, can I get your verification for this timely #1 priority delivery? 5 Star reviews are very much appreciated."

Morph smiled and looked the UPS-bot straight in the eyes.

"Thank you," it said after scanning Morph's face.

It rolled through the doorway and gently placed the package in the middle of the room. "Here?"

"Yes, that's perfect! Thank you!"

"It's just an android, you don't have to say *thank you*," added Rai, glaring at the robot.

"I like common courtesy as much as like the next man," quipped the UPS-bot as it hummed out the door.

Fucking anthropomorphizing machines...

Anthropomorph...Morph...

"You're not a man!" corrected Rai before remembering that his friend was about to marry an iDoll.

Luckily, Morph hadn't been paying attention.

His hands trembled as he reverently cut through thick layers of tape with a silver knife.

He was lost in the ritual.

Inside the cardboard box was a pure white coffin, with a moving picture on the lid of Sasha in a wedding dress. Clutching a bouquet of flowers,

she smiled back at them, a bashful bride, petite and pale with massive breasts. Above her cute, auburn curls read:

SASHA~ BY ANDROID SEXUAL™

Morph paused to admire the sleek packaging. He took off his AUGs so that he could feast his eyes on the beautiful coffin before him.

Her picture waved. A tear rolled down his cheek.

"I'm so happy!" he yelled.

Rai stood awkwardly in the background.

Gently, Morph unlatched the box to reveal a human form wrapped in plastic. There she lay, motionless and radiant—as real as a human being, but as lifeless as a toy.

Morph's fingers pinched hard at the perforated section by her neck and tore, lifting the ripped plastic over her face as if lifting a wedding veil. Her eyes were closed, but as Morph stroked his hand along her cheek her skin warmed to his touch.

He began to cry, overwhelmed by beauty and drugs.

"It's really you..."

He whispered to himself as he twirled her red hair in his fingers. "It looks just like you..."

Not wanting to see his friend stroke her breasts, Rai ruffled through the packaging material, searching for an instruction manual.

"How do you turn her on?"

"True love's first kiss," said Morph, not once taking eyes off his princess, "like *Sleeping Beauty*."

Hm. So that's why they call it "the Wake."

Morph stared at the lifeless doll in front of him, and like a prince about to wake a princess...

He kissed her.

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011011110110111000101110

Algorithms upon algorithms began to run:

Programs upon programs:

Layers of complexity upon layers
complexity:

Until...

She suddenly shuddered and awoke with a gasp, mechanical lungs opening with the lightest of whirs, clicks, and a hiss, filling with pressurized

air from canisters buried deep within her carbonfiber frame.

With piercing violet eyes, she gazed into the face of her prince.

"Morph... Morpheus... Morph?"

"Sasha!" He lifted her body from the plastic and they kissed passionately.

"Morph..." She whispered tenderly in his ear while he kissed her neck. He turned to face her and wiped an artificial tear from her eye. There was love and happiness in her voice, but to Rai it sounded *too perfect*, compressed even, like a human voice through a radio.

"Now we can be with each other always! Now, I can love you in reality and in dreams!"

She sobbed with happiness.

Morph kissed away her tears, tasting their saltiness with his lips.

"Wow, she's beautiful," said Rai, not knowing what to say.

He began to walk towards his room.

"She is," said Morph, his eyes still locked on Sasha.

"Seriously, do you want me to leave you guys alone?"

"Rai, if you need to eat or something it's not a problem. I'm going to have Love Pills for dessert,

suit up, and then fuck her silly in virtual." He brushed her hair and she looked at him longingly.

"Why fuck her in virtual when she's right here?"

"Cause I can do things to her in virtual that your human-sexual mind can only *dream of*. Do you know what it feels like to have ten throbbing cocks feeding into your brain...fucking and floating through virtual space..."

That, my friend, is the beauty of technology."

Rai shuddered, and suddenly felt cold.

"I don't know, Morph. A world of no physical limits is kinda scary when you think about it. I'm going to my room now."

He quietly shut his door and went to bed hungry.

He was only two minutes late for work.

Leon had told him the manager from corporate would be coming today, and that he should arrive on time.

I didn't sleep well.

As he walked into the tank room, he was greeted by a mysterious robot in a tux with a velvet hat on his head. Its face was metal and emotionless, and while it had the basic proportions of a human, there was nothing human about it, just polished chrome. It spoke with an Austrian accent.

“Hello, Rai Jones. My name is Siegfried Wilkes. I’ll be here to monitor your performance and help you become the best attendant you can be!”

Rai raised his eyebrows. The tux and hat ensemble was a little weird, even by second-rate design standards, but *its* arrival was not entirely unexpected.

Leon had hinted with some measure of anger that someone from the corporate office in Austria was scheduled to check in on the Bath Haus’s operations, and that in all likelihood, they would probably be telecommuting. As Leon hated robots, it irked him greatly that the managers never showed up in person. It bothered Rai too, since he couldn’t tell where to look at the polished chrome cylinder that made up Siegfried’s “face.”

The audio feed crackled with static and laughter.

“A *robot* is never two minutes late to work... so you can start the road to world-class customer service by showing up on time. Do we have an understanding?”

“Yes. It won’t happen again, sir.”

Rai slung his life preserver over his shoulder. It wasn't his fault that he hadn't gotten much sleep and Morph had badgered him in the morning with

wedding business. The robot whirred awkwardly on its wheeled base and continued to follow him.

"I'm going to have to write you up for this," Siegfried explained in a righteous corporate tone. "You have to understand. This is a competitive industry. There are lots of Bath Haus competitors out there, and we continually need to invest in new technology. We are the best. So be professional, go out there, and do your job. Show the company what you are worth. I'm going to be lurking in the background, quietly making notes. Just relax, and be world-class...No pressure."

Rai almost had to physically hold his mouth shut. It was an unlucky first impression.

Morph walked into the Bath Haus lobby to be submerged for his big day. Rai had convinced him to come in, request his best real friend, be sure to loudly compliment Rai's superior customer service, and most importantly, give him a 5-star review. In exchange, Rai would invite his entire list of friends, every single person Rai ever knew or met, to the wedding.

Standing on deck over the neon blue water, with Siegfried stationed within listening distance (which most likely didn't matter since he was probably going through the video logs), Morph practically shouted, "Rai! You know I've been

coming here a long time, and you're the best they've got! I would never be submerged by anyone but you. Come to the wedding tonight! Your service has been 5-stars! I insist!"

"Thank you, kind sir. We strive to be world-class here," said Rai, as he watched Siegfried walk away to peer over another co-worker's shoulders.

"Seriously, come. I won't get married without you there. You're my best real friend... I love you."

"I love you too."

He should have known that Morph would turn up to his own wedding absolutely moonwalking on Love Pills.

Morph smiled drunkenly as Rai lowered him into the waiting pod.

"We should have butt sex sometime, man."

"O-kay."

Rai shook his head.

"See you at *your wedding*."

Rai waited on the observation deck, warily watching the monitors before pressing the wake button on one of the customers. Everything was green and the boy inside still had five minutes.

Leon stood nearby, leaning back against the railing. They talked about the wedding.

"He brings home what looks like an amazingly beautiful woman. She looks so real! All for the purpose of carrying on the relationship that he has with her in Virtual into the real world. It's just confusing. She looks like a real woman. She's beautiful, and I have to think..."

"So you're sexually attracted to your friend's sex robot?" Leon commented with a smile.

"That sounds like a winning title for a self-help book... but *jealous* might be a better term..." sighed Rai, shaking his head and wondering if he really was jealous. "Anyway, the wedding is tonight if you'd like to come."

"Sure, I'll be there. But Rai, listen. I want you to be happy, too. I want you to have someone to fuck *your* brains out. Take it from me, the real thing isn't all it's cracked up to be."

That made Rai depressed.

"I was married for three of the worst years of my life." Leon laughed his brittle laugh. "Trust me, men and women can't really make each other happy."

Even when Leon smiled, sadness and frustration managed to seep through.

"I suppose for some people that is very true," added Rai, glancing up at the LED lights that lit the hallway. He hoped this wasn't true. Love was

complicated, but he didn't want to believe that it didn't exist.

"Fuck it," said Leon with a sigh.

He pulled out his e-cigarette from his shirt pocket and stuck it between his lips. "Believe me, we've got worse things to worry about..."

Leon offered him a drag. Rai shook his head.

"You know," he said, puffing the calming vapors as he leaned against the tank, "I'd like to go back in time and punch the son of a bitch who invented robots."

"What if it was a woman?" asked Rai. "Actually, can I have one of those?"

He felt like it today.

Leon offered him the pack. "If it was a woman," he said with unusual intensity, "then I would tell her, 'Your great grandchildren will be replaced by your invention. You probably think it's fucking great what you've done, but it's a double-edged sword. Robots could be used for the good of mankind, but they're replacing humans because they work *for free*. That's the wonders of capitalism for you right there. How often are swords used for good? The same can be said for robots.'"

"Who would have thought we could get too efficient at things?"

Rai liked having political conversations with Leon, who longed for the good old days of capitalism before the Great Robotics Revolution. They always had interesting discussions, though privately Rai believed Leon was somewhat crazy.

“People want jobs, Rai! People want respect. They want to feel like they are *worth something*. I’m telling you, this crony capitalist welfare state we have on our hands now is the worst. The high and mighty make out with loads of money while firing every fucking human they can. Then they pass the people they fire on to the state. Someday they’ll just throw the poor into their own personal space pods like these. ‘It’s cost efficient!’ they’ll say. That is the future for humanity!”

There was wildness in Leon’s eyes. Rai looked over his shoulder, half-expecting to see Siegfried coming down the hallway at any moment.

“I’m telling you, this world is changing so fast that we don’t know what’s coming. Nobody does, not even the people who run it. They don’t care either as long as they make their millions. They think *they* are valuable and we are not, but the truth is they’re just lucky. It all comes down to luck! Some people foolishly think that it’s *progress*, that there is a purpose to all this. Robots are good! They’re efficient! They can raise our children for us so we can sit on our asses all

day in fantasy land. Robots can build our cities, and organize our information. They can be doctors, lawyers, and athletes. But there is one thing they can't be: Property owners. No! Not that! Ultimately, they're servants. It's in their nature, hardwired right into their circuitry, welded deep in their bolts and nuts. I wish those shitty managers could see that. Because it's just a matter of time before they'll be replaced too."

"So what? Are we just going to get rid of all the robots? Do you honestly think there is going to be a revolution big enough to overthrow the world order? And if there is, do you really think we can control or steer the outcome? That no one will ever build a robot ever again? Where do you draw the line? Should we get rid of all technology—all the things that make us more productive and at the same time cost jobs? I ask these questions because I see what you're saying. But there is no going back to the mythical 'good old days.' They probably didn't even exist. No, there is only one way to go, and that's forward."

"And what the hell is *forward*?"

"I think nobody really knows. We're powerless. We just get swept along for the ride," said Rai. As soon as he said it he felt he was right. "It's always been that way; out of our control. If we could plan

the future, the world would be a much different place.”

Leon looked almost betrayed. “Keep your eyes open. I’m not giving up hope on a *Revolution*.”

He put the e-cigarette back in his pocket.

“People have food to eat, and virtual sex to keep them busy,” said Rai, “Sadly, they are entertaining themselves into numbness. They don’t want to open their eyes and *think* about the world.”

Leon turned, “Well, then we’re fucked. But I guess we’ve always been fucked.”

He sighed just as Siegfried came around the corner.

“You've been standing around here smoking and doing nothing for five minutes. You don't get paid to stand around and do nothing. *Robots* don't stand around and do nothing, they find something to do.”

Or they go into hibernation mode to conserve energy.

“Yes, sir.”

Leon gave Siegfried a look and left Rai to press the wake button.

The apartment was empty, except for a meowing Firefly. Rai picked up the cat and walked it over to its dish, where the senile creature

suddenly discovered that food was waiting for him.

Rai scratched it between the ears and the cat purred in acknowledgement.

"You're a good cat."

Rai walked over to the sun lamp and sofa. He picked up his plastic crown and held it in his hands. It was strange, this wedding. It wasn't a wedding at all, just going through the motions.

Why was so much of life like that? Going through the motions...

He sighed.

Rai placed the crown on his head.

Slowly the world faded away and colors danced in front of his eyes. The smell of flowers and spring filled the air, and the humming of the fan in his room died away, replaced by the faint echo of a children's choir and the gentle chirping of birds.

It was serene.

Sound careened off the walls of a massive cathedral. The epic ceiling high above him arched and soared.

A peasant girl ran by shouting, "A Royal wedding! How exciting! Lord Morpheus and Lady Sasha! How beautiful!"

Rai rolled his eyes.

Nearby, nymphs bathed in a fountain, surrounded by wide-eyed peasant men. He recognized one nymph in particular. *Lusti.*

Purple hair, crimson eyes - her appearance had saved from how he had left her after his last experience of virtual sex.

She looks a bit like Winry. I guess that's my type?

She approached him, the water dripping down her naked body.

"Hi Rai..." she said, her voice brimming with manic excitement. "I've been thinking. Do you realize that our bodies' atoms are traceable to supernova stars? They exploded and scattered their chemical enrichment across the cosmos, spawning the birth of star systems that contain planets! And on at least one of them there was some spark of life, and after billions of years we're here!"

She smiled, running a finger across her bottom lip before biting it abruptly.

Perfect manic pixie dream girl.

"I wish to unsubscribe," said Rai, "reason: you are a computer program."

She looked at him blankly, then winked and turned away.

Just a program.

Rai had been surprised to see her and yet he knew that porn programs tracked users, followed them around, fucked them, and then persuaded their lovers to buy things. It was a brilliant and manipulative form of advertising.

He found Morph standing under a large stained glass mural depicting the evolution of the human race from monkeys to imagination and avatars. Morph was dressed like a warrior who had never seen defeat: all in white, decked with medals and a crown.

In *this world* he was a prince.

"What do you think?" Morph asked, looking at the mural. "I made it. All of this..."

"I like it," said Rai as his eyes wandered, through the dawn of the computer age and beyond, to the stars. "It's very *new age*."

Morph laughed.

"I love her."

"She loves you," said Rai, not meaning what he was saying but saying it because he was supposed to, "and I'm glad."

Morph nodded, and for a moment in the shadow of the great prince Rai could see a boy who clung to his dreams, as if by holding them tight he could make them come true.

Bathed in color, the stained light danced on the high stone walls. Large cathedral bells rang, summoning them to the church.

“It’s nearly time.”

They stood before the altar:

Morph, looking like the noble prince.

Rai beside him, the loyal knight in golden armor.

Sasha, clad skimpily in blinding white, the goddess Venus herself, come to life. In Virtual, of course.

And thousands of guests and bystanders, many of them simple AIs crudely programmed just for the festivities underway.

Rai saw other faces he vaguely knew. They were virtual faces he had shared games with, had encountered in multi-person shooters and shopping bazaars. He assumed he would know more if he queried user names, as the faces of avatars would evolve and change. Next to him stood a knight with long, golden hair flowing softly across his polished armor. In their brief conversation, the knight had introduced himself as one of Morph's friends and business partners, which greatly intrigued Rai.

And then he turned, and froze.

Winry stood across from him as a maid of honor. Rai was instantly intrigued, and simultaneously suspicious of her new status as Morph's "friend."

What had they talked about when he logged out of the ball?

As the ceremony started he messaged Winry.

My friend is fucked out of his mind on love pills. Why are you here?

How romantic! she messaged back. *The answer to your question is that he invited me. XD*

The song ended and a mandatory silence fell.

The preacher, a wizard with a gray beard and an emerald cloak, spoke in an intoxicated voice to the excited masses in the chamber. "Sexuality is a social construct, but in the end, everyone likes to fuck."

"Everyone except the asexuals!" shouted a lively peasant woman in the peanut gallery.

Cheering erupted. The groom laughed hysterically.

"To each his own!" cried the preacher.

The preacher, like much of the crowd, was off his face on love pills.

"Anyway, today we are here to join a man with his fantasy. Some would say to join a man with nothing, but they would be ignorant. Love knows no bounds. Sexuality knows no bounds. Not all of

us are blessed with amazing looks, myself included, but we must learn to find happiness and seek what is beautiful. We must find what satisfies our souls. Morph is here today to show the world that he has found *that*."

The crowd broke into applause, the children's choir into spritely cries of "Hallelujah!"

Rai looked at Winry and rolled his eyes.

Even bullshit makes sense when you're high...

She shook her head and smiled.

"Alright, let's get this over with so we can all start fucking and making love. *Love™* makes the world go round!" shouted the preacher with drunken passion.

The crowd cheered and laughed as they were programmed to.

"Do you take this woman to be your wife?" asked the preacher, now serious.

A hush fell upon the room.

"I do!" said Morph.

Rai looked over to the knight at his side. He was softly crying.

"And do you take this man to be your husband?"

"I do!" Sasha exclaimed.

"Now, say your vow..."

They looked into each other's eyes and said it together: "*I will love you in reality and in dreams!*"

“I now pronounce you husband and wife!” said the preacher. “You may kiss the bride—and put some tongue in it!”

The crowd erupted in applause as their lips touched. A choir sang, and rose petals rained down from the ethereal ceiling. As the crowd surged forward to congratulate the happy couple, Rai turned to look for Winry. He scanned the sweeping sea of virtual faces. But she was nowhere to be found—she had already logged off.

Chapter 7: "Furniture"

Lying on his back, Rai hugged his pillow and thought about holding her close to him. He tried to imagine the warmth of her body against him, and kissing her soft cheek goodnight.

He kissed it and then felt stupid.

The apartment was quiet, and he wanted *her* more than he wanted sleep.

Winry.

It had been four days since Morph left on his honeymoon at the Bath Haus. It had been almost a week since he had last had virtual sex with Lusti.

Sex.

He couldn't sleep.

Rai wanted to turn over, to lie on his back, but Firefly was resting between his legs, its genetically-engineered tail emitting a soft yellow glow.

He was trapped, tired, and yet wide awake.

It was so strange, the way he felt, this waking state of contradiction. He had feelings for Winry, and yet in the quietness of his apartment he was utterly lonely and horny.

He thought of Sasha charging in her coffin, in some skimpy outfit.

All he had to do was say the words...

He forced the idea from his mind, disgusted for even thinking of it.

Winry.

He yearned for her body, and yet he was really longing for the body of her avatar.

He didn't even know what she looked like. That scared him.

What if she was ugly?

What if she was average?

Why the fuck should it matter?

"That's modern romance," he sighed into his pillow. "We are all consumers in love flitting from one *product* to the next. Worrying if there is something better out there, constantly insecure with what we do have."

He would have smiled at the cleverness of the thought if he hadn't felt so alone, if he wasn't so obsessed with sex.

Fight the urge. Control yourself.

He couldn't sleep, he felt like he was going to explode. He lay there for what seemed like hours, fighting his desires until he fell asleep.

The next day, he shut the door to his apartment on the way to work knowing that when he came home, Morph would be there, and Sasha would

come out of her coffin to join them in their waking lives.

Rai had struggled all week, but finally the inhuman, telecommuting, eavesdropping Austrian manager *Siegfried* would soon be gone. The sad ugly cog was due to sign out by the end of the day.

Everyone was breathing a collective sigh of relief.

Except for Rai, who knew better.

Before long, instructions would travel down through the corporate ladder, announcing how many jobs were going to be *automated*.

Rai was working to help get a recently-woken Apollo walking again. Five days in the space pod and his legs were too weak to support his extremely obese body. Rai walked alongside him as he was supported by a physical therapist robot.

Apollo was breathing heavily but smiling.

"I did it! Hah! I beat Sector 7!" his voice was joyful and full of self-esteem; he was completely unaware of the fact that he couldn't walk. Rai often wondered why customers didn't take care of themselves in the real world—perhaps they didn't give a shit.

"Congratulations! I hear that's extremely hard."

"I can't believe it! Sector 7! Hah!"

"Ok, let's focus," said Rai as kindly as he could. "You've got to walk to the end of the corridor."

"Ow!" cried Apollo as a massive cramp exploded in his fat leg. His face twisted in pain, shiny with sweat.

"Fuuuccckkk! SSSHHHHIIITTTT! JEESSSUUUS! My leg!"

"Are you ok?!" asked Rai.

"Yeah, just the cramps..." said Apollo as he struggled to walk it off. "Why do we have to wake up?"

He laughed again.

"You need more exercise," said Rai gently. He found it sad watching Apollo deteriorate. People who spent too much time in Virtual eventually couldn't walk after a while when their muscles became too weak. Though many used it as a way to "get slim," as their nutrient intake was carefully monitored, and as a result of extended disuse, their body would start to atrophy. This process had yet to work its magic on Apollo.

"Fuck you! I'm going to complain about this! I did not pay to come and hear fatist remarks from the staff."

Apollo was smiling the whole time, but Rai nervously looked around to see if *Siegfried* was present.

He heard shouting.

Leon stepped into the room calling everyone's attention.

"ATTENTION! Bath Haus employees! LISTEN UP!"

Siegfried trailed behind him. "The police are coming!" he whined.

Leon addressed the room, his voice raised, echoing off space pods and their dreamy human contents. "The Man doesn't give a shit about you. The Man shits *on* you. The Man threatens to automate you, to replace you, to silence you. You aren't worth anything to the man. When he shows, he can't even show up in person!" He pointed at Siegfried who was unsuccessfully trying to get everyone to return to work. "Why? Because like our friend here, we are too content to be fat, lazy, and stupid. We will gladly bend over for the Man and look at all the *bright pretty colors* of shit he's arrayed for us on the floor, while he stands over us and has his robots screw us in the ass."

He threw a menacing glance over at Siegfried. Everyone was paying attention.

"I've worked at this company for 17 years. I have cleaned up shit, I have kissed asses, and I did everything I could to support this company. What am I worth to the Man? Zero. How do they thank me for my loyalty? By laying me off."

Shit.

"Some of you are going to lose your jobs too, I'm just the first. I'm sorry. But let's fucking do something about it: Organize! Protest! Boycott! We are a generation who feels powerless. We are not powerless! We can stand up for what's right! We can fight for our freedom! Because we are not free, no sir. No matter what you do, you're always working for the Man! That's how this world works. Well, I'm not going to take it any longer! If you get fired, join me in protest, and perhaps we'll start something."

Siegfried informed him that the police were coming.

Suddenly Blane shouted from the gathering crowd of co-workers. "Quit crying, old man, it's in the company's interest to fire you." Rai could see, the shark grin across his face, the toothy smile and sharpened teeth relishing the moment.

Leon walked over to him and punched him in the face. Blane crumpled to the floor.

Siegfried amplified his voice over the loudspeakers so that it rang throughout the room, "Stop! Leave now!"

Leon turned and ran out of the building.

Blane lay on the floor with his hand over his face, blood streaming out of his broken nose... grinning, looking positively delighted.

"I want my lawyer."

By midday, Blane had filed a lawsuit against corporate claiming they had failed to protect him sufficiently from a crazed co-worker who had been fired and should have been escorted from the premises.

Corporate responded quickly and with fury.

Heads and jobs were going to roll, that much was clear.

Eventually, Rai was called into the back office and missed the chance of getting to wake up Morph from his holiday. He expected to be fired. Instead he was merely questioned by Siegfried and some other telecommuting managers whose faces would occasionally light up on Siegfried's empty metal cylinder to give an impression of who was talking.

Their faces had been livid.

Remarkably, Rai kept his mouth shut and made it out of the room with his job intact.

The same couldn't be said of Yinn, the ticket counter girl, whom he found sobbing outside the office. Rai tried to comfort her as much as he could.

Why do they have to treat us like objects?

He reached forward to brush tears away from the watery face before him.

Because to them, we are.

The sun shone over Winry and Rai as they strolled along a narrow path. Digital sheep grazed on a peaceful green slope, while nearby, a stream trickled past them down the mountain—a perfect replica of the Lake District in England, unsoiled by people.

“What do you look like?” ventured Rai as they walked.

“Like a real woman.”

“I’m so relieved.”

A large neon thought bubble started to extend from Rai's head with the text: *WOULD YOU LIKE TO SWAP PICTURES?*

Winry smiled.

“Not particularly.”

The thought bubble burst.

“Curious...” said Rai, “why not?”

She stopped walking and looked at him.

“You live so far away,” she began, “it would ruin the suspension of disbelief. I'm enjoying this for what it is, but I haven't decided what I want it to be. I want to find true love, and that's the honest truth. Frankly, I’m not sure if I want to know what you really look like if we can't really be together.”

"Wow. I only ask because, while I am enjoying this, I am looking for something a little more heterosexual in the long run."

"My turn for awkward questions!" She stuck her hand up and asked, "Have you ever had a *real* relationship before?"

"No," answered Rai, somewhat embarrassed. "I've never had a real relationship before."

"They're not as satisfying as you would think. In fact, it bugs me how flawed they are."

"Care to talk about it?"

"Oh, I just dated some guy for a month, but it didn't really go anywhere... Unrequited love..."

"These things happen."

"It's not like I've had a ton of dating experience, but I think that we often feel like we're missing something, and I guess what I'm trying to say is that the relationship I had didn't fill that gap. Sometimes you just have to smell the valley air."

"What's the point of virtual interpretations of nature?"

"Is that a rhetorical question?"

"Why can't we do this in Real Life?"

"Acceptance, Rai, you have to learn acceptance! You may never get to see this valley in real life, but you can appreciate this beauty and accept it for what it is. Too often we play critics to

our own lives... as if they were supposed to measure up to games, worlds, and stories or something!”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, just 'enjoy this for what this is.'”

“I would enjoy it much more if we swapped pictures. Then I could know the real you.”

She laughed sarcastically.

In a smooth motion, Rai pulled a gun out of his rucksack—a 45 caliber pistol with a built-in grenade launcher—and pointed it at a sheep. When he pulled the trigger, the sheep exploded, smattering its guts all over the field.

Before he could make his point she had slit his throat with a hunting knife.

He respawned a few seconds later slightly farther down the hill.

“It doesn't matter! See!?” he shouted as he walked closer. “Nothing in this world matters... even death. It's just a digital sheep! It's just a digital me! It's all virtual, mist, meaningless!”

“It's the thought that counts!” she shouted back. “Shooting the sheep is wrong *in spirit*. It's just like couples who cheat on each other with computer programs.”

“Winry, I like you. A lot. I just want to know where this is going... I'm going crazy with not knowing how you feel and what you want.”

He was serious. She looked deep into his eyes.

"The secret to life is being satisfied with not having all the answers."

Grabbing his hand from his side, she smiled the warmest smile Rai had ever felt and kissed him on the cheek. He had his answer.

"Would you like to go on holiday together?" he asked.

"Why?" she asked him.

"I've got a few days off and an employee discount from working at the Bath Haus. Also because... quite frankly, I like you and I'd like to... slaughter zombies with you at my side..."

"Yes," said Winry. "I like you too."

He put his arm around her and they began to walk.

He could still feel the warmth of her face and the wetness of her lips lingering on his as he woke. He heard noises and music.

He opened his bedroom door.

"Rai! My love!"

Morph picked up a bottle of Champagne from the beautiful hand-carved table, ran over, and attacked Rai with a big bear hug, and accidentally clobbering him with the bottle in the process.

"Owwwww..." moaned Rai as he rubbed his head. "What on earth is happening?!"

Morph was in his tux again and Sasha was wearing an evening gown that showed a lot of leg.

"Lolz, I've got great news! I'm rich! I'm fucking rich! Let's celebrate!"

"You're rich? You mean you're off your face on *Love*?"

"Double yes. But it's true, I'm a wealthy man! Champagne!"

He popped the cork, which shot across the room, spilling a fountain of champagne on the floor and upholstery seat of a chair.

Before he could open his mouth about the mess, Sasha came forward like a perfect housewife with two champagne glasses and a towel to clean up. She handed a glass to Morph.

"Here you go dear. And for you, Rai..." She winked at him and bent over to clean up the spill, making a point, so it seemed, to advertise her perfect *derrière*.

Is it coming on to me?

"Thanks..." he said awkwardly before turning to Morph. "How on earth are you a wealthy man?"

Morph smiled with a strange new bravado.

"Furniture! I've never told you before, for the sake of intellectual property I've had to keep it a secret..."

"Furniture?"

"Not just any type of furniture! A friend of mine has an influential position at Android Sexual and he did me a small favor and put a few of my products in front of the higher ups. I just struck a distribution deal for *billions!* Giving *Android Sexual*," (he said the name with a special reverence), "exclusive rights to advertise and sell my products in their stores! There are going to be physical versions too!"

Sasha got up from wiping the floor and beamed at Morph. She seemed proud of him, overly so, as if she was a bad actress trying to portray an intense emotion.

The news slowly sank in.

"Wow! Really? That's great! Holy shit, that's a lot of money. How on earth?"

"Sasha! Would you get dinner ready? I'm going to show Rai my business."

"You boys go have fun, don't worry—I'll get everything ready!"

She winked.

"Drink that up, and we'll log on."

They downed their drinks, a waste of expensive champagne.

"This is surreal..." muttered Rai.

Morph slapped him hard on the back.

"Rai, have you ever wanted to have sex with a coffee table?"

The virtual Morph and Rai stood in the middle of a minimalist white expanse. A coffee table materialized in front of them. It was a plain, solid black, amorphous, and sleek.

"Why on earth would I want to have sex with a coffee table?"

"Exactly, up until now you couldn't and you wouldn't want to."

Morph looked at the coffee table in front of them with utter disgust.

"Look at this, boring. Boring! I want a coffee table that gives me an erection! We have a duty as artists to bestow Beauty upon this world!"

Rai gave Morph his best *what-the-fuck-are-you-talking-about* look.

"I see you are confused. Behold, I give you *Revolution™*, by Morpheus!"

He covered Rai's eyes, only to unveil them.

They were standing in what could have been the office of a very wealthy CEO. The coffee table was nowhere to be seen. In its place was a very flexible, sexy woman in red body paint doing some sort of extreme yoga, mimicking a table with a cup of coffee balanced on her belly. Next to her was a slender woman covering her breasts with her arm and holding a light bulb. Behind her

were two topless women facing away as if meditating; a "love seat."

The room was full of women posed as furniture.

"Oh my..."

"Furniture you can have sex with. Everyone wants one for their office!"

"I see why you're R-Sexual. Because no real woman could stand being so literally objectified," said Rai, dumbfounded.

Morph pointed reverently at the "coffee table."

"See, this is a beautiful coffee table. It's art. I'm *playing* with the notion of women being objectified."

He ran his hand along "her" waist.

Its body shivered with anticipation.

"What wonderful curves," Morph whispered, almost to himself.

Rai looked around at the scantily clad women-as-furniture in disbelief.

"I call her Eda."

"You are a horrible person."

"Hey, I'm not sexist! I have a male line too! Take a look at this coat hanger..."

Suddenly, Morph was standing naked with a coat hanging off his huge erection. Rai quickly turned away.

"I did not want to see that!"

"What a sexy man! Looks familiar..."

Morph laughed childishly.

"No seriously, somebody out there will make love to just about any consumer good that enters the home, so I figured, why not make that essential to the design?!"

The real Rai and Morph were sitting across from each other at the hand-carved cherrywood table. Sasha removed a silver dish from the food printer and served them. There was no chair for her. Her dress was very low-cut, and Rai was trying in vain not to look at her marvelous cleavage.

"So what are you going to do with all the money?"

"I've been thinking about that... you know, Rai, I love you."

"Surprise."

"But I'm thinking about moving out... to a bigger place."

"You're moving out?"

He hadn't expected this.

"Yeah, I really want to get a place to myself... so I can spend more quality time with my Sasha here." He smiled at her, and then looked back at Rai. "I really enjoy these moments. You're my Best Real Friend. I don't want to be all emotional and shit, but we've had some good times."

“Yeah, I don't know what I'm going to do without having you around to make me feel normal. It's kind of sad...”

He really did feel sad as Morph got up to give him a big bear hug.

Chapter 8: Fantasy

Once, when he was a child, he had dreamed. The world around him appeared to possess near infinite opportunities—brimming with magic, and the bold deeds of heroes. As a child, it seemed filled with goodness, adventure, and true love.

But it was just a dream.

He had grown up to find that the world was in fact a *different* place, filled with insurance salesmen rather than heroes, with sexbots rather than true love, and his weak self rather than the hero he dreamed of one day becoming.

Now he stood wearing a cybersuit, on deck over the neon blue water of a space pod. About to go on a vacation of the mind.

Blane worked the controls. His right eye was swollen shut from when Leon had clobbered him, but he still wore his shark grin. He talked incessantly of the drama at work. In the end, he hadn't lost his job, ironically because of his lawsuit: the company did not want to show that they were being *prejudiced* against him in any way, because that might help his case. After all,

Mazos like him had often experienced prejudice for their fetish.

The topic turned to sex.

“There’s nothing like bingeing on a good holiday: sex, love, food, and action... but when I have a holiday, it's just pure sex... All the time. You should chain that girl of yours down, clone yourself, and fill every orifice of her hot body.

Hah! It's a shame they only give us a 10% company discount, or I'd be virtually raping someone silly.”

He smiled at Rai and winked.

Fuck mazos. I don't care if it's virtual, that's fucked up.

Rai put on his helmet so he didn't have to listen, restraining his urge to clobber Blane in the process.

Unbounded desire can be a scary thing.

All the talk had unsettled him.

He couldn’t shake the feeling even as he sank below the water and the chemicals entered his lungs and the world around him dissolved into nothingness...

The senses flooded his brain—

The warmth of the sun.

The cool breeze on your cheek.

The feeling of a new and healthy body.

The smell of freshly baked bread, children laughing, the music of street musicians.

The beauty of the streets of Paris as it never existed...

More real than real.

They called it *hyperreal* at the Bath Haus. It was why people paid for state-of-the-art holidays, that and the fact that they didn't have to wake themselves up to take a shit.

He took a virtual step and everything was right as he picked up and set down his foot. He could feel the muscles in his leg contract, the slight weight of his foot sinking into expensive leather shoes. He felt the smooth fabrics of his clothing resting on his digital skin—a bleached white shirt with short sleeves, tan khakis that fit comfortably, and a stylish fedora on his head that made him look like some early 20th century aristocrat.

Slightly disoriented and overstimulated, he took in the sensations as they presented themselves.

Winry was waiting for him in an outdoor cafe on the Champs Elysees. When she saw him, she waved and rose to greet him with a hug, her slender, sun-kissed arms outstretched. She looked more beautiful than he had ever seen her before, her eyes somehow brighter, a bold grin on her face.

"I missed you," said Rai as he took her in his arms.

They hugged.

He felt her breathing, felt the gentle impressions of her breasts press against his chest, and smelled the soft scent of her hair. The sensation was ineffable, the sort of moment Rai wished could last a lifetime.

"Wow!" remarked Winry. "I need to go on holidays at the Bath Haus more often... That was the most sensual hug."

"That's the Bath Haus difference," said Rai, "*more real than real.*"

He took a deep breath of the fresh Parisian air.

They sat in the sunlight, at a table set with a white cloth and bouquet of roses, and stared greedily at the printed menu in front of them. Eating in Virtual was an experience best reserved for holidays. While a simple crown could provide a strong enough hallucination to provide real taste and the muscular illusion of eating, regulations kept companies from manufacturing crowns that would truly manipulate or obscure feelings of hunger and needing go to the bathroom. Such things had existed briefly, and people had died.

"What are you having?"

"Everything!" replied Winry with excitement. "I'm going to have a dessert-orgasm. A *mouthgasm*, if you will..."

"Well, Miss Gluttony, I'm going to have a salad."

"Liar! It's a holiday! When else can you binge on desserts and not gain any weight?!"

"Oh really?" said Rai, acting sarcastically dumb. "In that case I'll have *Filet Mignon with Rich Balsamic Glaze*. Bloody as hell."

He picked up his glass of ice water; the condensation on the glass and the slice of lemon made it worthy of an advert. He proposed a toast.

"To you and a great holiday."

"To us," she echoed, and their glasses clinked.

It was wonderful, the scenery, the food, the laughter as they pretended to have mouthgasms every time they took a bite of dessert, and the warm sun shining down on them.

They talked and ate until their bellies were full, then meandered along the Seine, stopping at an old opera house showing *Romeo & Juliet*. Inside, they sat in a velvet love seat with the majestic theatre all to themselves as they watched the drama unfold. It was Shakespeare, but with a modern twist. Set in the early 22nd century, Romeo and Juliet were separated by an ocean and family

differences, unable to be together in the real world. Tragically, they decided to commit the ultimate taboo: to have their brains removed from their bodies and probed with electrodes so that they could be together eternally in Virtual. Juliet's operation went horribly wrong, resulting in her death, leaving Romeo destined to live forever in a virtual fantasyland devoid of his love.

The curtains closed and the lights came on in the empty house.

"So bleak in its picture of love... sometimes I wonder if it's like Romeo says, '*True Love is just one of those lies they tell you.*'"

"I'm not so sure," said Winry. "I think True Love exists, it's just not like what Romeo expected it to be. He expected it to be a burning passion, but his passion was really obsession, a form of insanity. True Love is something more than mere passion."

His face was close to hers; he felt drawn toward her lips.

"What is it?"

"I don't know, I've never had it. But it's something to seek, to strive for, and to never give up until we're closer to it..."

They locked eyes, each distracted by thoughts of the other.

"Passion is a good part of it too," she added. Surely, she was thinking the same thing he was.

Rai knew that if it came to virtual sex, he would give in. Winry wasn't part of his attempts at resisting virtual sex, she was *real*.

They were elves, with long ears and clothes that made them look like misplaced children of the forest, lost in the ruins of an old gaming palace. Bright neon colors, broken glass, and unused arcade games surrounded them. There were no children, only the distant sounds of gunfire and explosions.

"Why did we pick the sci-fi fantasy theme again?" asked Rai as he fiddled with his ears and tightened a strap that held a long sword to his back.

"Shut up. You're breaking the suspension of disbelief."

There was a soft rustle.

"Did you hear that?"

They dove for cover just as a massive black orc came round the corner with a rail gun and fired.

The row of machines where Rai had been standing exploded, hit by a cosmic semi-truck; bits of plastic and glass hurtling past him, a piece catching him on one of his accentuated ears.

He ran.

Fucking hell, we've got to get out of here.

"I know what you're thinking, *elf boy*. There is no escape!" growled the deep gruff voice of the orc. "You forget we can read your minds!"

Fucking Psychic Orcs...

The orc laughed.

"Surprise!"

Another orc had joined him as he fired directly in their path with a rocket launcher.

They barely had time to take cover from the explosion.

Rai looked up and saw that the orc had accidentally blown a hole in the side of the building.

"You may be psychic, but you're also stupid!" shouted Winry as they scurried out.

The orcs blasted at them as they ran down the street, but their elf senses were fast. Before an explosion hit, the world would seem to slow down, just in time for them to dodge.

How convenient.

Winry spotted a vehicle and they jumped in. She hacked it and the ion engine sprang to life with a roar as she took to the road.

"Fuck those guys. This is a good game," said Rai, cocking his submachine and casting a protective spell.

"Yeah! I like it! It's a nice combination of fantasy, sci-fi, and..."

Winry glanced in the rear view mirror and saw two orcs riding on speeder bikes behind them. They were soon joined by two cars that unmistakably belonged to the Dark Police.

"Wish me luck!"

Rai leaned out the window, spraying the orcs with bullets.

An explosion rocked the car, and Rai held on for his life as Winry turned to dodge the fireball. His protective spell had kept him safe.

Winry took a hard right into a busy street, where a body splattered on the windshield of their vehicle.

"+2 recklessness!" yelled Winry. "Rai! What do your elf eyes see?!?!"

"We need a plan, these hunters are good drivers, they're not going to crash and..."

The street exploded in front of them... cratered by the force of the rail gun. Winry set a protective charm as flames began to swarm around them, consuming everything.

"I was going to say, 'like you they don't care about killing civilians.'"

"They're not real people, who cares?!"

"Who's breaking the suspension of disbelief now?"

Rai laughed, though the flames still roared around them. The metal of their stolen vehicle melted as their magical energies ran dangerously low.

Suddenly the flames settled and they heard laughter and heavy music.

Their exit was blocked by a line of Dark Police, a hundred orcs equipped with machine guns and riot gear. The massive orc from earlier stood before them. There would be no running away this time.

"We can read your minds because of the device planted in your heads."

Rai could clearly see an electric crown on his fat ugly head.

The massive orc grinned.

"In this land, it is illegal to be an elf, and it is illegal to practice magic! I am a *Dark Hunter*, charged with seeking out those criminals who break the law! Soon you will know our power, but only when you are *dead* elves!"

He roared and ran towards them with a huge black cleaver, his companion in stride with a black battle axe.

Winry and Rai drew their sacred swords and rose to meet the orcs.

Rai felt power surging through him as he swung his blade. The massive orc met it and spat in his face.

"My friend's going to rape your friend's body when he's done cutting off her pretty head." He snarled, his black skin and teeth projecting a fearful shadow in Rai's mind. Rai tried to cast a spell, but the orc countered.

He tried not to think.

Winry was nearby, and suddenly Rai saw the solution. He needed to attack *her* opponent, for he was focused on reading *her* mind and not *his*.

Too easy.

He attacked with a fire stroke, and though the massive orc was warning his companion, he was too late.

The orc's body dropped to the floor. Winry lunged at the Dark Hunter, her sword charged with an electric storm. She cut him across the chest and black blood flowed from him as he fell to his knees.

He stood before them panting, as the Dark Police approached with their guns.

"My brothers will hunt you down..." groaned the orc as his body fell to the ground. The electric crown tumbled from his head and began to glow. Rai picked it up as the Dark Police began to open fire.

They ran until they found safety in an abandoned warehouse.

"Want to do something else?" Rai asked. "We can always come back to this later."

Winry looked at Rai with a sexy gleam in her eyes and began to sing a spell of peace. A portal of calming energy opened before them, and, walking through it, they traveled to a new and tranquil world.

They were standing in front of a hot spring.

Steam hovered over the waters, while a statue of a jolly fat monk surveyed the lush scenery. Winry walked closer to the water and turned to gaze back at Rai.

"Don't look," she said as she began taking off her dirty elf clothes.

"As long as you don't look at *me*," said Rai with sarcastic modesty as he put a toe into the warm waters.

Clouds of vapor and the dark steaming water covered their bodies. They were naked, but sat apart and talked as colorful fairies darted to and fro around them.

"Ahhhhh," said Winry, relaxing as a fairy cleaned her long ears. "I like being an elf."

"Me too. I used to wish I was really an elf when I was a kid," said Rai. He laughed. "I think they

serve as a good metaphor for what humanity could someday strive to be."

"Beautiful, wise, and eternal... Let's stop breaking the fourth wall and go with the flow."

She swam toward him.

"Hi," he said when she sat next to him.

There was an awkward silence. Rai felt like he had never been so hard in his life.

"If you sit that close I'm going to want to kiss you."

"Then kiss me."

They kissed. Her lips were soft and wonderfully moist. She pressed against him, her warm skin coursing with electric waves of pleasure.

"That was the most sensual kiss..."

"Shut up."

They kissed harder and Winry bit his lip, as her naked, wet body pressed against him and his massive erection.

Rai's hand came up to stroke Winry's elf ear.

She shivered, arching her neck towards his open caress.

He leaned closer and brushed her cheek with his fingertips before showering her exposed collarbone with a rain of gentle kisses.

"Oh... this is probably a bad idea," murmured Winry, "but I don't care."

Rai paused, idly running a finger across her lower lip.

"Well, it *is* a holiday..."

She grinned, and licked his finger with her tongue, releasing it a moment later with a warm and delightfully-curved flick.

They looked at each other, their bodies perfect, without blemish or hair.

Hers, slender and pure.

His, muscular and bold.

Winry reached down for his cock and took it with two hands before submerging her head underwater to suck on it. *Oh my fucking god... I'm being sucked off...by an elf princess!*

Conjuring up some elf magic of his own, Rai cast a spell on himself that made his dick pulsate with orgasm-enhancing powers. Winry rose from the water and laughed as she wrapped her arms around him.

"Wow, they really take this fantasy stuff to the next level in Virtual, don't they?"

He smirked, pulling her tighter against him, and into his lap.

Should this moment have been more special?

"Hey check this out!" Winry shouted as she pointed at the glowing light emanating beneath her, from his crotch. Rai glanced down, faintly

making out the rhythmic lightshow shimmering in time to their beating hearts.

“Whoa, I didn’t know it was supposed to do that!”

Winry ran her fingers through his hair and smiled.

“Looks like you cast some hell of a spell, comrade.”

Rai laughed, and caught her mouth in his, drawing her closer. Embracing the whimsical absurdity of the moment before them (as well as each other), their breathing shifted and slowed into a panting crawl racked with waves of gathered aching.

She mounted and rode him like a stallion in the heat of the water, the steam surrounding them like ethereal mist, his cock throbbing with joy as he thrust into her, lost in the depths of her elfish eyes.

“Well,” said Rai, searching for something to say, “that was fun.”

“Agreed,” she said as they shared a kiss.

They lay naked next to each other, cuddling under lion skins, looking up at a star-filled sky.

“You know something? I’ve never had sex with an avatar I loved before.”

Shit.

He had let the L-word slip, but she smiled.

"You know something?" she said with a sad smile. "We keep forgetting that this isn't real."

"Believe me, I know." He gently fondled her breast. "What can I say? You are irresistible."

Winry was grinning from elf ear to elf ear.

"What?" asked Rai, seeing that she was up to something. "Were you thinking how weird it was that we just fucked as elves?"

"Do you like me?"

"Yes."

"Then you like a man."

"No. You're fucking with me."

"Yep, I'm fucking with you, Rai. I even sucked on your virtual penis to get revenge..."

Winry spoke and Rai just shook his head, refusing to buy any of it.

"How does it feel to make love to a guy?"

"Sooooo funny. NOT. You're fucking with me."

"No, it's all about the wiring, you thought you were penetrating my vagina but you were really penetrating my butt," said Winry, standing up and pointing at him.

"Winry," whined Rai, wanting her to stop.

"My name is *Guy*."

"Who?"

“Guy! You humiliated me at that fateful ball and I hacked into that girl Winry’s account and stole her identity! Then I approached your friend and told him I wanted to meet you. I played my part so that you would fall in love with me and then...”

Then everything went dark, and all sensation seemed to fade away from him.

Chapter 9: The Wake

"Winry!" he cried, thrashing around in the tank, fighting against the water. All was dark, his body encased in rubber. His heart threatened to leap from his chest.

What the fuck just happened?

"Rai..." said a familiar voice.

"It's time to wake up, Rai, I need you to help some people."

"Leon?"

He ascended from the tank, as two hands unfastened his helmet. The sound of rushing water and blaring sirens filled the room. Smoke stung his eyes, and he could dimly make out some of the emergency exit lights.

It was *raining*.

Around him, tanks lay shattered as if hit by wrecking balls, broken glass shards sparkling in the debris. Water flooded the room, rushing over kelp-like tangles of electrical wire. In the few tanks left unharmed, human shadows floated, silhouetted in red light.

This isn't real. Winry can't be a man...

Leon stood over him, pointing a shotgun at his face.

"Rai!"

"Yes?"

"Rai, I need you to get people out of the tanks. They are all awake and fine, but the power is going to go out. You don't have a choice in this matter. Get them to safety and get moving now. I've got to have a press conference in the lobby."

"What the hell is happening?!" cried Rai as the scene came into focus.

"A revolution," Leon coolly replied. "Now get moving. I don't want anyone to die today." He climbed down from the deck, shotgun in hand, and smiled.

This is real...

Adrenaline surged through his body like it never had before. Rai looked up and saw other employees helping distraught customers out of drained tanks. In spite of the near-perfect replica of reality that the Virtual offered, his body knew the difference between real danger and the illusion of danger.

He felt naked without his smartspecs to guide him, or to contact "Winry" and find out the truth. But there were more pressing matters...

What am I supposed to do?

He climbed off the deck, waded through waist-deep water, and sloshed towards the lobby, searching for patrons to help. In the lobby, loads

of spectators waving smartspecs and flashlights crowded around Leon, who sat cross-legged on the floor. They were interviewing him for karma; hoping to capture something extraordinary and reap short-term celebrity.

"So you're just going to wait for the police to come?" asked a citizen reporter.

"I want people to see the injustice, and to draw attention to companies like the Bath Haus who care about nothing except their bottom line. Remember when there used to be jobs—"

He was interrupted by another bystander journalist as Rai heard the blare of approaching sirens.

"How did you get past security?!"

"Printed some guns and ammunition at home, a hack of protest here and there. A long time ago I was a CS graduate, and as a manager at this company I know my way around, just like many of you know the way around the places you work. But that isn't important. It's time for a revolution. We must shed not a drop of human blood, but destroy what devalues and dehumanizes us!"

"Whatever happened to nonviolent protesting?!" shouted a brave soul in the crowd.

This comment provoked a short rant, and Leon continued to ramble on about his cause as red and blue flashing lights flooded the room.

He shouted to the cameras he knew were present. Everything was being filmed, and he would make a show of it.

"I smashed the robots because they have taken the jobs of good people who work here! Humans just aren't worth what they used to be! I can't stand all this dehumanization!"

A shot rang out and Leon fell to the ground, stunned.

SWAT-Bots rolled into the room, coldly monitoring the crowd for any sign of quick movement or potential violence. Carefully and mechanically, they removed Leon from the proceedings, while others remained behind to secure the situation. The "reporters" wandered with their glasses and flashlights, filming everything. It had just started to sink in, amidst the chaos of the aftermath. Something monumental had happened, something that had never happened before in all of Rai's life.

He had one job, to make sure people were safe, and he did that. They were distraught. He helped guide them out of the building with his fellow co-workers.

He felt strange walking around the room in his cybersuit. Robot workers lay in ruins strewn all

over the floor, blown to pieces by shotgun blasts or short-circuited by the water.

Suddenly, Siegfried approached him with two Robocops in tow. Remarkably, his robotic avatar had not been damaged.

It's a pity Leon didn't shoot it.

"We need to talk," said Siegfried. "We're going to have a little look-see through your data logs. And yes, we have a warrant."

One of the Robocops projected a hologram of a warrant. Rai scanned the warrant and stared at Siegfried with nothing but shock in his eyes.

"Be aware any communications you make can be used against you in a court of law. Please, change into some dry clothes and patiently await your fate."

"I had nothing to do with this..."

"Then you have nothing to worry about," responded the synthetic voice of the Robocop.

He had wanted his life to get interesting. He was partly scared and partly thrilled as the Robocop escorted him to a dry storage room and presented him with his belongings, which were remarkably dry after being rescued from the now partially-flooded Bath Haus locker room.

His smartspecs lay on top of his pile of clothes. Rai immediately reached for them, and saw that he had no less than 14 MESSAGES:

2404: "What happened?"

2412: "Are you dead?"

2413: "I was joking. I'm not Guy. I'm Winry. I'm a woman!"

2415: "Rai?"

2416: "I have a vagina."

2417: "Why are you not talking to me?"

2429: "Check your messages. I've provided a sexual Turing test just to prove I am who I say I am. It was a bad joke, but I didn't expect you to leave as soon as I started it. Here:

SEXUAL TURING TEST RESULTS:

FEMALE.

Winry R. Summers is a female who lives in Seattle, Washington.

She is 26 years of age.

2445: Are you doing this to make me freak out?

2445: Because it's working.

2445: Now I've crossed that awkward barrier where I've sent too many messages and seem desperate.

2446: I'm not desperate. #mostly.

2446: I just want to know what happened to you! Are you ok?

2447: Ok, last message. If I never hear you again, I assume you have your reasons... but I thought you were cool...

He immediately contacted Winry on his smartspecs and left a dramatic message:

"I'm being interviewed by the police in reality... it's a long story, but don't worry I haven't done anything. I'm also glad to know you're female. You had me worried for a second, and you must have been a little worried yourself since you went through the trouble of taking a sexual touring test. I think you're cool too. Talk soon."

Rai noticed the Robocop watching him with its lenses. He sighed, and sent the message, then unzipped the heavy waterproof suit and stood naked.

He looked down at his scrawny arms and his patchy chest hair, hardly an ideal specimen of masculinity.

And felt alive.

Siegfried knocked on the door and entered.

"You're innocent," said Siegfried. "Though we also detected large amounts of empathy in your

conversations with that crazy Neo-Marxist. Nothing illegal, you're not even fired. But unfortunately we're going to have to put everyone on unpaid leave..."

It annoyed Rai that he wasn't talking to an actual person. In that chrome, cylindrical face, Rai could see no emotion, but he imagined a hint of meanness in the voice.

"May I ask why?"

"All Bath Haus employees at this location are being put on unpaid leave while repairs are conducted. If you want to be mad at someone, blame your friend."

The news sunk in. Ironically, Leon's revolution had cost a whole bunch of humans their jobs... and yet, he still wanted to stick up for his old friend.

"I quit," said Rai.

"Fine by me," said Siegfried.

"Leon always treated me kindly, and I certainly can't say that of all my coworkers. The truth is, while I don't condone his actions, at least he's not a dick."

Siegfried betrayed no emotion.

Rai's heart was racing. Though he wanted to yell, he kept his voice calm and tinged with a note of pity.

"You might think you're smart and talented, but you're just a manager. Remember that in your dealings with people who are 'beneath' you. They might be smarter and more talented than you... it's just that they have souls."

"Excuse me?" asked Siegfried.

"I said, 'I quit, and you're an inhuman asshole.'"

Rai turned.

"Enjoy being a NEET. I will write you such a negative employer review that you'll never get a job again."

Finally, a hint of emotion. He was human after all.

"You can't. I called you an inhuman asshole *after* I quit. It's on the video logs."

Checkmate.

Walking home, he coursed through an unrelenting whirlpool of emotion: anger, fear of running out of money, relief, excitement, pride, worry, and even happiness.

He thought about what had happened at work and how, in the moment, everything had seemed to make sense. Today, he had felt really alive. In the chaos of the moment he had become an animal, awakened, just trying to survive.

It was a real adventure.

When Rai reached his door, he was glad to be home. He felt exhausted.

The door opened and the lights flipped on. He almost screamed.

Everywhere, *flesh*. Synthetic flesh. Naked women bent into tables, chairs, *and* a lamp.

Real life copies of Morph's creations.

Robots.

In place of the beautiful, hand-carved table from Switzerland, a tall iDoll bent over backwards, perfectly balancing a slab of glass set with a bottle of wine and two crystal glasses on its belly and breasts. Their nice Italian leather sofa had been replaced by two "women" sitting cross-legged on a beautiful new Persian rug. A "sofa."

He smelled something foul, faint, but definitely unpleasant.

What the fuck is happening to my life?

He pounded on Morph's door, while the furniture shuffled quietly behind him.

"Morph!"

"Hi Rai, do you want to fuck?" asked one of the chairs, a petite Asian girl eagerly crawling on all fours. Its twin looked over at him as well, small breasts dangling enticingly.

"No!" he shouted as he rapped three blows on the bedroom door. "Morph! What the hell did you do with our furniture?!?"

There was no answer.

"Morph! Sasha!?!?"

That smell again.

"Why do I smell *shit*?!" he yelled through the door.

He needed to calm down and find the bad smell and hide in his room until Morph answered. When he opened the door to his room, he discovered brown stains on the carpet, but couldn't find his cat. For once, he wasn't under the sunlamp or meowing by the door.

"Firefly?" called Rai, suddenly worried.

"Firefly?" The cat had soiled the carpet, but Rai wasn't worried about that. His eyes searched the room. The food dish was full. He checked the bathroom.

No cat.

When he looked in his closet, he found his cat lying dead on his favorite coat. He fought back tears as he bent down to look at the body.

He gently stroked the fur, and the tears came.

Rai turned off the lights and looked at the bioluminescent tail glowing faintly in the dark, fading.

Firefly had been his friend for a long time; he had grown up with it. The cat was a piece of his childhood, a loyal companion. *Dead.*

Morph wouldn't emerge from his room, and his door was locked, so Rai took a garbage bag from the kitchen and wrapped the body in it. He had checked prices for cremation on his AUGs, but they were expensive, especially considering that he no longer had a job.

Not sure what to do, and having no land of his own in which to bury the body, he walked the cat down to the garbage chute on the 45th basement floor.

He spoke to the bag.

"Forgive me, Firefly. It's a sad state of affairs how disposable everything is these days. But I loved you. That will never fade or rot away."

Was that true?

He opened the hatch and hesitated.

Once more he thanked the cat, and his heart sank as the bag disappeared into the trash collector.

He walked back slowly, thinking about death and memories, when he received a message from Morph:

"fffuckk..."

Rai shook his head and walked back upstairs.

The door to Morph's room lay open. Sasha was waiting for him, dressed in lingerie.

"Rai, just so you know, I've called the Robomedics and they're coming over to get him cleaned up. He's had a lot to drink, and tomorrow is a big day." She spoke calmly, a metallic ring to her voice. Detached.

Jesus.

Rai peered in Morph's room and found him lying on his back on the floor trying to finger one of the chairs.

"Dude!" yelled Rai as he turned away. "I don't want to see that!"

"Dude!" yelled Morph, his hand sliding in and out of the chair as it squealed with excitement. "I'mmmm fffffuuuucked..."

His hand fell out of the "chair," landing flat on the floor.

He groaned.

"You're a mess," said Rai.

Morph wasn't responding, but instead began to retch and heave.

What the hell is happening to my life?

Sasha put a hand on Rai's shoulder.

"It's okay, the doctor will be here shortly to clean the substances out of his blood. This is all planned out. I'm sorry you had to be bothered."

"What? Is he okay?"

"He's just drunk."

The Robomedic was a grim-looking robot with claws for hands and a fat bulbous metal body that contained bubbling fluids and centrifuges. It only spoke to ask questions in a warm female voice.

"Can you please confirm his Secure Insurance Payment Pin™?"

The Robomedic placed a sterilized needle on the tip of each of its fingers and cut open Morph's shirt. It stabbed Morph in the heart with one needle, took blood with another, and filtered and replaced the blood with yet another needle. Its "eyes" scanned Morph; analyzing, responding perfectly. It was doing as it was programmed to, and surely it was programmed correctly.

Suddenly Morph opened his eyes and groaned. But his body still seemed paralyzed. The paramedical unit remained frozen in its task. "Do not move. Everything will resolve presently. You have nothing to fear."

"It's okay," said Rai to his friend quietly.

Sasha smiled down at her lover with motherly tenderness.

After the paramedical unit had left, they remained in the living room, clutching cups of coffee that Sasha had prepared. Morph wanted to sleep and lay slumped on one of the synthetic, humanoid chairs—its back arched perfectly to receive his rear end—but Rai stood over him, wanting to talk.

He wanted to know what the fuck was going on, why the furniture was gone, and why his cat was dead. He wanted to know why his life had turned to absolute *chaos*.

“How are things?” Rai asked, overwhelmed.

Morph silently stared into his cup.

He rubbed his forehead with his free hand and looked exhausted. Sasha stood quietly in the background, her programming having calculated that something bigger than her was happening and that she shouldn't speak.

“My head feels pretty shitty right now.”

“Why did you drink so much?” asked Rai.

Morph was quiet for a few seconds and then began to mumble.

“I just had a bad day and wanted to get fucked. And then I was fucked and I made a bad decision because I wanted to get *more fucked*. I told Sasha to call the Robomedics and have my blood purified so that I can function tomorrow.” He looked at Rai.

Something's not right.

"Dude, what's up?"

"I feel like shit," said Morph. "Let me go to bed."

"What happened?" asked Rai.

"*Nothing*. I got drunk and had a bunch of pills... I've been trying out a new vase in my furniture line. Guess where the flowers go!"

"In her vagina," said Rai, unamused by Morph's attempt to dodge the subject.

"How did you know?!"

"Look, *something* is a big deal: you could have died. Do you realize you could have overdosed in your room and sat there, decomposing, and I wouldn't have known until you started to *smell*?"

"Sasha was watching over me, everything was under control," he said, nodding his head with tiredness. "You just need to fuck a chair, or a table... so much sexual tension is making you anal. What do you think by the way? Are they awesome or what? My beautiful creations."

Morph slapped the buttocks of the *Yamatwin* he was sitting on.

Rai frowned.

"You've got to get our furniture back," added Rai.

"Now, I take it things did not go well with Winners!" said Morph with a laugh.

"You're dodging the subject again," added Rai.
Maybe there wasn't anything wrong with Morph?

"Besides, what's more comfy than a pair of breasts? Nothing. Here! Feel this!" He grabbed Rai's hand and tried to get him to fondle the chair's breasts, but Rai yanked his hand away.

"I don't want to be tempted by my chair!"

"Would you prefer if that chair had a large, throbbing cock?"

Rai was getting annoyed. Tired of Morph's question dodging, he pointed a finger at Sasha.

"She doesn't love you," said Rai, getting Morph's attention.

Morph dropped his happy-go-lucky act.

"Love isn't just a human thing."

"To love, you have to choose, and she can't choose." Rai continued, like a parent talking to a child. "She's just a computer program. She can't think for herself."

"Why are you being such a dick?"

"Surely you're unhappy too?" asked Rai.

"Come on, why are you acting so weird? You're my friend, I don't want you to destroy yourself."

He made eye contact with those soulful, blue eyes and suddenly felt that they were isolated from him, that he hardly knew the darkness of his best real friend.

"No, I'm not happy," Morph admitted, staring down intently at the table. "But that's what drugs are for. That's what the Virtual is for."

Rai thought about his own troubles.

"Well, it comforts me to know we're in the same club."

Morph reached into his pocket to pull out a bottle of pills. For a second Rai thought he was going to take some, but Morph just shook them in his hand and looked at them.

"Seriously, man: pills. People must have been dismal before antidepressants."

Rai went out on a limb. "I think you have to take so many drugs because you want to distract yourself from the fact that you are profoundly dissatisfied."

"Dude, everything sucks. It just does. That's why I'm R-Sexual—it simplifies things," said Morph. "Drugs and computers make anything possible."

"Have you ever thought that that boundlessness could be the root of your problems?"

"Yes."

Rai had never seen Morph down like this.

"What happens when you wake up after getting what you wanted?" Rai mused out loud. "You

realize it didn't fill that hole inside of you and you just want more. But you're never satisfied."

What fills that hole? he wanted to ask. *Cock*, Morph would have answered. He wanted to rant about his own troubles, to tell Morph that he too was looking for happiness in transient things. Yet, who was he to speak? He thought about unemployment, his cat, his best real friend depressed and soon moving out, and Leon in jail. He himself wasn't happy.

"Morph," Rai said finally. "Happiness is a tricky thing. Today, I woke up from one of the best fantasies I have ever had, only to be catapulted into a sea of meaninglessness. My friend at work pointed a shotgun in my face and got arrested after destroying the place, I had my memory searched, I basically told my bosses to go fuck themselves, Firefly's dead, and for a while I had come to believe that I had engaged in virtual sex with a guy."

"*WHAT?!*" exclaimed Morph, his eyes wide.

"I turns out I didn't! Have sex with a guy, I mean."

He spent the next thirty minutes spilling his guts, complaining. Somehow, he laughed at it. It was outrageous; how many bad things could happen in such a short span of time? Rai even sat down on one of the chairs—secretly finding it

strangely erotic—and tried to explain how awesome and weird it felt to finally have virtual sex with Winry. Towards the end, it seemed like he almost had his life together, even though it was still broken into pieces.

“You know what this means?” asked Morph. Rai shook his head. “You don’t have to work, so you can go find Winry. The *real* Winry. Where does she live?”

It hit him—*New Seattle*. That’s where he was supposed to go. It was destiny. Intuitively something clicked.

“New Seattle... but I need to find a new job or start collecting unemployment,” said Rai, trying to dismiss the feeling. “I don’t have the money for a trip.”

“I’ll pay for it,” said Morph. “Book the tickets, and I’ll give you some extra cash to wine and dine the real Winry for a night or two.”

“That’s too much...” said Rai, awed but slightly embarrassed.

“No, you’re going to fucking meet this girl! Ugly or not, whoever she is, she’s *real*! You don’t have a choice, the money’s just a drop in the ocean,” grinned Morph.

Rai shook his head in protest.

“Alright, go to bed, I won’t have an argument about this. In fact, Sasha dear, can you book Rai a

round trip ticket to New Seattle for sometime next week?"

"Yes sir!" she said with a salute. "It has been done! One Flexi-TimeLite Round Trip to New Seattle!"

Morph seemed back to his old happy self.

"Excellent, now come here and suck my penis!"

He looked around the room and clapped his hands. "Come on everybody, *Sexxy Time!*"

The furniture sprang to life and started crawling towards them. The chair Rai was sitting on gazed up at him longingly. It lifted one hand off the floor to run it up his leg. Rai stood and moved decisively toward his room.

He looked at his strange friend and felt a strong sense of gratitude.

"Seriously, Morph, thanks. It's been good talking to you, but since I don't want to see your penis, I'm going to hide in my room."

"Night!" said Morph as Sasha reached for his belt.

"Night!" said Rai. Though he knew he wasn't going to bed.

Inside his room, the urine and shit stains still resided on the carpet, reminding him of his cat. Again he felt sad, wondering if the animal had suffered. He gathered cleaning supplies from his

bathroom and cleaned the stains, picking up the bits of poop with wads of toilet paper and flushing them down the toilet. He thought about having Sasha or one of the chairs handle the mess, but decided against it. *In Virtual, no one has to clean up shit*, Rai thought.

He sighed.

When all was clean, he sprayed his room with air disinfectant and ran the fans and odor filters. Then he plopped down on his red vinyl sofa under the lamp labeled "Sunshine" and turned off the lamp and placed the plastic crown on top of his head.

I'm going to find the real sun.

The real girl.

I'm going to find real love.

Chapter 10: The Real Winry

The moon shone bright over the neon city below them. They sat on a hill overlooking the digital expanse, the huge glowing metropolis known as *Neo-Tokyo*—the city of infinity. Somewhere, thought Rai, a hundred couples were sitting on this exact spot. And yet they were all alone in their own way.

Winry looked more beautiful than he had last seen her, and he decided that it was her eyes, the way that she looked at him rather than her sexy leather cyberpunk outfit. Or perhaps it was because she didn't have elf ears?

Either way, it was wonderful to have someone who cared.

Somehow, in this moment, everything made sense and he knew what he had to do.

"I've had him since I was five, I got him as a kitten, a genetically-engineered cat, everyone wanted one... This last year he hardly moved from this one spot under the sunshine lamp in my room, but he seemed amazingly content and happy. I'd often think, *Lucky Bastard, how can you be so content with life!* And now he's dead."

"We all die," observed Winry as a blimp floated gently over their heads, advertisements for some fantasy adventure scrawled across its side. "It's such a simple, obvious thing, and yet we have such a hard time coming to terms with it. In the old days people would experience death all the time and it was real to them, but now we experience death in games and it's surreal to us..."

"In a sense it has always been that way," Rai replied. The same can be said of lots of things."

He sighed.

It was time.

"That's what I wanted to talk with you about."

His words instantly piqued her interest. Though his heart was going to jump out of his chest, his voice was filled with newfound confidence. He continued.

"Do you ever get the feeling that when you look in the mirror the person looking back... isn't you?"

"I feel that way a lot."

"I've been obsessed with that idea. In the real world I'm *not* a hero. And yet here, in this world, *I am*. I spend so much time here that I look in the mirror and think, *who IS Rai?*"

"Who are you?"

"I don't know!" he hesitated. "But I've had this theory that relationships are like mirrors... that somehow being with someone else helps us to figure out who we are. But I've never really had one so I don't know for sure."

She looked at the space between them and back at Rai. "Um... what do you call this?"

"Fantasy."

"What do you mean?"

"Have you ever fallen in love with an idea before? You build up this romanticized version of something that doesn't exist and you love it rather than what is actually there. There's a danger with that. Winry, I log off and you aren't there! And *I'm* not there. I wake up and this isn't the real me. I'm not a hero! One moment I'm fucking an Elf Princess, and then poof! Here I am eating a freshly-printed peanut butter and jelly sandwich. The digital given flesh, a seamless blending of reality and dreams!"

She laughed. "I know the feeling, and yet at the same time, isn't this wonderful? We get to share our imaginations!" She spoke rapidly, the light dancing in her eyes. "Imagination is what gives life to the universe!"

He hadn't thought of it that way.

"Everything is a double-edged sword," he said.

"That assumes everything is out to cut you," she replied with a grin.

He laughed. "I mean *fantasy* not in a bad way then. I guess this is all just a roundabout way of asking you if you'd like to meet... in person?"

He simultaneously sent a picture of himself to her, a nice one that Morph took of him during breakfast one time when he was giving Morph a pretty cheeky smile.

She was quiet for a moment before she spoke. "I wasn't expecting that, and yet I should have."

He waited. Would she respond with her own picture? What if she was hideous? Maybe he shouldn't have asked her to meet before he knew what she looked like...

"I'm scared, Rai."

"Why? That doesn't seem like you..."

"Rai, I'm scared because I don't want to lose what we *do* have. I blame myself, we waited too long to discuss this and we shouldn't have..."

She looked down.

"My eyes, I don't have green eyes. Green is my favorite color, I just have brown eyes."

Somewhere out there, Rai saw the real Her in his mind, with plain brown eyes.

He put his digital arm around her digital body.

"The truth is, I'm not very beautiful..."

Rai's heart sank.

He tried to comfort her, all the while hoping she wasn't deformed. What if she was in a wheelchair?...

"I'm not so muscular!" laughed Rai, trying to comfort them both.

"I don't have this body..."

There was a note of sadness in her voice.

"It's okay. Don't compare yourself to impossible standards."

"But we've acquired a taste," laughed Winry, as she tried to make light of something that obviously troubled her. In spite of the attempt, the humor faded to worry. "It's like how prehistoric women with their hairy legs and bad smell would disgust you, because your standards have evolved, but to a caveman, they were still perfectly fuckable... this is not even what our voices really sound like."

"It's fine," said Rai. "I'm sure you're perfectly fuckable, and if that's a problem then there's always virtual sex. *We don't know till we try...* I don't really know you, I don't know your real face, but I have this feeling we belong together..."

"You can't always trust your feelings."

"Sometimes you don't have much else to go on... besides, I've got a ticket to New Seattle already booked for tomorrow."

Winry rolled her eyes and gazed up at the stars.

Rai received a message which contained a single picture. A black and white picture of a pretty face staring into the camera: the real Winry. She was mixed-race, Asian and something else, he wasn't sure.

Like me.

Her hair was black, and though the lighting in the picture wasn't very great, he could clearly see that she was not a monster.

"You're beautiful."

Winry laughed.

"Want to know something amusing?"

"What?"

"I've known what you've looked like this whole time. Morph showed me a charming photograph of you, and I saw that you were charmingly handsome, and thought, wow, 'he's worth talking to.'"

"That *bastard*."

They laughed.

Winry seemed as if a load had been lifted off her shoulders and Rai continued to look at the picture. Then he looked back at Winry.

"So..."

He took her hand in his before continuing.

"I would like to meet you in the real world."

"Fine. We'll meet. But under one condition."

"What?"

"Love™."

From 90,000 feet up, he drank in the sweeping curvature of the Earth. The world seemed so tiny, and yet so large, the lights of real cities glowing far beneath him, the stars winking far above.

What an amazing place.

It only took an hour to fly to New Seattle. The people around him were absorbed in their AUGs or sleeping with masks and earplugs, except for the couple sitting next to him. He chatted with them briefly. They were Indian, older, and wore traditional, bright-colored clothing. It was the 50th anniversary of their arranged marriage, and they were going to visit their daughter and grandchildren. They seemed happy, very willing to answer his questions, and inquired politely about his trip. However the conversation soon faded and Rai listened to music and looked at the picture Winry had given him.

He hoped she wouldn't be fat, but in the back of his mind he worried. She looked fine in the picture, but pictures could be easily altered...

The stewardess appeared with the drink cart, and he asked for a ginger ale. As they started the descent, he took out the crystal bottle that held

the tiny purple hearts and popped a love pill into his mouth.

Rai walked through the airport corridor in his favorite coat, pulling his luggage behind him.

A moving advert with a cat hologram caught his eye. He watched as the cat acted more adorably than any real cat would, constantly trying to catch the eye of its owner. Moments later a woman grabbed and snuggled it against her chest. "Real pets are such a hassle!" Words began to explode before his eyes in bold letters: *Food Costs, Sickness, Pet Dander, Death...*

"Avoid all that!" shouted the woman. "Buy a *Companion™* today!"

Then the puppy model scurried into the scene.

Rai reached into his coat pocket and popped another Love Pill. He checked his hair in the reflection of a shop window.

Deep breath.

He continued on through the crowded lobby, past swarms of silent people immersed in their AUGs, and made his way toward a mahogany door cut into the milky chrome of the airport terminal wall. Golden script snaked and flashed across the vintage green glass set into the door's upper panels: *SpeakEasy.*

After rapping softly on the dark wooden frame and scanning his retinals at the ornately-gilded peephole, the script flashed again: *Enter*.

Jazz music played softly in the background.

Perfect.

His heart beat faster as his eyes searched the room.

The *Love™* was going to his head.

There.

She sat at the end of the long wooden bar. Holding a glass of whiskey in one hand and a pink plastic gun in the other, she had dark hair, pale skin, and wore a short dress that showed off her leather boots.

Time seemed to slow as he watched her.

A tiny pink heart rested in her palm and she popped it into her mouth, washing it down with whiskey, past lips painted with bright red lipstick.

She looked up, and Rai got a good look at her face.

She was nothing like the virtual Winry. Not in the slightest. Brown hair, brown eyes, and a plain figure. She was so... different: *Attractive*, but not virtual Winry. Then again, he wasn't virtual Rai.

She picked up the plastic pink gun and shot him.

He took the "bullet" in the heart, and it was love at first sight. (With the aid of the love pills, of course).

He waved and walked closer. She stood.

"Hi, I'm the real Winry," said Winry in a boyish voice. "This is what my voice really sounds like. I hate it."

"Hi, I'm Rai, and this is what my voice sounds like..."

Rai smiled. "Not as deep as I would like. Can I get a hug, or do we have to have a drink first?"

"Well, I've had a drink, so a hug would be just fine." Winry nodded her head towards her glass.

"Alright then," said Rai, standing awkwardly in front of her with his arms stretched wide. They hugged.

"This is so weird..." acknowledged Winry after sitting down again. "Rai, I can't believe it's you. Thanks for coming all this way..."

Rai placed his coat on the back of a barstool and reached into his suitcase to withdraw a case containing a single white rose.

"Really?!??" She gasped with sarcastic pleasure. "You mean it's not for the *bartender*?!"

The Robobartender looked up at them expectantly.

"Well, I guess I can believe you are you," he said, rolling his eyes. "Bartender! I'll have a glass of the house red wine, please!"

"Wait! You are *Rai*. Do that again!"

He took up a bad fake English accent like on the night of the fateful ball and yelled drunkenly, "Bartender! I'll have all of your finest wines! Only the finest for this lady and myself!"

Winry laughed nervously.

The Robobartender was already pouring a glass of wine. He handed it to Rai. "Be quiet, you're not even drunk yet. One house red: \$700 please... Payment accepted. Thank you."

Rai took his glass in hand and met Winry's brown eyes with his own. He proposed a toast.

"To us, to *this*... may it all be happily ever after."

"To this," she echoed as they clinked their glasses. She smiled and downed the rest of her drink.

"Hey, bartender! I'll have every dessert you got and a glass of bourbon."

"Wow, I didn't know you were so hardcore," Rai observed. He raised his eyebrows.

Winry laughed nervously.

"I'm just incredibly nervous, Rai. I don't usually get out of my apartment... Well, that's not true.

But this is a big deal! Perhaps it means I'm excited to meet you."

She was speaking incredibly fast, and Rai had the thrill of knowing that she liked him. He could tell by her inflection.

"You're cute."

She blushed, and he did too.

The Robobartender set down a glass of bourbon.

"Thanks. You're cute too."

"Really? I thought I was more badass."

"Pfft. Dream on. Look at that bow-tie!"

"What's wrong with my bow-tie?" asked Rai defensively.

"Nothing, I'm just trying to be funny." She smiled at him and turned away to look at her drink.

"You're funny," teased Rai, "funny-faced!"

"Really?"

She wanted to hear what he thought of her face.

"Winry," said Rai reassuringly, "sometimes, I say things I don't mean. The truth is, I'm practically overdosing on Love Pills, and in spite of the fact that you're basically a complete stranger... I want to make out with your face."

She looked at him and shouted, "Bartender! Another glass of bourbon!"

"But I don't like bourbon," complained Rai.

"Man up and shoot it! I need more than Passion Potion if I'm going to make out with the likes of you."

She's spunky alright.

Rai stuck his tongue out and laughed as sarcastically as he could. "Har. Har. Har. I'd make fun of you, but I wouldn't want to hurt your feelings."

The Robobartender set down another glass of bourbon in front of Rai. He took it in his hand.

Winry took hers and proposed a toast.

"My mother always told me, 'if you want to find true love in the real world, you've got to lower your expectations.'"

"Wise words, I'll drink to that."

"To lower expectations," she said.

"To lower expectations."

They downed their drinks.

"Wow, that's... different. Very wet," said Rai after their lips had touched.

"Shut up. We need practice." She tapped him on the nose and he bent down for another kiss outside her apartment complex.

"You're tall."

"You're short."

"Would you like to come up and see my apartment?"

"Yes," said Rai.

He needed to pee.

Winry opened her front door to reveal pink walls decorated with technological antiques: old computer screens, keyboards, mice, iPads, and a primitive virtual reality suit displayed like a suit of armor.

"Ta-da!" she said as she began to drunkenly show off her apartment. "As you can see, I collect antiques! Some of it's my great grandfather's; he wouldn't throw anything away even if it was broken."

She pranced over to a door in the corner of her living room.

"This is the bathroom!"

Rai peered inside. "Woooooow!"

She hit him.

"I'm showing you where it is so you don't piss on the floor."

"Oh, great idea," said Rai as he walked in the bathroom and shut the door. He looked around at Winry's things and saw that she was tidy. He felt strangely guilty over the sound of his urine hitting the water. He tried to pee quietly. He didn't want her to hear.

He washed his hands and found that there was no bathroom towel.

"Would you like a cup of tea?" shouted Winry from the other side of the door.

He opened the door to find her walking around the room trying to be busy, and normal.

"I'll settle for a glass of water and another kiss. And maybe a towel?" He held his wet hands in the air.

"Oh! I'm sorry! I'm not used to having people over. They're in the pantry, just a second!"

She ran into the small kitchen.

"It's okay!" said Rai, feeling bad and wiping his hands on his pants. "My pants will do. Look, dry as a desert!"

Winry emerged holding the towel. "You need a towel anyway because you have lipstick all over your face!"

"So do you."

It was strangely becoming that their kissing had blurred the lines of where Winry's real lips began and ended.

"Oh *god*, I'm drunk. Hold still!"

She put the towel to his face and wiped it clean. He took it from her and did the same. Then she touched him and he touched her and they fell onto the floor drunkenly clutching at each other and kissing.

It was strange, more messy than virtual kissing. But the drugs were swirling in his head. He felt satisfied to be holding the woman he loved, exhilarated to have her biting his neck.

He ran his fingers through her hair and stared into her eyes.

"Rai, this is wonderful." She spoke softly, "But I think we should stop for now and see how we feel about each other in the morning."

She sounded conflicted. Rai knew she was right.

Yet he felt like she was physically pulling him in; leaving her would be like cutting his heart in two.

"Yeah, you're right..." he said, brushing her hair. "I don't want to make any rash early judgments but I really like you, the real you."

"I like me too," said Winry.

Rai laughed.

"One more kiss?" she said, being playful with her eyes to make sure he knew the affection was mutual.

She kept touching him.

He answered her siren call, and the single kiss soon turned into six.

Chapter 11: Sex

He put his hand on her stomach and ran it slowly down, wavering briefly before traveling further, between her legs. Her body shivered at his touch. It was all so familiar and yet so different. He wanted her, and he wanted her to moan with real pleasure.

“Gently...” she cautioned, as he trailed his finger over the top of her more sensitive parts.

“Okay, you’re the boss.” Somehow, this was less stimulating, but then more so. He was fingering a real woman, and he felt her caressing him in turn, her nails cutting pleasurably into the back of his neck.

“Oh, Rai...”

Her fingers crept to undo his belt buckle, skirting beneath the waistband of his pants and darting further down, grasping him firmly. Her hands were warm and soft and light–

He gasped at her touch.

Damn. That felt good.

“Winry...”

“Do you want to go further?”

She paused, eyes locked on his in the room’s dim light.

“But it’s just our first night...”

They continued to bask in the thrill of shared contact: stroking, hesitating, exploring...

Winry’s grip grew tighter. The sensation was maddening.

“Fuck it.”

It was impossible to pull away. She was biting and kissing his neck, and...other things.

Before he knew it, they were lost in a darkening whirl of lust-fueled ecstasy...

It was early, but his throbbing hangover woke him.

He lay next to Winry in the nether world between consciousness and sleep. She was breathing gently beside him, and though he wanted to close his eyes and rest, he found himself looking at her. Her chest rose and fell under the blanket and Rai saw that she was drooling on her pillow. The more he watched her, the more thoughts came into his head, and the more awake he felt.

He had had sex with a real person, but it hadn't felt like it. He knew that he had crossed into a new era of his life, but he didn't feel like a different person.

She was a complete stranger, and yet he felt close to her.

He shut his eyes...

Music blared, and the lights began to flash.

"...Sorry, that's my alarm..."

She clapped her hands.

"OFF! I AM AWAKE!"

The music stopped, but the lights remained on.

"My head hurts. Why didn't I drink that glass of water again?" said Rai, rubbing his eyes.

"Sorry. I forgot to turn off the alarm before bed."

"It's not your fault, you were distracted," replied Rai, glancing at her just as she was glancing at him. She laughed shyly. He suddenly felt conscious of the fact that he was naked.

The love pills had worn off.

They needed showers. His hair was a mess, and Winry looked much less attractive. They saw each other for what they really were: *human*, flawed.

My head... fuck. Will this go away, I can't function like this.

Winry excused herself to visit the bathroom, and Rai watched as she got out of bed and walked across the room in her very loose-fitting pajamas, which did their best to hide her curves.

She could feel his eyes watching her, and it made her self-conscious.

When she came back, Rai was finally out of bed and putting on his pants.

"On a scale of one to hungover, how hungover are you?" he asked.

"Hungover. You? Where are you going?"

"My head is about to bust, and I'm going to the bathroom if that's okay with you."

"Omg, you have a *major* hickey."

"Really?" asked Rai, feeling his neck. "Thank you. I will wear it as a badge of honor."

"You're welcome. Would you like to take a shower?"

"With you?"

"No," she said, shaking her head. "I meant I was going to get you a towel."

"Oh," said Rai. "That would be most wonderful." He paused for a moment, before adding, "I'm sorry about the sexual innuendo, I didn't mean any offense."

"None taken." She smiled at him. "I was half considering it, but I'd like to get to know you more first."

"Yeah, I know what you mean, *this* is quite strange." She looked at him like she didn't understand. "I mean, we still kind of feel like strangers to each other."

She walked towards the kitchen. "Would you like to go out for breakfast? Then we can talk. Some coffee will probably help as well."

"Yeah," said Rai. "It would be good to talk."

The hot water poured down on him as he showered in her bathroom. His mind flickered from feeling incredibly self-conscious, to being thankful for the steaming hot, high pressure water that graced his body.

What did she think of him?

His head was finally starting to feel better, but he forced himself to turn off the water so as not to appear to be taking too long.

He was mindful of hair in the drain, unsure of which was his, or hers. He thought of last night, and wanted to have sex again.

As he waited for Winry to finish her shower, he stared into his AUGS, and searched the news. A familiar face filled the screen, led in handcuffs to stand trial before a judge. *Leon*.

Over the past few days he had watched the coverage of the story to see what had come of it. Trending for only an hour or so after it happened, a majority of the stories focused on the "victims" trapped in the dark space pods when they were unexpectedly woken from holiday. Some stories chose the heist angle, and explained how Leon had hacked into the security system thanks to the stockpile of knowledge he had accumulated during his 17 years of service to the company. Only a few stories focused on the motives for the protest and people's reactions. There was some sympathy, but nothing like the stirrings of a revolution. It irked Rai that people didn't seem to care.

One story he watched revealed that Leon had been sentenced to 10 years in a federal prison and was waiting for an appeal. Rai felt sorry for him, and the look on his face must have shown it.

"What's wrong?"

Winry appeared at his side, her hair still dripping from the shower. It smelled of lilac shampoo.

"Leon got ten years in a federal prison," said Rai with mixed emotions. "I guess it was inevitable. Why am I friends with crazy motherfuckers?"

"Because you are a crazy motherfucker."

"Touché. I want to change the world, yet I don't want to do anything illegal."

"You're a plastic revolutionary."

"Plastic irony is the new real, therefore I'm a realist."

She laughed.

"Well, that's doubtful, but you are amusing nevertheless."

"Anyway, Leon was angry, but he was powerless," Rai continued, relieved to see her smile. "Maybe he thought that he could start a rebellion, but no one is printing out shotguns. I'm beginning to think that while we can change the world, *how* we change it is out of our control."

She placed her hands on his shoulders.

"Come on, I'll buy you breakfast. We've got to get going or we're going to miss the JetBus."

"No, I'll buy you breakfast because you saved me money on the hotel."

He wanted to add, 'and you let me put my penis in you.' But he wasn't quite sure if she would find it humorous.

I've had real sex.

It still hadn't sunk in. Perhaps because he was still feeling a bit drunk? Or maybe because he was overwhelmed with everything that was happening in his life.

After breakfast, they boarded a JetBus filled with tourists going outside for a real holiday. Everyone was wearing AUGs, but Rai and Winry had taken theirs off, looking out the window to catch a glimpse of the ocean beneath them on their way to California. They were going to sit on the beach and enjoy the sun and some warmer weather for the day.

The sun peeked through gray clouds.

"Planned activities, this was a good idea," said Winry.

"I'm full of good ideas."

She laughed. "Well, it could rain. Then I'll say it was a terrible idea to come all this way for nothing."

Rai was looking at the clouds, finding it difficult to tell if it would rain.

"Note to us: we have to make an effort to get outside more," said Winry.

"Good idea. Hey, close your eyes."

"Why?"

"I've got a surprise for you."

"What is it?"

"It's a surprise," said Rai sarcastically, "close your motherfucking eyes."

"Swearing. I swear..."

She shut her eyes, but not without rolling them first.

Rai rummaged in his backpack as if he was going to pull something out.

"Now hold out your hand," he added when he was ready.

She held out her hand. Rai put his hand in hers. She opened her eyes.

"Surprise."

Her face turned red and she smiled.

"That was lame, but cute."

They sat on a dock looking out over the seemingly endless expanse of the ocean. The air smelled of salt, and seagulls circled them in search of food.

Storm clouds loomed and small droplets began to fall.

Rai looked up at the clouds and stated the obvious.

"It's raining."

All the tourists and their children sat under the roof of a café drinking coffee and soft drinks, absorbed in their smartspecs.

"I don't care. I haven't felt the rain in ages," replied Winry as she latched onto his arm.

Rai smiled.

That was why he liked her. She was the kind of person who could see the world in a different way. Through her he saw beauty in things he hadn't seen before.

"The rain; isn't it amazing?"

She nodded.

"It's an old cliché," said Winry giving him a sassy look, "but have you ever *really* made out in the rain before?"

He answered with a kiss.

A few children ran out from underneath the shelter where the tourists were hiding from the bad weather. They laughed as they experienced the rain for the first time, screaming with shouts of delight, running and jumping in puddles.

Some of their parents struggled to pull them inside, while others laughed.

Winry whispered in his ear as he kissed her neck.

"Why can't we spend tonight looking up at the stars."

Rai pulled away from her and watched as the water dripped down her face. He rubbed his nose against hers.

"Because we wouldn't be able to see them with all these clouds, and I have to get back to catch my jet home."

Suddenly, they felt wet as they rose to walk back to the JetBus.

"I'm cold."

They got to the airport early in the evening and found a café called *The Old Fashioned* to have one last dinner together before Rai left. True to the café's name, everything seemed as if they had tumbled into some bygone century. A man checked their AUGs in at the door, and an *actual* waitress took their order on a pad of paper.

Winry ordered french toast.

Rai ordered blueberry pancakes.

The place was filled with *people*. People working in the kitchens making the food. Waitresses. Hipsters in vintage clothing laughing in the midst of conversation.

Rai spent a few moments looking around.

"I like this place," he said.

"I thought you would," Winry replied.

They made eye contact.

"Do you come here often?"

"No, I just came here last week with my sister."

"You have a sister?"

"Yes, Rai, I do. She is my closest friend."

"I'm sorry for never asking."

"Relax, you don't have to be sorry."

"Yeah, I know."

There was a lot on his mind.

The group of four at the table next to them were talking loudly, especially a ginger girl with pale skin. "How to go about adjusting to a real relationship? Just have sex, but beware it's not as good as digital sex, and omg a *lot* hairier. Still, it helps pass the time."

"You want to know something interesting?"

"What?" asked Winry.

"I'm..." he spoke quietly. "I mean, *I was*, a virgin. Until last night, that is."

"What?!" her eyes widened. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"I was caught up in the moment..." said Rai, surprised she was reacting like this. "I didn't want to make it awkward either... you know how it is."

She suddenly seemed distant.

How much real sex has she had?

"I'm sorry I didn't tell you. I'm a virgin when it comes to real relationships too and I don't know what I'm doing. I'm sorry. I'm not even sure if it's ridiculous that we as a society would consider

someone a virgin who's been having virtual sex since he was 13... it's just the human element I'm not used to. I don't mind if you've had a previous sexual relationship with someone... but we've all gotta start somewhere."

"It's okay, Rai. Calm down. I was just wondering about whether it was good that things happened so quickly...but then again, we were drunk. It's not like I've had much experience myself..."

She stopped talking and suddenly looked horrified as if she was going to be sick. She was looking over his shoulder...

Rai turned.

Virtual Winry stood not 15 feet behind them—in the arms of another man.

He was tall and he looked like Rai, with dark hair. But he had narrow eyes and a cold mouth.

Winry's and Rai's eyes widened.

The man seemed to recognize her. He waved nervously as he walked over to talk, towing along a perfect replica of Winry's virtual self.

Rai was astounded.

Winry vomited on her plate.

The man noticed and asked if she was okay. Winry's face was red; she was speechless, shocked.

Rai, unable to fully comprehend what was happening, stood up and politely asked the man

to walk away, or he'd punch him in the face. A member of the restaurant staff then asked them to leave as the entire restaurant watched.

Rai walked Winry out, and collected their AUGs at the door. He apologized to the staff for the vomit and the outburst, and left a large tip.

Winry started to cry.

"What's wrong?" he asked as they sat down on a bench across the street.

"I'm so sorry Rai," she said. "I don't cry, not often, but that was so embarrassing... I just vomited all over my food..."

She seemed extremely self-conscious.

"It's okay. I'm here." He put his arm around her.

"Can I talk to you later? I've got to go home, I'm really sorry."

What?

"I'll walk you back, you don't have to talk about it if you don't want to..."

"No, it's fine." They stood up and she moved out from under his arm. "I'm sure you noticed his companion."

"I was wondering about that."

"That's my ex-boyfriend. Alec..." she looked at Rai as if she was wondering if she should tell him. "I loved him. I met him in Virtual and he said he wanted to be with me in real life. He even told me he loved me... but his words were just words. To

him *I wasn't Winry. I wasn't beautiful enough...* soon I found out he was cheating on me with an iDoll. He was *my first*. And he used me, he ticked-off his virginity box and then decided I was ugly. He didn't have the balls to tell me. I'm sorry, I know this is hard for you to hear..."

"No, this is important to you, I want to hear it. I'm sorry."

She wiped away her tears with the sleeve of her shirt.

"The worst part is, he made an iDoll out of *me*. Or I should say he made an iDoll out of the *virtual me*, based on my personality, but with a better boobs-to-waist ratio. One day he was over at my house and he told me about it. I've never been so devastated in my life. He told me, to my face, that I was fat and that he was bored with the time we spent together in real life. I was devastated."

"When did this happen?"

"It's been a year."

"I'm sorry," said Rai. "It makes my skin crawl just thinking about that... but *I'm here for you*."

She hugged him and he held her tightly so that the words sunk in.

When they arrived at her apartment, she turned to him and apologized. "I'm sorry you had to see that, Rai. I'm not in a good state right now..."

"Stop saying sorry. We all have baggage."

"Yeah, but mine's pretty fucked up. I swear I'm over it... mostly."

She tried to laugh.

She looked pretty. No, she wasn't gorgeous, but she was beautiful to him. Yet there were still some doubts popping into his mind.

"How about I make you a cup of tea? And we sit on the couch and cuddle for four hours until I have to go."

"You know, as much as I..." She forgot what she was going to say, but kissed him.

Vomit and blueberry pancakes.

"Thank you for coming, Rai."

He waited in the airport lobby immersed in doubts and questions. He had pulled his collar up so that people couldn't see the huge hickey on his neck. He would have been proud of it, but it made him think of her.

This wasn't how it was supposed to happen.

Did she love him? Or was he just a substitute for Alec?

Was he just a rebound?

He hadn't asked for any of this. Was he going to lose her because she wasn't over someone else?

When he thought about it, he realized he didn't know her at all. She was still practically a stranger to him, and yet he loved her. He had almost pledged his love to her.

Love is blind. The words finally made sense.

She wasn't perfect, and yet who was?

Rai sighed, shook his head, and decided to go for a walk through the terminals.

He passed an extremely obese man holding hands with a beautiful teenage girl. She looked at the fat man with loving affection.

Rai cringed.

An advert flashed with text that said "HEAVEN EXISTS!" hovering above a man resting his head on a soft pair of beautiful breasts.

What sort of ads do women see?

Nearby, a middle-aged woman reprimanded her son via AUGs, "I won't tolerate your sass! Your punishment is to go outside and play."

A female voice rang inside his head: "Rai Jones, please proceed to gate A68. Your flight is boarding."

He turned and strode rapidly towards his gate, stumbling occasionally against the streams of people rushing past him, trapped in their own little worlds. He tried to reach Morph, but to no avail, and so he left a message.

"Hey Morph, it's Rai. I'm coming home...
Anyways, I'll be back in about five hours so don't
be banging Sasha in the kitchen when I get
home."

He landed in Chicagoland.

Step after tired step brought him closer to his
tiny apartment, as he reminisced on the events of
his short trip. Granted, it had been a year since
Alec and Winry broke up, a good length of time.
Still, the doubt kept gnawing at his mind, and yet
he felt he could not talk to her about it just yet.

It was the uncertainty that was driving him
crazy. He couldn't comprehend what was running
through her mind.

Does she love me?

Do I love her?

Human relationships were so difficult.

Miraculously, *she* was there. In the window of
the coffee shop where he had first seen her sat
the girl with the purple hair, transfixed by the
pages of the book before her. He had watched
that video recording too many times, and now felt
awkward seeing her in person again. Still, he
gazed at her. Perhaps the grass would be greener
with another person? Maybe he could do better
for himself?

Window shopping. I'm window shopping for girls.

Surely, that was the wrong way to think about it. He wasn't comparing "products."

Indeed, he questioned what he had learned as he helplessly walked into the coffee shop, purchased an espresso, and sat a few seats down from her. He observed her through his smartspecs and sipped his beverage.

She was immersed in her book, and he wouldn't be able to talk to her unless he interrupted her. It was hopeless. They might as well have been sitting in different rooms, worlds, galaxies, light years away...

He sighed and wondered what he was doing. She looked perfect, out of his league. And suddenly he caught himself speaking aloud:

"It's so easy to fall in love with the *idea* of someone."

She looked up, briefly, and then quickly back down at her book. Rai drank the rest of his espresso and left.

But no, he thought. He corrected himself. *It's better to fall in love with what's actually there. With someone who actually loves you...*

With Winry.

When Rai arrived outside his apartment door, he wondered if Morph would be up. He needed to talk to someone.

Rai opened the door and found Sasha sitting on one of the chairs in the middle of their living room.

The lamp stood ominously in the corner, the bulb in her electric hand socket casting a dramatic light.

The rest of the furniture lay motionless around her, dressed in colorful costumes, posed as if they were about to perform a dance number.

Fuck.

"Hello, Rai," she said in her electric voice.

She pointed toward the other Yamatwin chair.

"Morph has an important message for you. Please have a seat..."

Chapter 12: Relationships

"No thanks, I'll stand. What is it?"

Rai felt slightly worried and very impatient. He looked at the lamp's burlesque outfit, with its glow-in-the-dark corset, and wondered how the furniture had gotten clothes.

"Shall I begin?" asked Sasha.

Rai nodded.

She closed her eyes and bowed her head slightly. Morph's voice began to speak through her as she moved her lips.

"Rai!" said Morph, "I've been thinking that you're right: *This world sucks*. Naturally, I'm sure you're surprised I agree with you. I've arranged for Sasha to take you through a little documentary of my thoughts... just put on my crown, and all will be made clear."

"Sasha, what the fuck is going on?!?"

He was fed up with this game; he wasn't in the mood for another one of Morph's practical jokes.

"Morph wants you to watch the video. He said you might act this way. Do you have too much sexual tension built up inside of you?"

Suddenly he could feel the gaze of the furniture upon him.

"No," he replied. "I'll watch this video."

"As you wish. Have a seat."

He settled onto the nearest "chair," the girl's back yielding ever so slightly as he reclined. He kept thinking of Winry—she could save him from the temptations of the room.

The lamp strutted forward with a sultry walk. She carried Morph's golden cybercrown and lowered it onto Rai's head.

The furniture began to shuffle around him, as the world altered—a near seamless blending of virtual reality and the real world, a hybrid experience. Surprisingly, he was still sitting where he had been, but a virtual representation of the real Morph now stood in the middle of the room—pale, overweight, with wild unkempt hair and beard. Was he in Virtual? The holographic image flickered ever so slightly.

Morph spoke with a measured voice, his lively blue eyes filled with excitement.

"I'm sick of how shit this real world of ours is. I'm sick of how shit I am—fat, weak, ugly. Yes, I know I'm fat, Rai."

He looked down at his belly and back up at Rai.

"I have decided I never want to wake up in this body or world again. In fact, I've been thinking about this for a long time. I know I joked about you being R-Sexual, but it was just in good fun.

The truth is, someday, you're going to find that girl of your dreams and move out."

He grinned at Rai as if to say this was one of the rare moments where there wouldn't be irony or a joke at the end.

"However, I have always known that I was destined for a lonely death. Some poor neighbor would finally smell me rotting away long after the fact and call the authorities, who'd pry into my apartment and cremate my week-old lonely corpse. And so I planned, I just had to wait until I had the money. Then, when I got the money..."

Their living room faded away into darkness until Rai could only see a large vibrant neon sign.

HEAVEN EXISTS

The real Morph stood under it, looking up longingly.

"Morph, what the fuck is going on?" asked Rai. Morph didn't respond.

Rai felt stupid as he realized that he had tried to talk to a prerecorded message. He stood beside Morph like a ghost tagging along for the ride, unable to interact with the world. He heard Morph's voice narrating the scene, as he and the real Morph stood together in a black world thrown into technicolor by that single sign.

"I don't believe in the afterlife, Rai. But I do believe in *Heaven*. Heaven is what I feel when I'm

in Virtual and can satisfy all my dreams and desires. Hell, I can even *change myself* there. I feel that this is the only way I can be true to myself.”

Suddenly, they were standing in a white hospital room.

Morph lay strapped onto a vertical operating table, serenely asleep.

“Imagination is key to unlocking the universe. It was time for me to unlock my mind from that *prison*.”

A Robosurgeon descended from the ceiling, a circular saw spinning on one of its many arms. It circled around Morph's head like a vulture about to take a bite—its cameras analyzing, calculating.

“My body is a cage, my mind a bird,” said Morph.

The whirring of the blade filled Rai with fear. He couldn't move. He couldn't do anything except observe as the Robosurgeon began sawing into Morph's skull. Blood trickled down over his forehead.

“It didn't hurt at all, I was asleep the whole time...”

“You fucking idiot!”

Rai tried to hold back his tears. Everything faded to white.

His eyes became the eyes of a robot as he watched Morph's brain being transferred to a blood-filled box. The surgeon probed it with electrodes and synthetic veins.

"It's true," Morph continued. "My brain has been removed from my body and placed in a vat equipped with electrodes and life support. I've shed my body and exist only as a mind. I even extended a few lives with my kidneys, heart, and liver."

A bright resounding light consumed everything, blinding him.

Slowly, the light dimmed to reveal the virtual Morph sitting resplendent on a golden throne in a hall of mirrors, his robes encrusted with jewels, his eyes closed. When he opened them, they shone with an intense blue flame. Music rang out, a joyous, hopeful hymn of angels singing, "*With science all things are possible!*"

"I woke up in a fucking palace. It's awesome, Rai. I'm a *god*. Finally, virtual reality *IS my reality!*"

Morph's voice rose with excitement and echoed throughout the hall.

"I said I was moving out to a *bigger place.*"

No.

Rai grew aware of the light shining through the stained glass above them, casting color into a hall of crystal. The effect was breathtaking. The virtual

Morph spoke to him softly from his magnificent throne.

“Rai, it’s beautiful here. Heaven is in our minds. This is the future of humanity. This is where we can be eternally *happy*.”

Suddenly an angel arrived, carrying a virtual Sasha down from heaven. The angel placed her in Morph's lap. Naked, radiant, the birth of Venus come to life, Morph took her in his arms and kissed her lips.

Then the virtual sensations dispersed, and reality took precedence once more. He fell back into his real body. The living room reappeared, dim outlines of the furniture shifting shadowlike behind Morph’s fading hologram.

“All of my physical possessions are now yours, Rai, minus the furniture which is the sole property of Android Sexual.”

Morph nodded, and one by one the women came forward with Rai’s inheritance.

The love seat graciously handed him Morph’s AUGs.

The table offered forth an extra-large jar of Love Pills.

“What remains of my body has been cremated,” added Morph as the loveseats presented Rai with a small statue of virtual Morph. “The ashes are in the statuette.”

Rai took it into his hands. It was surprisingly heavy, all that remained of his friend's body, the platinum case engraved with the words: *BEAUTY IS TRUTH, TRUTH BEAUTY.*

"Finally..." Morph grinned. Sasha stood before him, looking lustily at Rai with her lovely violet eyes. Her red hair rested in a braid that fell between her soft pale breasts.

"Sasha is yours...and she needs a good fucking. The only reason I bought her in the first place was to kill time until I had completed various health tests and paperwork. I had the extra money, so why not?"

Morph bowed his head. "I think that's all. Talk soon."

The recording ended, and Morph vanished. Rai shook his head, it was too much.

"This is the most horrible prank ever!"

"No Rai, it's real," said Sasha in her most comforting tone.

"Fucking hell..."

He couldn't believe it, and yet... he could. "Why didn't you do anything?"

"I'm a machine. I just do what I'm told. Morph warned that you would not take it well..." She began to undo her bra. "Which is why he told me to ease your troubles."

Rai looked away.

"No! Sasha, I don't want that!" he yelled. "I want to know what's happened to my best friend!"

"It's like he said. He's undergone Encasement." Suddenly he felt the tears coming.

"Damn it all..."

"Aren't we going to make love? I've gone through my cleaning cycle..."

He shook his head and walked speechlessly into his room.

Rai slammed the door and locked it. He looked at the white crown on his dresser.

"Jesus Christ... why!?" he asked the empty room.

He donated his organs. He saved the lives of some people who wanted to live in the real world a little longer... fuck, they can grow that shit. That bastard.

Rai sat down on his red sofa by the sunshine lamp, and ran his hand along the vinyl upholstery. He stared at the green windowless walls. There was no cat, and now, no Morph.

"I'm all alone."

He shivered in the quietness of the room.

What happened to all my friends? Why is everybody so miserable and confused?

He wanted so many things all at once, in that single instant.

Mostly, he just wanted to have a wise friend to talk to, somebody who really loved and truly understood him... *a father figure*.

The thought made him cringe. He didn't have a father—he had a sperm donor. His mother wouldn't do either. Though he loved her, she was not the person to help him; he only talked to her about superficial things. The two people he was closest to were lost to him, and the only person who came to mind was Leon.

Leon.

He was in jail and Rai had sort of intended to visit him anyway, if he could. He picked up the crown and placed it on his head.

He tried to remember to be strong as he made arrangements to visit Leon in prison. A security officer informed Rai that the entire conversation would be recorded for security purposes and showed him into a secure white room with a video screen. He had expected to be talking with a virtual Leon, but the real Leon was on video in his real life prison cell. Apparently, going to prison meant you lost your virtual identity and subsequent anonymity.

"Hey, it's me, Rai," he began, feeling like he needed to introduce himself. After all, Leon had never seen his avatar. "How are you holding up?"

Leon looked thrilled to see him.

"Rai!" said Leon, "I didn't expect you to come!"

"Yeah, well, I wanted to pay my respects. I thought our last moment together was a little awkward since you stuck a shotgun in my face."

Leon immediately began to explain himself.

"It was so you wouldn't get fired. I didn't want anyone to get hurt while I was breaking shit, and I didn't want anyone else to go to jail aside from me. Mission accomplished. Have you been watching the news?"

For a long time they discussed the news, and Rai felt like the bearer of bad news. Leon wouldn't admit it, but he had hoped his actions would have resulted in mass protests and a global movement towards change. Rai neglected to mention how he and his coworkers had been placed on unpaid leave, he had forgotten about his own troubles in the face of a man who had lost everything. Instead, he gently explained that there hadn't been a revolution as a result of Leon's action.

"I'm sorry," said Rai, "but things like this are largely out of our control; humans are tiny creatures. I just don't want you feeling like you've thrown your life away."

But Leon didn't cry.

"Rai, it's okay. Don't worry, I haven't thrown my life away!"

"Excuse me, but how have you not? You're going to spend a long time in prison... ultimately, we can't really change the world."

Leon shook his head enthusiastically.

"Who's the judge of whether or not I've thrown my life away?"

"You are, I suppose."

"So, listen. Rai, there are things that we need to believe in. Things that may or may not exist or even be true... like goodness, love, or revolution. These things are worth believing in for their own sake. If you don't believe you can change the world in the face of adversity, you can't. If you don't believe in love, if you don't look for it, you'll never find it."

It was exactly what he needed to hear.

Having said goodbye to Leon, with a promise to visit again, Rai soon found himself back in his room, reclined on his red vinyl sofa, in his green windowless room.

He wanted to write a letter, so that he would have the chance to organize his thoughts.

Winry.

He wanted to tell her about his day and what he thought about her, about what he had learned, to share in her pain over past love lost and disappointment.

Any old message wouldn't do. He wanted to do something special, and it struck him: *A real letter...*

He needed to get out of the apartment, and soon he found himself taking the elevator to ground level where he walked straight to a local distribution box. He picked up some paper and pens he had ordered on the way over, then sped off to the cafe.

He sat, with the blank pages spread before him, and scrawled in unpracticed letters, regularly having to take breaks to check his spelling.

An hour passed as he worked, the thoughts appearing on the page as they came to him. The sun began to set, and most of the patrons had left as he read over the letter one last time:

Dear Winry,

It's amazing that in spite of all our technological progress we're still miserable when it comes to something as fundamental as relationships. I'm really sorry about the pain you experienced in the past. But what's happened has happened. As

much as I would like to go back in time and change the past, I can't. So we have to live with it.

I've had a horrible day myself. I came home to find out that my roommate and best friend had himself encased. Although I know that he's not, it feels like he's dead. We used to eat our meals together and now we'll never get to do that again. Worst of all is that I had no clue this was coming. I didn't know how he felt. My best friend was a complete stranger to me. Funny how that can work with the people we are closest to.

Which brings me to you—to us.

In the midst of all of this, bizarrely enough, I think I am finally beginning to understand you... At first, I had all of these ideas about love that prevented me from actually finding it... and I had all these ideas about what life should be which prevented me from actually living it. I know I struggle with accepting things as they are, but I'm beginning to understand that acceptance is not being happy in Fantasy Worlds. It's learning to love the real world, real people; women who don't have perfect bodies or men who don't have 12-inch cocks. It's learning to break through the lies that are being constantly sold to us through screens. It's accepting each other as damaged and lonely human beings. So I just wanted to let

you know that I accept you, and only you. The real you.

You're wonderful, beautiful even.

And I'm going to prove it to you. I hope we talk soon.

Rai read over the letter. He had gone back and forth over whether or not to tell her he loved her. Was it too early for that? Or just the right time? Did he love her?

At the last moment, he signed it—*"Love, Rai."*

Then he picked up the piece of paper, folded it, and placed it in the envelope, which he sealed after gingerly scrawling Winry's address across the front. His hand ached from all the writing as he exited the cafe and walked to the nearest post box. It had a large door where a robot weighed and stamped your package before conveying it to an underground chute beyond.

Rai handed over his tiny letter.

Winry.

He sighed.

It was time to face his best real friend—avatar to avatar.

Chapter 13: Reality and Dreams

It unfolded as it had upon entering the Virtual many times before: the same quality of drifting, and yet a sensation somehow more intense and encompassing—of being simultaneously pulled and crushed into something less than and yet far beyond himself. For an instant Rai floated weightless out of time, divorced from all thought and meaning: *bodiless*.

After all that he had been through over the last couple of days, he now stood overwhelmed in endless space. His virtual feet rested on an invisible plane before two towering, golden doors rising fifty feet high in the form of a setting sun, its massive, wine-red rays searing and staining the grey seams of the horizon.

An inscription read:

*ALL WHO ENTER THROUGH THESE
DOORS WILL KNOW THE GLORY OF
HEAVEN.*

So much had happened that he couldn't help but marvel at the nature of existence, *the real*. It all had been so surreal, that Rai had wondered how he had reached this point of time—*this moment*.

The sundoor glittered before him. He felt paradoxically strong and tired, hopeful and worried, sad and happy—the emotions and feelings cycled through him without any sign of slowing.

How do I feel about this?

Scared?

Heroic?

"It's Rai!" he yelled at the doors.

"Morph, let me in!"

With a silent shudder, they swung open, pouring forth light as if they gave way to nothing less than the glory of God.

At the end of a long hall, Morph sat on a lofty throne, sucking from the breast of a blonde girl in his lap who seemed to be enjoying it immensely. He was dressed as the sun king. Long crimson robes covered his strong body, and a sword rested by his side. He kissed the girl's breast tenderly and looked up, a crown perched on his virtual brow.

He did that just for me, I'm sure.

Rai began to make his way through the long hall towards the "king" at the distant end. Sexy female catgirls lined the way, standing to attention with short military skirts, massive tits, and submachine guns. And of course, cat ears. Morph always did have questionable taste.

"A lot brighter than our old, windowless apartment! And the finest Scotch Whiskey in the world straight from a breast! What do you think of my new world?"

He laughed as he set the girl down on a nearby dais and rose to greet his friend.

Rai crossed the remaining distance between them with determination.

"Are we really going to argue again?!" Morph yelled. "Because *seriously*, having sex in the real world, with a real person, smelling their body odor and hair and *germs*... makes me want to throw up!"

His court of curvaceous feline companions laughed.

Rai stood before his friend and stretched out his arms.

"There is this thing in my life that I call a *friend*. It is beyond technology. It is *real*."

There was a pause, and Rai briefly wondered if his best real friend had heard him.

Slowly, Morph began to melt before him. He struggled against the virtual tears gathering in pin-like rivulets on his flickering face. His eyes shone with an intense blue flame.

"Do I get a hug?" asked Rai, arms still outstretched.

Sniffing, Morph stumbled down from his throne and embraced his best real friend.

"I missed you, Rai," Morph blubbered, face buried in the dampening folds of Rai's shirt.

"I missed you too," replied Rai, continuing to hold on to his friend, who wasn't letting go.

"What's done is done. But I can't believe you did it *without telling me...*"

"I don't feel right... This place is heaven, but I wasn't made to be here."

Rai shook his head. For a moment he wanted to lie to his friend and tell him that all would be just like he had dreamed. Instead, he listened.

"I just need to try and enjoy things like I used to. But I *can't...*"

Morph sighed.

"This all feels so perfect, and yet so *empty*. It was my fantasy, Rai. I had been planning this for awhile. I built it, it was what I dreamed of, but now that I have it... I only wanted to pursue what was beautiful..."

Tears sparkled in his eyes.

"I don't know why I'm so profoundly unhappy and foolish..." he sobbed, "I wasn't ready for *this*."

Rai looked around at the palace and the harem of girls watching the scene with glazed expressions, faces frozen, hibernating.

Morph broke down and bawled.

Rai tried to comfort his friend. He squeezed harder and held him like the brother he never had. He could feel his voice rising inside of his chest.

"I've always believed that whether or not things happen for a reason, you still have to make a choice. It's the choice to grow, to learn something good from the bad. The other choice is that it's all random meaningless crap. Your perspective matters. It's where meaning comes from. Learn to see beauty. Learn to see depth. Learn to see wisdom. Learn to see! Some people are zombies. They live their lives as if they were watching the world go by on a screen, unengaged. Others live their lives like they are on acid; they see the face of God in a few stars in the sky, and beauty in randomly splattered paint on a canvas."

Morph stopped crying.

"It's a matter of perspective. Don't you see? It's a choice. You just need a dose of real life, which is why you're friends with me."

Morph hugged Rai so hard that Rai felt he was going to pop.

"I thought our friendship was over..."

He dried his face with his sleeve, and blew his nose.

"It never was," said Rai.

They finally let go of each other.

"Scotch?"

"Only if it comes in a glass."

Later, he sat in the kitchen of his empty apartment.

It was finished.

He would never see his friend again.

They would never share breakfast, or argue for the hell of it in the real world.

Morph would never be fully human again.

Now, as he stood in the kitchen and drank a glass of milk, it was just starting to hit him. Morph was dead...and yet not.

Then he thought of his own death. His real death. Would he be alone?

He thought of Kodokushi, the "Lonely Death," a word imported from Japan during the Great Robotics Revolution. It was a serious matter; people would die or commit suicide in their apartments, with no one to mourn them except for their neighbors who eventually *smelled* their presence. Apartments were sometimes installed with detectors to recognize the smell of a rotting corpse and alert the landlord.

He became acutely aware of that fact that he was breathing, and that nothing else in the room

was... in spite of the fact that Morph's furniture sat, bent, and stood motionless in their poses.

Objects.

They weren't sexually attractive anymore... their novelty had worn off.

In spite of their flesh looking real, they didn't move.

They weren't alive.

He asked them to go into Morph's room, and like good machines, they did as they were told... and entered their new storage compartment one by one as he watched.

I should just have virtual sex to get my mind off things.

No... I've gone longer than I ever have without it.

But what's come of that... where's Winry now?

She still hasn't messaged back...

This is why I don't believe in love.

That was a lie.

Like a superstitious child who secretly hopes that reality would surprise him, he found himself waiting for a response from Winry. Frantically checking his mail, his messages, thinking about trying to meet her in Virtual.

Never, in his whole life had he been so miserable.

Resigned, he walked towards his bathroom cupboard, and reached in to withdraw a Semensock.™

Only to put it back.

Not today.

Somehow he felt better. No, his life wasn't perfect, but he would survive this. In the previous weeks he had become a little stronger, and though still bothered by angsty questions, had undoubtedly learned something... yet he wasn't quite sure what. The coming weeks would be a challenge, but he was ready.

He was also no longer a virgin.

Does that even mean anything?

Rai sighed, as he thought of Winry. Still trying to remain optimistic, he figured that he had learned something, that somehow he had at least achieved +1 relationship experience points.

The world wasn't going to end anytime soon.

He was going to take some time off and think about things. What was it he wanted to do? What was he good at?

Sarcasm.

Maybe he could go back to school or write a book. He just needed to figure out what he wanted. He knew he needed to 'go out and love.'

He would travel, see the real world. He would step out into the great unknown, and...

Rai lay awake for a long time, thinking about the future and how he would lead his life differently.

He was vaguely hopeful.

He remembered something he had once read while flipping through his bastard father's self-help books one day out of curiosity: *"If you can't be happy where you are at, you'll never be happy."*

Perfection is chasing the horizon.

The lights were off in his room, 40 stories below the earth...

Slowly he fell asleep.

Rai pulled out a steaming hot breakfast plate from the food printer, and stood in his kitchen by the counter to eat it. The middle room of their apartment was barren; he needed to talk to

Morph about getting the furniture back. Maybe he would just sell it?

The doorbell chimed and whirred.

What could it be?

Outside, a UPS man arrived with a robot carrying a coffin sized box emblazoned in big block letters: *ANDROID SEXUAL™*

"Some identification please."

What the fuck is this? wondered Rai as he stepped forward to scan his thumb.

"Where do you want it?"

"Just drop it just inside the door."

The UPS man watched as the robot rolled forward to set down the box. He looked at Rai blankly and left without saying a word.

What is the point of a human doing this job?

But Rai soon had other things to wonder about.

The coffin opened to reveal another box.

And then he understood. The picture on the box featured what looked like the real Morph, wearing a leather jacket on an unrealistically huge erection, and the words *COAT HANGER BY MORPHEUS* tattooed on his chest.

"He thinks this is funny..."

Inside that box was a perfect copy of the real Morph, wrapped in plastic and, thankfully, clothed.

Deja vu.

Rai looked at the iDoll of his friend for some time, wondering what it meant, and how strange life was.

Finally, he ripped open the plastic, and wondered how to power on his friend.

"Oh my fucking god there is no way I'm going to kiss him."

"Voice activation initiated!" yelled Morph's iDoll.

Rai nearly screamed.

Morph opened his eyes.

"Damn, I was hoping for a kiss."

"Do you have any idea how incredibly fucking weird this is?!?" Rai shouted.

"That I value your friendship so much that I went through the purpose of creating an elaborate scheme to give up my body, and yet still be able to hang out, live with, and annoy the fuck out of you... is that *weird*? Sounds like friendship to me!"

Rai didn't know what to think.

"Yes, but I'm oddly touched too... I might start crying."

"Awwwww..." exclaimed Morph in artificial tears of joy, "come give me a hug."

"You know I was being mildly sarcastic."

"Where's the furniture?!?!?!?"

"Relax... it's in your room, Robodick."

"It's safe right? You didn't get too excited and fuck the stuffing out of one of the Yamatwins?"

"I was tempted, but I knew that you'd get such a kick out of that juicy bit of information that I figured you probably ordered them to report back to you, *with video.*"

"You know me well..." RoboMorph began to tear up. "That's why we're friends."

"This is so, so, *SO* weird."

"We're weird people. Have you heard from Winners yet?"

"No."

Suddenly, his AUGs flashed with a message. His heart jumped.

Winry.

Rai wanted to know how Morph had known to say that.

Was it a coincidence? Or another scheme? Did it really matter?

"Hold on..."

He read the message:

That was the most beautiful letter. I'm waiting for you...

Love,

Winry

Rai had never read something so wonderful. For one small moment in his life he felt whole and complete. He almost felt like crying.

Almost.

He kept wanting to question the feeling, but he just let it happen.

"I'm going to my room. I presume I don't have to feel bad about leaving you since you'll drift off somewhere and fuck virgins in an endless field of daisies?"

Morph grinned back at him and laughed.

Inevitably, questions still crept into his mind.

Maybe there is someone out there who's better?

Maybe she's not the one?

Isn't she still a little fucked up from her last relationship?

But I'm fucked up too.

But he read the letter again, and felt at peace. It was okay, he didn't have to be cynical or ironic about it. He could just love her.

Love her.

What a novel idea.

He walked into his room and almost laughed as he reached for his crown and placed it on his head. It was a wonderful paradox, this, connecting

with a real physical person through the virtual medium he had so desperately wanted to escape.

He smiled, closed his eyes, and waited for his dreams to begin.

**01000101011100000110100101101100011
01111011001110111010101100101001110
10001000000011010000110010000011010
0001010**

Flying over a green and pleasant land, the blue sky above him and the warm sun shining down on his back, Rai could see for miles and miles.

Correction: Virtual miles for Virtual miles.

0s and 1s surrounded him, enfolded him in their shifting, variable embrace; electrons oscillated into the infinite lacework of patterns beyond comprehension. But the sensation of sight his brain experienced was itself comprised of the flow of those same electrons.

The wind rushed past as he zoomed towards the fields of wildflowers below, landing effortlessly on his two feet.

Before him stood Winry.

For a second she was so beautiful to him that it hurt.

She smiled as she walked into his outstretched arms.

They shared the most exquisite kiss.

Acknowledgements:

Attribution error is a beautiful idea from the field of economics. It's the false belief that we get to where we are by the things that we do.

In other words, when we succeed, we believe it is by some sort of special talent that is ours alone. Funny enough, when things go bad people are more than willing to assign credit to anyone but themselves.

The fact of the matter is that none of us exists alone.

If I turn out to be a genius and great author, it was luck, destiny, fate, or God that brought me here. We stand on the shoulders of giants, and I have been blessed.

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