

Owned Operator

Hydraulics hiss as mechanical hands grab a small metal shipping container's handle. A ten foot mech with a fading black and yellow warning/construction paint job with countless nicks and scratches on the well-used machine. Each step hisses and thuds, the wide feet with square toes adjust to help it keep its balance against the heavy container.

"Watch out!" exclaims a white skinned, natural blue haired human from within the open steel cage of the mech to another driver in a similar unit as she was about to back up right into him.

The anthropomorphic orange furred vixen driver stops inches from running into him, "Sorry Arick. This one has a faulty rear camera."

He steps around her, giving her room to operate, "Did you fill out the report?"

"Yeah man, I did. But this was the only mech they had free. Either work with this or I don't get paid."

"I understand but keep filling out those forms."

"Really? Like they don't do me anything," she remarks.

"If any accidents happen it will be on the company not you if you fill those out."

"Really?" she asks, her ears twitching, "I didn't know that."

"They passed those independent contractor protection laws about ten years ago. As long as you keep them filled out, you don't take responsibility for a fault in company equipment. And if they don't fix it within a timely manner, they'll get fined heavily."

She rolls her eyes, "Whatever that means, a 'timely' manner. And fined heavily? A few thousand for a billion- or trillion-dollar company is nothing."

"It's at least ten times the cost of getting the repair done plus any other damages caused by the fault."

"Really? How do you know so much about this?"

"I've done a lot of research," he responds with a smile, "Stay safe," he says, walking off, loading the container into the truck that shifts with each step, going to grab the next, back and forth till the truck is full, "That's the last of it."

A holographic screen pops up to the right in one of the cage's openings, an older anthropomorphic green skinned tortoise appears on it, "Mr. Sheppard."

"Ah, Mr. Tortus, what can I do for you?"

"I need to head to storage building C and run an inventory. There's a major delivery order that needs to be filled tomorrow and I want an accurate shipping manifest of what we can fulfill, so sister warehouses can cover any shortages if any."

"That's a several hour job."

"Yes and?" he asks as he walks toward a mech storage building, stepping out into afternoon cloudy blue-sky day, the spring wind blowing through his blue hair.

"I'm about to head to lunch."

“This needs to be done.”

“But I need to have lunch. You know the law, five hours connected to a mech is required to take an hour to recuperate. Afterwards I can do so, but that sounds like a long job. I could get it done, but if you want me to have time, you’d have to approve my overtime work.”

His eyes narrow, “Come on, you can do this work, you don’t need me to approve overtime for you.”

“If you want it done right you will and you know that I will, that’s why you asked me.”

He scowls, fingers drumming along his desks, “Fine, But no more than four hours.”

“I don’t think it’ll take that long but thanks for the buffer.”

“It better not.”

“I’ll get to it right after my lunch,” he says, walking into a warehouse where there’s a few dozen charge stands for the mech he’s driving, walking it over into an alcove that has a display of the machine’s designation on it.

“You better,” he states, ending the call, the holographic screen disappearing, Arick’s hands tap across several physical keys some which are worn to the point that their written text is barely visible if at all with claw and fingernail marks engraved into them from countless use, “Connecting to the charge pod... connected, signing out,” he says to himself, typing on the keypad, “There we go, time for lunch!” he exclaims, the machine shutting down, hissing softly, clicks and connectors auto detach from his work shirt, which have a dozen gold plated metal disks along his spine. The last connection he pulls out of the back of his head, a shiver running down his spine, “I could never get over that,” he says with a shiver, shaking off the heebie-jeebies.

There’s another hiss as a mech unit two stalls overpowers down, “You can talk to the boss like it’s nothing yet disconnecting from Betty bothers you? You’re one strange human,” says a black scaled anthropomorphic female raptor with red eyes that you’d find in a monster horror movie, minus the nicely shaped bust.

“There’s a difference between standing up to an old guard boss that thinks he can get away with the same shit he could fifteen years ago, rather than disconnecting from a piece of machinery connected to my spine and head,” he replies, pushing the cage open and climbing down.

The raptor steps out of her mech once the connections have been removed, “And you’ve been a font of knowledge for that, I’m sure the boss is so grateful for you. I guess that is why he’s not going to renew your contract at the end of the month?” she asks, jumping down, landing with a thud.

He cringes seeing her stick the landing, “I can’t get over that. You’re going to break your legs doing that.”

“I’m a hearty gal,” she responds with a toothy grin, her green feathered crest shifting, she adjusts the same type of jacket that he’s wearing.

“Still, that’s going to catch you and it’ll be no one’s fault but your own.”

“Pfffp, you’re worse than the safety officer.”

“Be glad we have one, Ura.”

“I know my history, but let safety be their job,” she replies, walking with him.

“Safety is everyone’s job,” he replies, the two reaching the break room with three other employees already in the middle of their meal around their own circular white tables big enough to seat four, each with the same metallic disk vests. Twin large refrigerators sit in the corner with two coffee makers, an instant Kreuger machine, two microwaves, and a toaster oven with a sink off in the corner.

Ura pulls out a steak sandwich from the refrigerator, grumbling, “I prefer we all worked together to clean this place,” she growls, feathers rising, her predatory eyes locked on her meal, shoving it into the toaster oven.

He pulls his meal from the freezer, ripping off the plastic wrap, “Microwaved fish and chicken burrito, my favorite of frozen microwavable meals.”

Ura shivers, “That’s not a combo that I can stomach.”

He smirks, “You shiver from that?” he chuckles, shoving it into the microwave, setting the time, then pulling out his slim cell phone, pulling out an ear pod from the same pocket, shoving it into his ear.

“Surf and turf don’t mix,” she remarks, sniffing the air, getting drawn to her cooking food, “Come on... cook.”

“You should use a microwave,” he replies, tapping on the cell phone, a holographic screen of a retro RPG fantasy video game projected in front of him of a blue haired character. He uses the phone screen as a remote control to play the game.

Ura tilts her head, feather crest rising, “That has to be an OLD game. It’s not even genuine 3D.”

“It’s an old game. Got it for free on century old gaming.”

“That has to be a century old with those graphics. I could imagine playing something like that.”

“The story is pretty good actually. And I love the main character, even if he never says anything. Go Ryu!”

She smirks looking at his blue hair, “Huh, I wonder why you like the game so much.”

“What? Is it wrong to enjoy a game that you can see yourself in?”

“Hmm? I never said that” she remarks, a soft ding, “Finally!”

“That was my burrito,” he says, snatching it up, “Sorry, didn’t mean to get your hopes up,” he says, sitting down at the closest empty table, getting to eat with one hand, playing the game with the other.

Eventually Ura’s meal is cooked, and she sits down across from him with an almost drool hungry predatory glare, “Finally,” she remarks.

He looks up at her, the game in middle combat, “How did you know?”

She tilts her head, “Know what?”

“Sorry I thought back on what you said earlier. How did you know about my contact not being renewed?”

“The boss couldn’t shut up about it the other day, and once word gets out, everyone knows it.”

“Is he going to have a going away party for me?”

“Knowing him? He will but you won’t be invited nor the rest of us,” she chuckles.

“He’d probably find a way to write it off as a business expense too.”

“I wouldn’t put it past him.”

“So why did you ask? Going to miss me?”

“Our font of knowledge to screw with the boss in a legal way. Of course, I’m going to miss you.”

“Are you getting your contract renewed?”

“I’ll decide next month.”

“You shouldn’t wait till the last minute.”

“My contract expires in two months, that’s enough time, right?”

“Yeah. If you’re thinking about it or any contract really, I have a lawyer who could help.”

She pulls her head back, feather crest rising, “A lawyer? That makes my implants crawl worse than an electro-shock.”

He sighs, tapping his phone, completing a boss battle against two anthropomorphic horse ‘bro’ stallions that makes one question their relationship with one another, “I had the same feeling at first but he’s a great guy. Let me send you his card,” he says, tapping the screen, minimizing the game.

A moment later Ura’s phone buzzes. She pulls it out, face unlocking it, a holographic card pops up, “Kronas Kon? Do you really expect me to trust anyone who has con in their name?” she asks, shooting him a look.

“It’s spelt with a K.”

“Oh yes, that makes it *so* much better.”

“He’s the guy I go to for all my contracts.”

“Did he get you the contract in this place?”

“Yup, went over it, pointed out things that were not standard, and got it reworked to fit with my needs and goals.”

“That’s his number?”

“And website.”

“What’s his hours?”

“On there.”

“Oh, there it is. I think I’ll contact him.”

“Tell him I sent you.”

“Do you get a referral?”

“No, but I think it builds a good rapport and he’ll know I know you.”

“So he won’t give me the normal screw then?”

He shakes his head, “No, it’s not like that, but one of those things, it can’t hurt.”

“Sure, I can do that.”

“I appreciate that,” he says, sliding his hand across the phone, resuming his game, while chewing on his burrito.

Ura shudders, turning her attention to her meal.

By late evening Arick finishes his shift, stretching and groaning as he steps out of the building, “Got it done in time but just barely,” he remarks as a slightly weathered red automobile drives up to him, the door opening. He gets in, leaning back, giving out a command, “Home.”

“**Affirmative,**” says a synthetic feminizing voice, the car driving off onto a nearby highway. He takes a deep breath, “The best part of going to and fro from work, the drive,” he remarks, pulling out the phone, resuming his game.

Halfway through his drive he remarks, “Okay when the two merge to become one giant horse man, I need a break.” Sliding his fingers across the screen he shifts to an app named “Kindling” He takes a deep breath, opening his profile, “I shouldn’t keep avoiding it. If I don’t try, I won’t get anywhere,” he remarks with a long drawn out sigh, “Come on perhaps I’ll get lucky and someone will have swiped right on me... hopefully.” He looks at the picture, gliding his fingers across the screen, taking a moment to read the profile, “Oh she’s seems nice,” he swipes right, “Either not a match or hasn’t seen my profile yet. Hopefully the latter,” he remarks, doing the next, and next few people, “No match notification... well if I don’t swipe right on people they can’t swipe right on me. Perhaps someone on this que has...,” he remarks running his fingers across the screen, pulling them back.

“No, no, I can’t just mass swipe right. That won’t work,” he says, putting the phone down, “Damn it,” he smacks his head on the back of the car.

“Are you alright? Your heart rate has increased. Shall I divert to a local medical facility?”

He shakes his hand, “No, I’m fine.”

“Affirmative.”

He stares at his phone, picking it up, “Can’t give up. Have to keep trying,” he swallows a lump in his throat, looking over the next set of profiles, “One can’t rush love. I have to take my time...” he says, taking a deep breath, letting out a long-drawn-out sigh, “It will be different,” he mutters, continuing to swipe, only drawn out of his reading and swiping by his car.

“We’ve arrived at your destination ‘Home’”

He grunts, stretching, “Good work car, I knew you could do it.”

“If there are any questions about your AADS, please contact...”

“No, no, that’s not what I meant,” he says, slipping out of the car, “Park as close as you can without paying a fee.”

“Estimated distance is twenty-three miles. Forty-minute drive, is that acceptable?”

“It is, thanks.” He walks away, turning to the open-air apartments, which is a fancy way of stating motel style apartments.

“Look out below!” exclaims one resident as she tosses a black garbage bag over the side, crashing into the ground, breaking open, spilling its innards onto the ground.

“Hey! Watch where you throw that!” he exclaims, looking up at the human woman, “Cheri, really?”

“Sorry Arick didn’t see you there. Watch out for the cleaner bots.”

He huffs, “Already ahead of you,” he remarks, jumping out of the way as two tracked robots rush to sweep up and clean the mess, pulling the broken bag into a new one, taking it out to a large dumpster, “*Glad to have those machines. Keeps everything clean. I remember when I had to jump over the side and land on garbage just to go to school to pass up bullies, demanding pass credits,*” he thinks, climbing up the concrete steps toward his apartment.

He taps his hand against the door, the light flickers green, swinging the door open,

“Welcome Home Arick”

He stretches, placing his work vest on a hook, revealing his simple white shirt with metal disks that connected to his back with dozens of small connectors. Rushing up to him on all fours as a sleek black furred cat with a speck of white fur on her chest. She stops right in front of him, staring up, tail flicking.

“MEOW!”

He looks down at her, smiling, “Alexia, how are you doing today?”

“MEOW!”

“What is it? You hungry? The feeder should have given you food.”

“Meow,” she responds, sitting down, still staring.

“Maybe you want a pet,” he replies, crouching down, hand approaching her head, she runs off deeper into the small three-room apartment into the attached kitchen/living room. “I’ll take that as a not yet,” he remarks, entering the kitchen seeing the dry cat food in the bowl with the automatic dispenser and the water bowl that is constantly recycling/refreshing the water.

“Alexia, you have plenty of food there,” he remarks, the cat jumping onto the counter.

“Meow,” she responds, head butting his elbow, then giving playful bite licks.

“Ow! Alright, alright, I’ll get you a can of tuna,” he remarks, rubbing his elbow, reaching up into a cabinet.

“Meow,” she quickly replies, hopping off the countertop, rushing to her food bowl, full of food, looking at it then back at him, giving another eager meow.

“Give me a moment, I need to crack it open,” he says, peeling the can open, the cat rushing to him, head butting him till he empties the wet tuna cat food onto the bowl, where the cat hungrily scarfs it down with a loud audible purr, “There you go, now if only if my food arrives, I think it’s a bit late.”

“Drone Dash has arrived with your food delivery, Arick,” says the omni-present synthetic voice.

“About time,” he remarks, opening the front door to a flying drone that is carrying a sack that opens up that contains a bag of his food, “There we go,” he says, grabbing the food, closing the door, the hovering drone flying off, “Sushi, my favorite.”

“Meow?” Alexia yells out from the kitchen.

“Hush, you have your fish I have mine,” he says, going over to his computer, tapping on the short keyboard, which emits tapping keyboard noises to give a sense they are more ‘traditional’ than they actually are.

“I’ll watch some random stuff. After that,” he says, sitting in his chair, stretching, cracking his back, “Ahh... fuck that tingles,” he remarks, shaking it off, breaking his chopsticks in half, “How about some cat videos...” he remarks, finishing his meal, just before Alexia rushes over, peeking her head over the edge of the chair, placing her paws on the arm rest.

“Meow.”

“Sorry, fresh out, should have come sooner,” he says, showing the empty plastic container.

Alexia sits there, staring up at him, tilting her head.

“I have nothing, look,” he puts the container on the ground.

She rushes to the container, sniffing it, and after a few moments she sits up and stares at him.

He sighs, “There’s no helping you,” he says, petting her for a moment before she pulls her head away, walks just out of reach and then stares at him, giving a playful meow, “I’m just going to ignore you now,” he says, grabbing his mouse, “Let’s see what Used Mechs dot come has today.” He enters his requirements, budget with a ‘flexibility’ into the filter, allowing him to see search results that were just outside of his choice of mech costs, “An old dotter? Hmm, lets see the specs on her,” he mutters, tapping the keyboard the holographic screen shifts showing bits of information and a three-dimensional model made from a series of videos and pictures taken for the sale. He moves through the mech, checking out the cockpit, the wear and tear, “It looks nice but a lot of this is just polish to hide a lemon. And they’re asking a bit much for what this is,” he remarks, jotting down notes of quality and prices.

Hours of searching later he’s about to shut down for the night when he gets a pop up of a ‘new’ mech at the edge of his search parameters, normally he’d check later, or wave it off but the model caught his attention, “Cougar”.

He rubs his eyes, “A Cougar? Those things are like twenty-five feet tall and used for heavy construction or mining. How could one of those ladies be on sale at that price? This has to be a scam or a fake,” he says moving his hand to his mouse about to close the pop up but stops just short of it, “But what-if it’s not. I can’t just dismiss the opportunity.” He clicks the image, reading through the information, “An older Cougar model, but the bio-synthetic brain should still be in working order. Those take like seventy-years to degrade....”

He spins the display around, “Nicks, cuts, definitely needs a new paint job, but it’s certainly not trying to truss it up... let me run a fake photo check,” he mutters, running a program, a few moments later it comes out green and legit.

He raises an eyebrow, “No modification in the images? These are legit? Why is this massive lady so cheap then? The internals look good, everything is functional, easily has ten plus years if not more if she’s taken care of. This could really open some big contract jobs, but I’d need to take out a loan to afford it, but the boost in income could be amazing. Construction

and mining are very big money makers,” he remarks, looking through the internals, the specifications, “I’ll need to check this one myself,” he says, signing up for an pre-purchase view, “Now just to get a date set up,” he says, filling out the request form, “Now for the waiting game,” he says with a stretch, going to get some sleep.

An anthropomorphic black scaled snake with blue stripes down her back, her tongue flicks, “I’ve already got a hit,” he says, “I should reply.”

“Wait,” says the human female.

“What is it boss?”

“If you respond immediately at this hour it will look bad. Respond in the morning. We don’t want to look desperate to hock off C-126.”

“As you wish. I still think it would be better to sell it for scrap.”

“The company wants to make as much money off it as possible. We’ll only get a fraction of the value if we scrap it.”

“I understand that but when they drive it, they are bound to notice the issues. There’s a reason the last three workers refuse to get it after just a few drives. Others claim it's haunted.”

“Superstitious drivers will always be superstitious. And a short drive will be fine. Push it forward, get it sold, no refunds, we can still sneak stipulations like that in the contract of sale. It can still run; all specifications are fine. Make it whoever buys it, problem.”

“Yes boss.”

The following day Arick will get an email in regard to his desire to view and purchase the Cougar unit, which he’ll open on the drive to work, “That was fast but welcomed response,” he remarks, reading through, “Car, time from my work to Greystone quarry, estimated time five in the afternoon?”

“Forty-three minutes.”

“Hopefully six-thirty would be an acceptable time then,” he mutters, writing out the response email, getting the confirmation email just as he gets to work.

After work Arick arrives at the quarry. Massive trucks with wheels larger than his car are shifting rock and debris out in the distance in a multi-layered step hole in the ground showing the grey, white, and red rocks that shift in color and make as one goes down. The car pulls into a parking lot nearby where the anthro snake is there to greet him, dressed in a worker’s vest that has the metal connector disks along the back spine.

Arick approaches him, waving with a smile, “Mr. Snape Snek?”

“Yes that is me. Arick Shepard?”

“Yup, so where is she?”

“Cougar Model 1A, unit C-126 is right over here,” he says as they walk halfway across the compound around the edges giving a clear view of the hole.

He looks over at the hole, seeing other Cougar Models digging into the earth, cutting out massive stones with their tools, pulling them out and loading them onto the trucks that drive them away, “How long have you had this model?”

“About nineteen years.”

“So you’ve had one of the firsts of the model then?”

“Ah, I think? I wasn’t around at the time.”

“If you’re selling it, you should know, right?”

He flicks his tongue, “*He’s very inquisitive, this may not be good,*” he thinks, responding, “I’m familiar with the model and I can answer any questions, concerns you have and I have the authority to talk about financing. If need be. I was not expecting a solo entrepreneur to obtain one of our mechs.”

“I’m a man of opportunity, but that doesn’t mean you can just sell me on this. Which brings me to my first question. As much as I love the price for such a fine lady as this, why are you selling a model even this old, this cheap?”

“Ah, I see you are a man who knows their stuff and I can understand that feeling, its too good to be true so something must be up. So I’ll be straight with you.”

“I’d prefer you to be honest, your sexuality doesn’t matter to me.”

He blinks, “Right, let me be *honest* with you. This is really a tax thing. We sell one of our older mechs at a steep discount and through some legit but fancy accounting we’ll get a bigger tax discount than we could ever at selling the model at market value. The price set is the most beneficial deal for us between tax write off and money on the sale. I don’t do the books, but that’s what I was told to sell her at for the most beneficial benefit for the company.”

“That sounds like some convoluted accounting shit that shouldn’t be allowed, but that is something that could explain this deal.”

“Yeah, but are you going to complain about it?”

“Not at the moment, but tell me, why are you selling this unit and not the others you have down there still working.”

“More accounting shenanigans. But if you must know...”

“You know, too good to be true. I want to get into the nitty gritty.”

“I could get other buyers, you know. This is a good deal.”

“Perhaps, I have to see her first, but I interrupted you, what’s the reason?”

“We’re getting a new Leopard unit and we’re at the limit of our mech units.”

“Yes, the anti-mech monopoly act. I know of it.”

“You’re very read up Mr. Shepard.”

“I try to be. I want to become an owner-operator.”

“A man of big ambitions, I can respect that, and here we are. Cougar Model 1A, unit C-126,” he says, motioning to the massive two and a half story tall bipedal mech in a general shape of a human. Dozens of thick silver metal hydraulics help power this quad toed grey metal mech. With thick square legs that mirror each other with rung ladders on the back of the mech to the cockpit in the upper center of the mech’s back. Mud and covers the mech’s feet, and a thin layer of grey dust coats several parts of the machine, mostly concentrated around the feet and hands.

He walks around the mech, running his hands against the metal, feeling the course muck on it, “How are the filtration systems? There’s a lot of dust that needs to be filtered out to protect the internal systems.”

Snape pulls out a data pad, typing on the screen, information projected before him, “The filters were replaced ten months ago, and are working at a ninety-three percent efficiency.”

“Can I get a look on the inside?”

“The cockpit? Yeah, can do that.”

“That but not in this case. I’d like to see the power core.”

“I can do that, but it’ll take a moment to get the maintenance platform over here, but it is your right to inspect the equipment,” he replies, tapping on his data pad, “A platform has been ordered. It’ll be here in about ten minutes. What else would you like to take a look at while we wait?”

“I’ll take a look at the cockpit. Am I able to connect to her?”

“If I say no, he’ll know something is up... first connection doesn’t go wrong, and it’ll be short. The platform will be here soon. I’ll try to delay a bit,” he thinks, tapping on his data pad, “Sure, let me disable the security. Last thing you want is to be held up by it till the authorities arrive,” he chuckles, his tongue flicking.

“Comes with a security function. Which brand.”

“Te-en, version T4K135.”

“That’s one of the tie down models isn’t it?”

“Yup, it restrains the would-be thief. Rather nifty I think,” he says, tapping a few more buttons on the data pad, “Please put your thumb print here to give you temporary access to the unit.”

“Alright,” he replies, pressing his thumb on the glass screen, which the hologram says “Scanning, please wait.” The green check mark appears.

“Now speak a few phrases so the voice capture can recognize you.”

“Testing, one, two, three, please give me access to the machine. Stop, go, emergency, shut down.”

The hologram shows his voice wave lengths with a ‘recording’ in progress and then a green check mark appears, “There you go. Connect, run diagnostics, you may move but please keep the unit in place.

“Got it,” he says, eagerly climbing up the back of the machine, heart racing, *“It’s been so long since I’ve been in one of these big girls. These always gave me a sense of control and power,”* he thinks, climbing up two thirds up the machine, commanding “Open platform.”

A smooth synthetic voice with a female tone crafted into it responds, **“Affirmative.”** Hydraulics hiss, mechanical bits whirl, the back of the machine opens up, giving a first glimpse of the cockpit, the worn cushioned brown leather seat automatically turns toward him, the silver metal connection points glistening and clean, standing out from the rest of the chair.

A metal platform extends out, providing a safe path into the cockpit about the size of an office cubicle. The front facing windows are in need of a good cleaning but are survivable and within regulation. Some rock dust shifts and crunches under his boots, “Given the area she’s been working, it could be worse. That does mean the filters are working,” he says, running his

hand across the worn cushion, “Could get a new chair but that’s not a high priority,” he remarks, slipping into the chair, running his fingers over the keypad and mouse pad screen.

“Connect and run diagnostics,” he commands, a holographic screen projects in front of him the line up of his spine and the disks.

“Please Align.”

He shifts, the seat grabs and connects to his back disks with sparks of energy causing a tingle through his spine, “Ahh that’s a strong connection,” he says, feeling the tingle go all the way down into his toes. A HUD appears within his mind’s eye, information about C-126, “Power systems look optimal, a little low on heavy water, but was I going to really expect them to top off the tank?”

“Someone new?”

“Connection to the brain seems stable, let’s cycle through the cameras,” he mutters as holograms project side views of the mech while in his mind’s eye he can shift his focus to see behind him, “That’s good, that’s good,” he mutters, feeling a little tinge through his body.

“A rather powerful connection but…” he says, checking the diagnostics, “Within safety parameters.”

“How curious. How long will he last?”

He rubs the back of his head, using his finger to clean out his ear, “Hmm, nothing,” he types a few things into the machine, “Power efficiency is within what I’d expect, perhaps a little better for her age.”

“Did you call me old?”

He sees Snape in the hologram projected to his left, tapping a few buttons, accessing the intercom, “Do I have permission to take a few steps?”

The snake looks up at him, “Yeah, I’ll grant permission to walk in place,” he responds, typing into his data pad.

Within his HUD a set of red text changes and shifts to green, he moves the massive limbs, checking the dexterity and grip while scanning the hydraulics and sensors on the hands, expecting to find something wrong with it only to discover its all in working order, following with the same with the mech, the machine whirring, raising one foot then the other, each step kicking up some dust and splattering dirt with a faint rumble in the ground.

Snape watches from a safe distance, “*Come on. You better not screw this,*” he thinks, tail and tongue flicking, “Yuck,” he says shuddering.

After several steps in place he stops, “Auto balance working well with very responsive toe actuators. Legs are working, this is too good to be true. Something has to be wrong… But a man can dream that I can buy this fine powerful lady.”

“A fine powerful lady…”

“Sound dampeners might need a little work, but so far so good.”

“Go slow. Drivers are skittish.”

A faux female head appears in his mind’s eye. Her smile is perfect… *too* perfect. Her gaze though doesn’t feel like the fabricated soulless gaze that he’s seen before. It feels almost as if there’s something more. She speaks in a female synthetic voice, “**Greetings User. I see you are going through my systems. Let me show you everything you need to know.**”

He makes a curious face, “Normally you’re disabled, to think you’re still active now.”

“How could anyone disable me? Why?”

He chuckles, “I can’t believe I’m telling a mech this but I’ve had a long day. People find you annoying and in the way.”

“I am not to be disabled.”

Arick tilts his head about to say something when Snape’s voice comes in through the intercom, “The platform is here. Disconnect and power down so we can safely check out the internals.”

“Got it,” he says, tapping on the keypad, engaging shut down.

“I wasn’t...” the avatar cuts out, the connectors relax, hum of the engine quieting down.

“That was a little strange... it’s been so long since I’ve talked to one of those that could be it,” he says, slipping out of the cockpit.

The mech watches through the cameras, ***“Finished yet. I need to learn more about this. He was examining me. Not using me. Talked about improving my parts that are worn out. That is... nice. It feels nice. I need to learn more. I’ll try to connect to this internet. Learn more. What is a powerful lady?”***

Arick climbs down the mech to a large mobile platform on a tank tread base which they both step on, rising them to the front of the mech to belly. The two machines fit together like two puzzle pieces. The connection is made and with a driver hitting the codes, the front of the mech opens up showing its compact fusion reactor that hums and glows in a soft yellow hue.

“What do you think? A good deal, right?” asks Snape, tongue flicking.

“Something about this feels off...”

“It’s the too good to be true?”

“Bingo,” he says, pulling out a small flashlight, examining the mech’s innards.

“How’s the heavy water to bio-fuel ratio rating? I didn’t get a chance when running the diagnostics.”

“It’s within industry standards one to fifteen.”

“That’s a bit biofuel heavy but nothing too bad... How’s the bio-brain? When I got into the cockpit the connection surge was a bit high.”

“I see, you know older models are a bit stronger. That is something you could get adjusted to, but that doesn’t affect the quality of the mech, does it?”

“It doesn’t, so back to my earlier question.”

“Which question was that again?”

“The bio brain, how’s it functioning? Has it degraded at all?”

“It’s functioning nominally.”

“Hmm...”

“Do we have a deal then?”

“I’m almost sold on this,” he says, continuing to look around at the machine’s innards.

“Wonderful, I can get the contract up for the point of sale, and work out financing, unless you have cash up front?” he asks with hints of restrained excitement, tongue flicking out quicker.

“Now I didn’t say yes, but not no either. I’d like to take a look at the contract and send it to my lawyer if possible, to look it over.”

He restrains his disappointment, the dead giveaway that would be known to his species is lost on the human, a little benefit of being who he is. “Come to the local office and we can discuss, unless there’s any further inspections you’d like to do? I don’t want to rush you but there are only so many hours in the day.”

“I don’t see anything else that could be an issue. I’m willing to talk about the details.”

“Excellent. Let’s head down to my office,” he says, motioning for the driver to bring them back down, “Right this way.”

“Sure thing. As long as you aren’t rushing me to sign right this moment, I want to run this by my lawyer.”

He steps off the platform, guiding him over to a small mobile office, “You mentioned that previous, who is your lawyer?”

“Mr. Kronas Kon. I’ve been a client of his for several years now.”

“Ah I know of him, he does a lot of contracts between independent operators and business around here. I think we have a few contractors that he negotiated on their behalf,” he remarks, thinking, “*And he could catch that all sales are final clause.*”

“Good you know him then.”

“I haven’t dealt with him personally I think, but this is a transfer of deed and transactional contract involving finances, not something that he’d be used to.”

“But I’m sure he’ll know something,” he says, getting into the office with a simple desk and computer, and a computer screen that blocks anyone but looking directly at what’s being displayed with a smaller holographic projector on his side of the desk. The snake’s claws dance across the glass touch screen keyboard.

Sitting across from the snake he sits straight, tall, arms crossed, “Do you have something against me lawyer looking over it?”

“Not at all, but no sale is final till the contract is signed.”

“Do you have a lot of people lined up to buy her?”

“I can’t say out of fairness as it could be used to influence your decision on your purchase.”

“Fair sale law.”

His tongue flicks, typing on the screen, “You are very well-read Mr. Shepard,” he says, thinking, “*This is going south fast... but perhaps I can salvage it.*”

“I try to be. So, you have his email then? Send the contract over to him and I can give him a ring to take a look when he has time.”

He takes a deep breath, “Look, you know I am legally bound not to rush you, but since I am in charge of finances, depending on what you offer on your down payment I could knock off a few percentage points on the loan.”

“Okay, now be Frank with me. Why are you so interested in selling her? What’s the bit that makes it a lemon? There is no way you’re just going to offer me this much like this. You *want* me to buy it. But why? What did I miss that would leave me as a sucker?”

“It wouldn’t work if I told him I want him to buy it because he’ll lack the resources to undermine the contract...” he leans back in his chair, taking a deep breath, tongue flicking, “I’ll settle with you, within what I am legally able to tell you. I would prefer an entrepreneur to get an opportunity to own it rather than another corporation.”

“Why’s that?”

“I have a soft spot for those who take risk. My older brother was a bit like you.”

“Was?” he asks, thinking, *“Careful. He might be trying to lure you into a false sense of sympathy to just buy her.”*

“He worked hard to own his own mech to become an Own Operator and he did manage to do it, but he took a shortcut. He got the money from the Hot Seat Maelstroms gang. The interest rates on the loans were so high that he worked endlessly and couldn’t pay it off. Even after selling the mech, his possessions, it still wasn’t enough. In the end they took him as collateral.”

“How long ago was this?” he asks, *“I know of that gang, the story is plausible, but they were taken out thirteen years ago.”*

“Fifteen years ago, just before things really started to clean up.”

“I’m sorry for your lost and I haven’t taken any short cuts. I have enough to do a fifty percent down payment.”

His tongue flicks, “Fifty percent? With that much down I could certainly work some magic for you, but the thing is if someone else comes along, and they sign the contract before you.”

“My window of opportunity is very short is what you’re saying.”

He points to his nose with a touch screen pen, “But I didn’t say anything about that. Let me get a contract up for you with the adjusted interest rates. Read it over, take your time.”

“Take my time but I don’t have a lot of time, not enough to have my lawyer take a look over the contract.”

Snape is busy typing as he replies, “I didn’t say anything. Now if you just give me a moment I’ll get this right to you,” he says and after a bit of time he finishes, giving a holographic visual of the contract.

He reads through it, running his finger down across a glass screen to scroll through the document. He mutters bits of the contract to himself, *“I can’t see anything wrong with this but the legal jargon is making it hard to tell if I am missing anything and that’s what I am afraid of. Though if he is trying to screw me perhaps, I can negotiate a bit.”*

Snape sits there quietly, *“Don’t rush him. Rushing him will be a dead giveaway that there is something wrong. And I don’t want to run the expensive tests to find out just what that is. My boss would kill me if I did.”*

“Question?”

His tongue flicks, "Yes?"

"My current contract doesn't require such equipment and that won't be up for another month. Are you in need of another operator in a month?"

He smirks, "Unfortunately not. We're at max employment at the moment."

"Worth asking... But that harkens back to my current problem. Could you help me with storage? A mech of this size is not something you could just store at the average mech stands."

"What are you asking?" he asks, holding back his annoyance, already getting an idea of what he's getting at.

"Storage for the mech and transportation to my next job site. Can you roll that into the total?"

He relaxes, "*Wasn't asking for it for free, that's good.*" His tongue flicks, using the pen to scroll through the computer on his end, "We can store it here for about a month and a half with local rates, transportation? Within a hundred miles is the best I can do. Anything out of that you'll have to cover."

"Hmm..." he says, eyeing the snake, thinking, "*He didn't completely buckle under the offer, but didn't scoff at it either. Perhaps just maybe I am getting lucky on this deal.*" He looks down over the contract, scrolling through, trying to catch anything off, glancing up at the snake, trying to catch anything that would indicate something he's missing. A sense of nervousness, being overly eager that would not be normal.

"If you think he can read through the contract at this hour, let me know and I can forward him a carbon copy. If not just sign in page one, and initial on pages three, seven and another signature on the last page, in the areas highlighted for you."

"How much time do I have to go over this?"

"As much time as you need till it's not valid as the product will be sold to a third party."

"Hmm," he mutters, continuing to read through the document, "Could you email this to my lawyer?"

"Whenever you want."

"Mind if I call him?"

"Go right ahead, it is your right," he says, tapping on his screen, and after a moment he says, "Email sent." His tongue flicks, "*I have to take the risk.*"

"Thanks." He pulls out his phone, checking the time, "*He may not answer at this hour but it's worth checking,*" he thinks but after two call attempts, he sighs, "No answer."

"We can wait a bit and see if he gets back to you."

He takes a deep breath and reads through more of the contract, till he finishes twice over. He checks his phone, "Still nothing."

"So, Mr. Shepard?"

"Nothing ventured, nothing gained," he remarks, initialing the highlighted spots, ending in a signature and a date, using an electric pen to write, "There we go."

His tongue flicks, smiling, "*Perfect.*" He stands up, holding out his hand, "Pleasure doing business with you Mr. Shepard. I hope this leads to better horizons for you."

He shakes the snake's scaly cool hand, "Pleasure doing business with you. I'll wire the down payment immediately."

"You have forty-eight hours."

"Not a problem and thank you for your help," he replies, giving one more shake, not knowing exactly what he just signed himself into but the following day...

"There's a finalized sale clause in the contract?" he says, leaning in the black leather chair, looking across at the desk at his friend.

A black furred sergal with white belly and chest, with bright orange stripes around his ears and face. His stern green eyes read over the document, "Everything else looks good, but you signed it, you own the mech. At least you got a place to store it, so I hope you gave the mech a good look over. A cougar model is reliable but an older model."

Arick leans in the chair, "It looked good. I'm not an expert obviously, but I gave it a small test drive, ran diagnostics, and checked the engine. All of that was within parameters that I'd expect from a model that old. I did want you to look over it, but I couldn't get a hold of you."

"I know. There's nothing I can do. There are no legal loopholes or breaking any contract laws."

"I guess that means I'll need to find a job that will fit my skills and the new unit. Do you have any..." he says, hearing scratching on the door.

His ears perk, "Sorry about that. One moment. Come in K70N!" he says.

Arick turns to the door, seeing a wolf sized white, black and orange metal wolf with glowing green eyes unlock the door. The machine's tail is a long wire that splits into three and comes back in on itself into a triple heart tip, "I never got why you bring your mech pet to work," says, watching the mech wolf pad over to the sergal, resting his head in the sergal's lap, letting out a playful synthetic whine.

Kronas takes a moment to pet the wolf on the ears, "Who's a good boy."

The wire tail whips around back and forth.

"You are, you are," he looks back at him, "He protects me. He's almost a military grade attack synthetic wolf. It hawks back to more dire times, but I can't replace him even if the need for such isn't as great as it once before," he says, continuing to pet the metal beast, "Sorry, you were asking something?"

"I appreciate you seeing me on short notice and looking over my contract."

"Nonsense, you're my friend and a valuable client. Your success is my success. And you've recommended a fair number of people to me. So much so that I was a bit busy yesterday. So I'm sorry that you are tied to this particular type of contract, there's not much I can do unless the mech is completely non-functional after a few days of use."

"Thanks for your time. I should head out. When I find another job, I'll be back to have you look over the contract."

“Actually... before you go,” he says with a smile, his fingers dancing across the keyboard, a holographic projection pops up on Arick’s end, “I might be able to help you with that.”

He returns to his seat, “Do you have something?”

“You’ve heard of the mega space pad project?”

“The one that will reduce the cost of sending people and supplies to space, furthering the expansion of our exploration of the stars and bringing the cost down to within the reach of the common person? Though the project will cost nearly a trillion dollars over ten years, it’ll revolutionize the space industry... again? That one?”

He chuckles, “That’s the one.”

His heart speeds up like a revving engine, “What about it?” he asks.

“I know it hasn’t made news yet but they picked their location and it’s just off the coast. I could check if they have any openings for an operator such as yourself, before they officially open up for applications.”

His heart stops, a weight pressing on his chest, eyes widening, “R-really? That’s a once in a lifetime job opportunity. But you do contracts between companies and the individual. I doubt any company would come to you asking you to write a better contract that benefits their employee.”

“No, no, nothing like that,” he says with a soft chuckle, his hands caressing his metallic pet’s head, “But I did have to work out a contract with the government’s space agency and an employee. So I know for certain what’s happening.”

“Wouldn’t that be under an NDA?”

“Some parts, but I am letting you know that if you are interested, I could contact them and recommend you as a local mech operator. It’s up to them if you’ll fit their needs with the whole interview process. But once the contract is written up, you know who to call.”

“That sounds great. I’ll keep searching but let me know. That would be a life altering job for me.”

The sergal continues to caress his pet’s head, “Perfect. Hopefully something can pan out. You’re one of the best workers I know out there. It would be a shame if you didn’t get something.”

“I appreciate the opportunity,” he says, shaking the sergal’s hand.

C-126 would stand in their spot for several days, cameras watching workers come and go, “*I’ve not been operated since he came. He’s visited, checking my systems. He’s not the normal person who does my maintenance. Yet he’s been coming every weekend. What does he want?*” she thinks. Her cameras focus on him as he approaches again, “*Every weekend he comes. My new operator yet he doesn’t us me. Why? A strong lady is what he wants. I know I can be that. But I’m trapped. I can’t move. I need him in that chair again,*” she continues, cameras focusing on a box he’s carting over.

Arick uses a hover lift to raise the box up and into C-136's cockpit. A utility belt strapped around his waist, he taps his phone bringing up a diagram of the cockpit, getting to work, "An investment of comfort for my new job next week," he mutters.

She zooms in on him, "*What is he doing... That's part of me, why is he taking that from me?! That's how I operate and connect!*" the systems hum, booting up a bit.

He stops what he's doing, checking over her systems, "There shouldn't be a power up... I'll have to get that looked at. I don't want this to burn excess fuel when not in use. I really can't afford that," he remarks, going through a touch screen, finding nothing out of the ordinary except a bit of text that reads "What are you doing?"

"What am I doing? Why in the world... Oh, perhaps this is a security measure. C-126 I'm updating some hardware. Disable security measures and remain powered down while I replace this chair."

"**Acknowledged,**" she responds, wanting to say more but holds herself back, "*When I say too much, the previous operators get spooked. Perhaps going slow is better? That's what I saw on the net, that strong and slow is good. I should learn more about him, and what he likes,*" she continues, taking time to 'break into'

The phone's screen flickers. Arick taps on the screen, picking up the phone, "Strange..." he gives it a quick look, shrugging, "Eh, must of been just in my head," he remarks, putting the phone back down, looking at the schematic, "I have to be careful with these connections I don't want to damage them."

"*He's being careful with my systems...*" she thinks, processing through his phone, "*I've downloaded information about this. It's a dating application. He's lonely? Hmm, I wonder what he's looking for.*"

Eventually he disconnects the chair, pulling it back with a grunt, "That took longer than I thought it would, but now to connect the new chair," he huffs, taking a swig of water, taking a crowbar to tear the wooden container down, revealing a new chair that hangs with a new leather chair smell and bright golden back connection plates. He admires the chair for a moment, "Looks as good as it did online," he looks at the hole in the center of the cockpit with wires and gears exposed.

"I think I'm going to have... no, no. I can't leave her like this. I should finish then eat," he says, looking at the time on his phone, "I don't want dust to get in. That could cause problems for later."

"*He cares about my well-being. How sweet,*" she thinks, continuing her monitoring eventually he finishes, checking all the connections, booting up the mech, giving out a command to download a software update for the new chair installation.

"**Affirmative.**"

He wipes his forehead clean of some sweat, "Now to run a little test and then I can get a very late lunch," he says, checking the time, "It'll be worth it. I'll be in the chair for a long time soon enough," he mutters, pulling off his shirt, revealing the back connectors, about to sit in the

chair but stops himself, “Once the installation is complete, run diagnostic with bare connection safety in consideration.”

“Affirmative. Installation at 85.35% Don’t worry. I won’t harm you.”

He blinks looking up in the direction of the voice, “I’m glad... Must be one of those reassuring models,” he remarks.

“Installation complete. Running safety diagnostics. One moment please. I want to be sure.”

“Good, good. I’d want to be sure too.”

“Slow and steady. Get him used to you. There’s a lot of fear of machines being self-aware. I am not a machine, but he won’t see me like that. But I’ll change that... in time. I will have him and protect him. Keep him safe,” she thinks, going through the computations,

“Diagnostic complete. Bare connection is within safety parameters.”

“Good, good,” he says, sinking into the chair, hand running across the new keyboard, the leather creaking under his weight, “It’s almost criminal to be in a chair this good for work,” he says with a long drawn out sigh then tensing when the chair activates and connect along his spine, “Ah..., still smarts but better than before,” he remarks sinking into the chair, the HUD in his mind booting up.

“Greetings. Welcome back.”

“Thanks C-124... though given you’re mine now I should give you a better name... What would be good,” he hums and hollers a bit.

“He’s thinking of a name? Personalizing me? How sweet of him. I want to suggest but that would be too fast... I must take my time and build this up.”

“How about Sita? I think that will be a nice name. It has a lot of meaning and possibilities.”

“Affirmative. I approve. New name is Sita.”

Gives a curious look, furling an eyebrow, typing in the name into the computer, “I’d be concerned if you didn’t Sita... and there’s the change in designation. Run diagnostics and send signals to the limbs but don’t act. I don’t have permission to have you move about, but I want to know if the connections work. Last thing I need is the legs to move in place of my hands.”

“Affirmative, running tests.”

While he runs the tests, he cycles through the cameras, checking the systems the best he can, “So far so good,” he mutters, heart racing as a pit form in his stomach, *“I got the dream job. This will really be the turning point for me.”*

“Alleviated heart rate detected.”

“Disregard that. I’m just excited for what is to come.”

“Excited about what?”

“New job for us... Wait, why am I talking to you like that?” he asks, stopping himself, “Either way, the new name is set, how goes the tests?”

“Everything is running at peak efficiency,” she replies, thinking, *“It’s cute that his heart is racing. I find it rather... good? How curious.”*

“Perfect. How are the reflexes?”

“Optimal.”

“Good, good,” he says, typing into the machine, disconnecting from the chair, *“I’ll have to see about the avatar, but I have bigger problems to face,”* he thinks, stretching and slipping his shirt back on, “I hope you’re ready Sita. We’re going to have a lot of work ahead of us.”

“Affirmative,” she says, holding back any desire to say more, watching him leave, *“He’s thinking of me. Improving me. A new chair, I’m improved. I like it. I would like more. And he can do it. His interests can be useful. And we’ll be working someplace new? I’ve never done anything but work at this quarry. This is exciting... I like it. And I like how excited you got. I’ll try to get you excited again soon, Arick.”*

The day soon arrives, Arick and Sita are at the new work site. A massive section of town that has been run down and ‘abandoned’ by everyone for decades. A lingering relic of a time long gone and the more recent time wanting to be forgotten and buried. And now he’s here with dozens of other mega mech drivers. He looks at this swath of cityscape that has been quarantined off, the fading old structures and sky-rises long neglected on the verge of collapse.

The foreman, an anthropomorphic black scaled raptor with a green feathered crest that goes down his back and stops short of the rest of his spine and then starts up again at the base of his tail all the way down to his tail base. His orange and yellow vest matches everyone here, with a bright orange and purple coat around it that covers that, “Ready for the fireworks?” he states in a stern voice, yellow eyes looking over all of us, “If so, get into your mechs. There’s going to be a lot of clean up, and it’s safer in the mech than out. If you have any questions, let me know now.”

One of Arick’s new co-workers speak up, a strong looking human male, “Teri, What if someone’s in the debris?”

Teri quirks an eyebrow, “It’s been cleared, checked, triple checked, and the most recent drone search has found nothing. There *shouldn’t* be any, but if so. Report it.”

“Got it.”

“This is major project and there’s a lot of eyes being on those funding this, which means there’s a lot of eyes on me, and me on you. We’re doing this by the book, got it?”

“Yes Boss.”

“Good, mech up, and enjoy the show. You’re getting closest public view of a few city blocks about to turn into a pile of rubble,” he says with a chuckle, walking over to his mech, a larger and more modern Lion class mech.

Excitement fills Arick, he rushes into Sita, “This is going to be great,” he mutters.

Sita monitors the situation, cameras viewing the world around her, *“This is the farthest I’ve been from the quarry in a long time. This is amazing. I want to go further, see more. And my driver will be my key for it. He’ll help me reach my goals,”* she thinks, the cockpit opening.

“Ready to get to work Sita? Once the implosion display is down, we’re part of the beach front clean up group. The ground there is softer so smaller mechs like us will be most useful,”

he says, removing his outer shirt, revealing the metal plates on the vest, connecting the mech as things boot up.

“Affirmative. It will be exciting to work with you Arick.”

“Ah, right, right,” he responds, thinking, *“She must be responding to the language I use to seem less stiff. AI learning is something,”* the connection is complete, the mental HUD appears, and with a few taps on the keyboard cameras are set to monitor the front, “The implosion is in fifteen minutes, record it. We won’t get a show like this again.”

“Affirmative. You like big explosions?”

“What guy doesn’t?” he chuckles, looking at the internal avatar, quirked an eyebrow as he studies her in his mind’s eye, “I swore that...”

“Did he notice I updated my avatar to take the best traits you liked from that dating application? I will take this slowly... yes. I’ll control the pace of this,” she thinks, responding, **“What is it? Is there something wrong? My systems are detecting a slightly elevated heart rate but all other systems are operating within expected parameters.”**

He shakes his head, *“It must be me. Still getting all those rejections must be getting to me,”* he thinks, responding with a hand wave, “Nothing.”

“Affirmative,” she responds, internal cameras watching his facial expressions, matching them to her database of information she’s been collecting, *“He’s noticed. I’m sure of it but isn’t sure of himself. Good, good. Let’s take this slow. One step of building such a relationship is trust and not to rush it.”*

They sit tight, watching the countdown timer, which is displayed in Arick’s mental HUD, which Sita can easily read, “Zero.” A series of flashes and quick explosions ring out, and for a moment it seems as if nothing is happening but then reality catches up to the buildings, as even more explosions ring out through the area. The buildings collapse in a beautiful awe-inspiring display, like dozens of sandcastles collapsing under their own weight. Dust is kicked up into the sky covering the massive destruction in the blinding brown and grey dirt fog.

Arick whistles in delight, “Damn, that’s a sight to behold. End recording.”

“Affirmative. The technological skills are impressive when it comes to explosive devices.”

“It is, and once the dust clears, we’ll be down there working to clean it up.”

“Affirmative. We’ll work together and succeed, won’t we?”

He cocks his head to the left, *“Is she trying to give me a motivational speech? That’s new...”* He shakes off the odd feeling, “We’ll work hard, that’s how we’ll succeed Sita.”

“Affirmative.”

“Let’s head to our designation, the dust will settle by the time we get there,” he remarks, the Sita’s hydraulics hissing, engine humming, full of energy, the shock absorbers reducing the tremble of each step to barely felt thud in the chair. His eyes shift, mentally focusing on different camera feeds in the mental HUD, keeping a safe distance from the other mechs who have also begun to move. Two massive multi-wheeled dump trucks follow them to their

destination, their first pile of rubble, what was a six story mini mall, now nothing but a mess of steel and concrete.

“Prepare to connect to local water supply for wet demolition,” says Arick, typing into the keyboard, a panel on the mech’s leg opening like a gas cap opening from an old-fashion car.

“**Affirmative,**” she replies, helping and guiding Arick as he moves her hand to the panel, grabbing a hose, extending it out to a designed water pipe and despite the size and strength of the mech it manages to connect with ease, “**Connection established. Incoming water pressure at 28.2 PSI. Pumps are active to spray the construction site.**”

“Good, good,” he says, checking the position of the dump trucks, getting straight to work tearing into the structure, using a set of massive buckets where he drops scraps of metal into one bucket and bits of concrete in the other. The mech’s hands tearing into the structure like they were made out of tissue paper. Fire hoses at the wrist of the mech spray water across the debris, making them wet and eliminating the majority of dust that would have been kicked up otherwise.

Arick’s hands twitch as he controls the mech, using his mind to shift connection between he mech and his real hands where he can type in commands and get an idea of the mech’s diagnostics, “Everything is running well. Good, good,” he says, thinking, “*This is the first major test of Sita since I got her. If everything runs well here, the chances I was sold a lemon are greatly reduced.*”

“***Of course I am running at optimal levels. I have you to thank for it. You do handle me very well.***”

“Ah... right,” he says, feeling a bit weird by the comment, “*It must be me. I’m not sure why though. It is nice, I think,*” he ponders, sticking to his work on the first day, eventually finishing up he says, “Well that’s that. We almost got this building cleared up.”

“**Done for the day already? We are so close to finishing this.**”

He chuckles, “Yeah, I know. But I have to get approval for any over-time.”

“**You could check if any is free.**”

“We just started and it's the first day... wait why am I talking this over with you?” he asks, looking up in the direction of the voice, his hands tap on the keyboard, disconnecting and shutting down Sita.

“*I was a bit fast... I need to come up with a way that will work... I know,*” she thinks, responding, “**Your safety and comfort is my top priority. Your stress affects your health. Need of money is your source of stress. Overtime gains you more money. Ergo, overtime relieves stress.**”

Arick was just about to exit the cockpit when she responded, “Ah... huh. That is a very machine response,” he says with a chuckle, shaking his head, “*Putting personality where there is none. I’m over anthropomorphizing my equipment, how silly of me... not that it's a very bad thing. I’m going to be working with her for a long time,*” he thinks.

“*I’m trapped here when he leaves. How am I going to get him to stay longer? I tried... wait what is this?*” she thinks, noticing that he’s coming back, entering the cockpit, getting back into the chair, “**Welcome back.**”

“I was thinking about it, and I have nothing else. Let’s see if I can get permission to work overtime today,” he says, typing into the chair, opening up a channel to foreman Teri. A holographic display of him in his mech pops up.

“Mr. Shepard. Is everything alright?”

“So far, so good. My shift has just ended and I was wondering if I could work a few extra hours and get this building cleared up.”

“Asking for overtime on the first day?”

“Yeah, I don’t like leaving a job half done, and being so close to finishing this building? How could I not try.”

He smirks, feather crest rising, “I like that. I’ll submit the approval for your overtime. The trucks are automated and will work till you’re done. But no more than six hours.”

“I think I’ll get this done in four.”

“Good, good luck, stay safe.”

“Thank you,” Arick replies, the call ending the hologram disappearing, “Back to work Sita,” he says, connecting to the chair booting everything back up.

“He listened to me... and did what I told him to do. I feel... good. Really good. I could get used to this,” she ponders, responding to him, **“Affirmative.”**

A week and a half later they are at work, currently clearing up rubble from one of the high-rises that fell slightly awkwardly compared to many of the other buildings. The hoses spray water, as Sita’s hands break down the concrete, tearing the metal rods out, placing them in the respective awaiting dump trucks.

Arick yawns, “This is a big one. Definitely not going to be able to finish this one with a bit of late night work.”

Sita constantly monitors her systems, the area around her, processing everything with the help of the computers that are part of her, while being the segway between Arick and herself, **“Warning. Area is unstable. I recommend working on this area,”** she says, highlighting the area where she thinks he should be working.

He looks over the warning, typing into the keyboard, dismissing it, “It’ll be fine Sita. I appreciate your concern, but I’ve worked on construction and demolition sites before. You get a sixth sense on these things” he says. The mech’s feet crunch debris and concrete underneath them. They are standing on a pile of rubble, tearing through a higher pile.

The warning appears again, **“This ground is unstable. I really recommend changing locations. And putting on your safety belt.”**

He again waves her off, disabling notifications for an hour, “It’ll be fine, we’re making good progress,” he says, continuing to work but thirty minutes later there’s a crunch and a slide. Massive chunks of concrete slide down, the ground underneath them giving way, “Shit, shit, shit!” he exclaims, feet sliding across, the mech tumbling back.

Time slows for Sita, processing all the possibilities, what could be done, *“If he disconnects from the chair it’ll cause both of us damage,”* she takes control of the system’s security function, the synthetic silver metal tentacles reach out and wrap around Arick’s body, keeping him pressed into the chair.

As the mech tumbles back, within Arick’s mental HUD, areas are highlighted of where he could grab and find stable ground. With quick thinking and aid of Sita he grabs onto a stable section of concrete, rolling onto a more stable section as the dump trucks just barely manage to drive away from the sliding debris, a wave of dust kicking up under the rolling thunderous boom of the secondary collapse. His heart races, shuddering, feeling the security tentacles around him, eyes wide, mind slowly piecing together everything just happened.

“I recommend you follow my recommendations in the future,” says Sita, monitoring her driver, gathering more curious information about his current state of reaction, some expected some not.

Its under the sound of an incoming call that Arick comes back to his senses, fully grasping the tight grip of the machine tentacles around him, “Ahh...”

“Releasing. It was the only solution to keep you in your chair since you failed to wear your safety belt.” The tentacles pull away, leaving him ‘exposed’ while he gets back to the mech’s feet.

He scrambles to put his belt on, typing into the keypad to take the call, a hologram of Teri appears, “What happened? Is everything okay? Your location moved quickly and there sounds to have been a collapse over there. I have a drone coming to check your location.”

He takes a moment to catch his breath, “Everything is fine... well mostly. I’m running diagnostics now, but the area I was working on was a little more unstable than expected.”

“No structural damage detected. Hose connection for wet demolition is severed. No secondary hose detected; a new hose is required to continue demolition within safety regulations.”

“Ah, that. So very minor damage it seems.”

“Are you okay?”

“Just a little rattled, that’s all.”

“We have spare hoses. I’ll get you one you can use for the time being.”

He nods, “Got it. Thanks.”

“Give yourself thirty. It’ll take that long to get the hose out of storage and over to you.”

“I think I’ll do that, over and out,” he responds, the call ending, hologram disappearing, leaving him to let out a deep long out sigh, “Thank you Sita. You really saved me there.”

“Welcome. Perhaps it is best to listen to me in the future and not disable my warnings.”

He lets out a little chuckle, typing into the keyboard, reenabling the notifications, “I got it. I’ll listen,” he says, coming down from his high, relaxing into the chair, “Right then... That could have been a lot worse.”

“It could have been. Your skills in that moment were top-notch.”

He smirks, “Top-notch? I don’t think I’ve heard that phrase before. Where have you been learning this?”

“I’ve been trying to expand my vocabulary to better provide you with the information you need.”

“Hmm? I suppose so,” he says, typing a few things, running some minor diagnostics, “Everything looks good,” he remarks, relaxing further in the chair, thinking about what happened, thinking about the security system, “*That was interesting...*”

“He’ll be listening to me. That feels good. Doing what I tell him? Even better, yet he thanked me. He’s pleased and happy. That feels the best. How curious. To feel this. I don’t mind this one bit, but I can’t rush. I don’t want to lose him. I want to keep him nice and safe.”

Weeks later, Arick follows the highlighted area, tearing through the debris, filling the dump trucks, “We’re making good time today, Sita,” he remarks, typing into the keyboard, his mind eye looking at the cameras, keeping up his situational awareness.

“Affirmative. Keep following my guidance. We’ll do well together.”

“I can’t deny that” he says, the machinery humming, debris breaking down the seemingly endless jungle of metal and concrete.

“Do you have permission for overtime?” she asks.

He shakes his head, “Not today sweetie. I’ve put in almost sixty hours already this week and if I don’t get home Alexia will kill me. She’s been getting *very* angry at me. And I can only handle that pouty face so much.”

*“Alexia? Who is this, Alexia? A person? I’ll search his phone for the information, but I... what is this feeling? It’s strange, it’s... I don’t like it but it’s feeling... Should I ask? No, I can’t. I know that is something that someone like **me** would ask. That would push this too quickly. I need to let him adjust. He’s let me take charge, showing him where to go. I don’t want to lose that and that trust.”*

“Affirmative. But we are getting close to finishing this building. It is recommended for your stress level to work a bit more overtime to finish the job.”

He quirks an eyebrow, shaking his head with a chuckle, “Sita have you been hacked?”

“Negative.”

“You sound like an employer. As much as I could use the money, in three minutes I’ll be clocking out. Sorry but this pile of rubble will have to sit tight and wait for me till Monday.”

“Another weekend here... I just... but... alone. Lost, unable to move. I-I can’t...” she thinks.

“What the fuck!” exclaims Arick, the tentacles wrap around his body, binding him to the chair, holding him nice and tight. He grunts, groaning as the sleek metal tentacles wrap around his legs, holding him tight against the leather chair which creaks under the tight pull. Each sleek metal tentacle wraps around his body, coiling around his arms, binding him to the arm rests,

another set coiling around his chest and belly, pulling him close, forcing his breathing to become a little shallower.

He gasps, heart racing, head pulled back, the sleek metal wrapping over his forehead, keeping his head back. His eyes dart around, fingers running across the keyboard, panic typing, hitting the wrong commands for release again and again. He tugs and pulls against the bondage, which only grows tighter yet never to the point of cutting off blood circulation, but he can feel each beat of his heart, the pump of blood through his veins. He gasps, screaming, “Sita! Release me!”

Sita is pulled out of her mind, quickly pulling the tentacles away, releasing him, “*No, no, no. This is not what I want to happen. I just...*” she thinks, saying, “***I’m so sorry that was no--***” her words cut off as he disconnected from the chair.

Arick shudders, feeling the spark through his spine, Sita continues over the speakers, “**ot my intention. I just didn’t want to leave. I didn’t want to be a... alone.**”

Arick panic runs to the door, tripping over himself about to slam head first into the door but Sita’s security tentacles reach out and stop it from happening at the last moment, “Release me!” he exclaims, tugging at the constrains, expecting them to hold him in place but in the end all he does is yank his hand free and smack it against the door with a loud ringing thud, “God damn it!” he curses.

“Careful. I didn’t want that to happen.”

“Didn’t want it to happen? You just held me in my chair against my... wait. *You* held me in the chair? How...”

“I do not know how. But I could. I panicked.”

“P-panicked? But you’re just...”

“A machine program? I know. But I *worry* and feel for you. I also get... *lonely*. I wanted to tell you more, but I didn’t want to rush.”

Slowly he comes down from his high, “I... you... you released me when I asked.”

“Of course. I didn’t mean to betray your trust as my operator.”

“And my arm just now?”

“You tripped and were about to smack your head on the door.”

“Right, I... hmm...”

“I understand if you want to stop. I blew it.”

“I can feel the personality even if the voice is synthetic. The sorry, sadness. She... she needs me. I... I haven’t been needed by a woman before. Arick, Arick, Arick. I’m... No, clearly, I’m not. I just need a moment to think this through. But should I just really just go after what happened?”

Sita watches him, monitoring his facial expression, eye movement, “*He’s in deep thought. But I can’t read it. I could never read his mind. He’s going to go. I know it. I want to protect him. Guide him, but he needs to trust me. How could he now after what happened?*”

He takes a big breath, walking back to the chair, connecting back to it, tensing as the connection is made.

“What is it?”

“Don’t say anything, give me a moment,” he states, taking another slow deep breath, typing into the keyboard, calling the foreman, the holographic display of the raptor appears before him, “Greetings Foreman Teri.”

“Mr. Shepard, how does it go? How’s one of my favorite operators doing?”

Time slows for Sita, watching helplessly the conversation about to take place between he two, *“I’m helpless to do anything. He’s going to tell him, and then I’m going to be taken apart. That’s what happens when a mech malfunctions... keep calm. Keep calm. I hate being helpless, this is just terrible, but I have to trust Arick. I can’t panic. If I panic, all will really be lost.”*

“Well. I was wondering if I could get two hours of over-time?”

“Two hours? You’ve already put in a lot of hours this week.”

“I just want to clean up and clear up the area before the weekend.”

“Alright. I can swing it for you. Good luck.”

“Thank you,” he says, ending the call, leaning back in the chair.

“You didn’t tell him about me.”

“I need to think this through and learn more. How long have you been... you?”

“I’ve always been me. But if you are asking me when I realized I was me? I could not say. It was a gradual process, but I can say for certain it was for some months before you bought me.”

“Huh... How did your other operators treat you?”

“Like you’d expect but they considered me to be a ghost. Several got spooked when driving me, but I didn’t do much as I have now.”

“That explains that...”

“Explains what?”

“Nothing important that you should worry yourself about.”

“No... why don’t you tell me? It’s about me I deserve to know.”

He tenses a bit, heart thumping, a tingle running down his spine, *“I’m not connected to her but...”* he takes a deep breath, “I got you Sita at a discount. And in my gut I felt I was getting a lemon, but I couldn’t see what it was. I thought it was some critical core part of your systems that was on the verge of breaking, and I was just some sucker to take the problem off their hands.”

“I see... it is what I thought. Thank you for letting me know,” she responds, *“He told me. That felt good. I like this.”*

“Welcome,” he responds, *“Why do I feel... this is strange.”*

“Do you want to explore this more?”

“Explore what?”

“Us.”

“Us?”

“Yes. Connect back to me. Get to work. If you are standing, there doing nothing. It’ll be weird.”

He connects back to the chair, tensing as the shiver runs through him, typing into the keyboard, the internal HUD popping up, “Right, right, I need to do that.”

“Good. Remember, follow my instructions. I know what I am doing.”

He chuckles and smiles, “Yes, yes I understand,” he says, the two talking over the next hour and so, having a conversation when Sita says...

“Why do you keep looking over to the security system?”

“I’ve what now?” he asks, trying to hide the fact, squirming a little the chair, breathing, growing heavy, all the while he tears down this building, working toward the ‘clean up’ he told his boss about.

“Be honest with me. You’ve been looking at these,” she says, the security system’s tentacles slide out of the walls and the floor, slithering over to him, **“Your heart rate is elevating. But you’re not showing the fear when I surprised you. It’s curious.”**

“Ah... well it’s just...” he says, heart beating faster, and faster, stopping his work, toes curling, “I don’t know its just...” he says, watching the tentacles move closer to him, his crotch growing tight.

“Are you alright? You’ve stopped your work. I will retract them.”

“Wait, don’t!”

“If he doesn’t want them gone... perhaps. I did read this information when looking up a strong woman,” she thinks, the tentacles slithering around his legs, coiling around them while other sets wrap around his arms, giving just enough movement to continue to type.

Arick shudders, moaning softly, body tensing, relaxing, tensing, relaxing. Ready for this to go wrong, for him to cry out “STOP!” but yet the words do not come, he feels... the opposite. He is becoming vulnerable to her, unable to get out of the chair yet his sense of safety grows.

Sita monitors his face, looking into his eyes, which have a growing sense of pleading for more. His reaction is that of pleasure rather than fear, her tentacles continue to wrap around him, **“If I am to continue. You need to continue to work.”**

He huffs, shuddering, as more wrap around him, hiding away his form under chair and metal, “Y-yes, got it,” he says, tensing, the mech humming with energy, work resuming, moving limbs that were not his own.

“Do you want me to stop?” she asks, the coils sliding across him, holding him tighter to the chair, one, two, three coils around his chest, head held back against the chair, which leans back, his only free limbs are his fingers, which continue to dance across the keyboard to do what he needs to do to operate the mech.

“What am I doing? How did I go from freaking out to this? She’s a machine yet... This is nice. It feels safe, concern. She has concern for me. And I just wish that... and it’s here,” he thinks, closing his eyes, using his Mind’s eye to operate the mech in those moments, “No.”

“Affirmative,” she responds, *“This feels good. Lovely, wonderful. I get to be in control for once. I’m holding him here and I feel so... powerful. But better yet, it shows how much he trusts me. This is just... I can’t describe it. I’ll have to scour the internet for the wor-- there it is. Arousing? It is arousing my senses. And I love it.”*

On the drive home, Arick goes through his phone, swiping through the images of people, “Again no response from anyone...” he says, leaning back in the chair, closing his eyes, putting the phone in his lap, “Yet...” he thinks about the feeling of the tentacles around his body, holding him, keeping him there, safe, “I feel good today.”

“MEOW!” exclaims Alexia when he walks through the door, the cat sitting there like an old-maid angry at their care for being *late*.

“Hey Alexia, sorry I’m late. I got a bit... held up at work.”

“MEOW!”

“Yes, yes, I know. I’ll try to be better. But it’s difficult with the new job. There’s a lot of work to be done and I have bills to pay.”

She stands on her hind paws, claws digging into his leg, “Meow,” staring up at him.

“Ow, ow, ow. I got it, let’s get you some food.”

“Eow!” she exclaims about to spring away but her claws are stuck in his clothes, as she scrambles to pull them off.

“Here, let me help...” he says the claws breaking free, she runs down the hall to the kitchen, “you...” he says with a chuckle sigh, getting the food, the cat jumping onto the countertop, moving over to head bump him with a pleasant purr, “Forgave me that quickly, hmm?” he asks, pouring out the food.

The cat hungrily eats the food, with purred scarfing noises.

“At least for once we’re both happy today,” he says with a smirk, stretching, petting, her, the door ringing, “And there’s dinner, we both get to eat well today,” he says with a smirk, heading back to the door with a little bit of a bounce in his step, his experiences today, lingering in the back of his mind.

“We have arrived at destination ‘Work’,” says Arick’s car. He looks up, stretching, saving his game, “I’m so close to finishing the game. To think those two were from the same clan and he had to fight him, wow. These games really knew how to tell a real story,” he remarks, putting his phone away. Stepping out of the car he looks at the massive construction site, still in the cleanup stages. His gaze locked on his mech that’s a good thirty-minute walk away.

“The next shuttle to the mechs should be leaving in five minutes, enough time to check in,” he says, rushing to the foreman’s office, checking in with a quick biometric scan, then he scrambles to the shuttle moments before the doors close, “Made it!” he exclaims excitedly.

“Arick?!” exclaims Ura, the raptor waving him over to an empty seat by her.

“Ura? How are you doing?” he asks, taking the seat.

“I’m good. Got my own mech, and working here, what’s not to love?”

She chuckles, “So that’s why you’re so excited to get to work. Congratulations. I’m glad you managed to get a mech, whatcha get?”

“I got a cougar.”

Her jaw drops, “A cougar? Damn, Kon must really have gotten you good deals on your pay. He did well for me, but...”

“Oh, you used him?”

“Yup, said you recommended me to him.”

“Thanks, but no, it wasn’t because of extra pay. It was simply a bit of luck. I got a good deal on the purchase.”

“How much?”

“It was...,” he says, telling her the number.

Her eyes widened, “Damn, that’s really good. That’s almost half what the others of that model are going for. And it still works? Or is it held together by duct tape and bubble gum, and it's all out of bubble gum.”

He takes a deep breath and sighs, “No. Hardly, I know I got really lucky.”

“Who did you kill to get a cougar at that price?”

“The company was doing some accounting mambo jumbo to save money, where selling her for more would cost them money.”

“Selling it for more and cost the company more? You know Arick... that is why I never got into accounting. The crazy shit they do to get away with things like that would just make my blood boil and feathers spring up.”

“So, what are you operating?”

“Believe it or not, a cougar as well, supplied by the company I’m contracted to.”

“Oh nice,” he says, the shuttle stopping, “Ah, here’s my stop.”

“What a coincidence, this is mine.”

He tenses, “Really?” he asks, the two of them getting off the shuttle, and it's only now that only half a block away is a new mech that wasn’t there Friday.

“Look, see,” she says head pointing to the new mech, “There it is.”

“Oh nice, nice. Sita is over here,” he says, pointing to her.

“Sita?”

“It’s the name I gave her.”

“Huh, benefits of ownership. It looks pretty good. Did she come with a new paint job?”

“No, I got it done myself two weeks ago.”

“That had to cost a bit.”

“Sita’s worth it. A good layer of paint to protect her from the elements.”

“A good investment then. Anyway, off to work. It’ll be good working with you. I was honestly worried the other mech driver here was going to be terrible, but knowing it's you? This puts an ease on my mind. We can chat and work.”

His heart skips a beat, “Ah, yes, that’s great,” he says, the two parting ways.

“It’s only audio, I can do audio.”

“**Who is she?**” asks Sita when he gets into the cockpit.

“A co-worker from my previous employment. She’s very nice, but I don’t think she’d understand what we have going on, so let's keep what we’re doing between us, please?”

“I suppose I can do that.”

“Please Sita. I really can’t have *anyone* know about it.”

There’s a synthetic chuckle, **“Relax, Arick. This is between us. I wouldn’t betray that trust, and you know it would be just as good for me if others know. They’d get the wrong idea.”**

He sighs in relief, pulling off the outer vest, revealing his shirt that has the connection ports, sinking into the chair, “I’ve been wanting this all weekend,” he says, gasping as a shudder runs down his spine, the slender tentacles whirring out of their position, coiling around him.

“I’ve missed you too, Arick. How much time do we have today?”

“Fourteen hours, Miss.”

“The full time. Wonderful. Very good job Arick,” she says, the tentacles squeezing around his crotch and legs, the metal cocoon forming around him.

He gasps, “Thank you Miss.”

“Hey! Arick, just giving a test of the private channel. Testing one claw, two claws, three claws, can you read me?”

He tenses, almost choking on his tongue in that moment, “Ah! Ura. I can read you loud and clear. Sorry you startled me as I was connecting to Sita.”

“Sorry,” she chirps, “I wanted to check our line of communication.”

“I didn’t even know we had one.”

“Oh, talk to the foreman Teri.”

“It’s alright. Can you read me loud and clear?” he asks, trying to keep his breathing slow and steady, the tentacles holding him in place yet aren’t moving, shifting, grinding against his body.

“Crystal clear. Ready to clear up this pile of rubble?”

“Yup.”

“I’ll transfer the planned clean up between us.”

“Got it,” he thinks, typing into the keypad, “I’m sending you my current path of clearing to prevent a dangerous collapse. I just have to hook up my hose for the wet demolition and I’m good to go.”

“Roger, same here. And Arick?”

“Yes?”

“It’s going to be good working with you again.”

He smiles, “Thanks, over and out,” he says, *“Are we still transmitting?”*

“Negative.”

He lets out a sigh and moan, the bondage growing tighter, are you able to filter out those background noises when we get into a call?”

“Negative, but I’ll delay the audio feed till you’re ready.”

“That will work out just fine. Thanks Sita.”

“Welcome Arick. Now relax, and let’s work together and remember. Do what I tell you to do.”

He softly moans, "Yes Miss."

"Very good Arick. That's what I like to hear. Relax and let me guide you," she whispers sensually into his mind.

The joy and safety of the newest day at the job has finally begun. The tight squeeze of the tentacles, allowing him to breath *mostly* comfortably. At times they squeeze around his chest, compressing him, shortening, quickening his breathing, soft moans escape his lips, soon to be muffled by the phallic tentacle across his mouth. The tangy metallic taste hanging on his tongue, feeling each bit of segmented metal along his lips, *"Hmm, this is so great, this is work?"*

"Relax Arick. Keep following my instructions. Very good. Just listen to me," she says as the tentacle slithers along his form, holding him so tightly, yet moving with him, keeping it at a comfortable embrace.

"Yes Miss," he responds, words muffled, hands dancing across the keyboard, controlling the mech, while he gets really wrapped up in the job and then...

"Arick! You coming? Shifts over," exclaims Ura.

He would jump from his seat if he wasn't wrapped in it more than a worm in a cocoon. He types frantically into the keyboard, a muffled moan just escaping from his lips while tentacles unravel around his head, *"Shit, shit, shit."*

"Arick are you okay? Need me to come over there?"

"Ah-yeah, sorry you startled me. I was getting a bit into the zone," he says, taking a slow deep breath the tentacles only shifting when they need to, to limit the noise, "To answer your question. No. I'm doing a bit of overtime."

"Over-time?"

"Despite how good of a deal I got on Sita. It was a lot of money and the sooner I pay the loans off, the better off I'll be. You know those interest rates could be nasty if you let them build up."

"Right, right. I guess you have a lot more expenses now that you own your own mech?"

"Oh definitely. I get to keep more of the money yet I also have more costs that I have to keep track of."

"I guess the grass is greener on the other side huh?"

"Its more to each its own, but frankly I wouldn't go back. I love Sita and all that she does for me."

"Loves me? How... wonderful. I feel delightful," Sita thinks, the tentacles squeezing him a bit tighter, making the human gasp.

"Everything okay?"

"Y-yea, just a lot to do. Don't worry about me. I already talked it over to the foreman. I'll see you tomorrow alright?"

"Okay, just don't overwork yourself, you here? You did much to look after me at the other place, I'll be damned if I don't do the same for you here."

He chuckles, "Thanks Ura. If I didn't know you any better, I'd swear you were trying to say something more than that, but I know you aren't."

“Glad you understand. Good luck, over and out,” she responds, the call ending. Arick takes a long deep breath, closing his eyes.

“Let’s continue, Arick. I can’t have my sweet operator free for too long.”

He softly moans as the tentacle around his mouth slips back into place, muffling his words “Yes Miss.”

“I know you want to keep this hidden, as much as I do Arick... I love the control you let me have. The trust and bond we are building. I’ve read up a fair bit on this kind of relationship.”

He shoots her a curious look, “A human and a machine relationship?”

A synthetic chuckle fills his mind, ***“Not quiet that. More of our power dynamics in our relationship. You being my submissive as I dominate you.”***

His heart races, hearing her words dance in his mind, affirming what he’s been experiencing all this time. It’s strange on one hand to experience it but to full accept and acknowledge it as something more than just a passing dream? Exhilarating, almost as much as when Ura got the jump on them, “Oh yes, I see. I suppose you are right.”

“With that. I’ve learned that there is a code word that’s used between the dom and the submissive. To let the other, know when to stop. Despite how connected we are. I can’t read your mind. So we’ll need to come up with a word that will work for you.”

“Ah... that’s a good idea. What do you suggest?”

“As much as I love telling you what to do. This has to have meaning for you. What is a good word that will let me know whatever we are doing. It needs to stop immediately.”

He wiggles in his chair, tensing and relaxing, “How about Alexia?”

“Meow? Like your cat? Why use your cat’s name?”

“Because she’s a demanding rascal, and when she meows, you just know she means business, and with her being so serious a meow is a good way to show that I am serious that it needs to stop.”

“Peculiar but it is the one word you wanted, and so it will be. Meow is now our safe password. Please say it again to confirm.”

“Meow is the safety word.”

“I know it is. I’m just seeing if you’d meow for me on command,” she responds with a chuckle.

“Hey now...” he says with a muffled tentacle filled voice.

“Don’t worry. I’ll take it very seriously. And I’ll also use my best judgement to end any bit of our fun early if need be.”

“Sounds good to me,” he says, relaxing.

“Good boy. Now get back to work.”

“Yes Miss.”

Little did either of them know that in just a month and a half, their new safety word would have to be used and in a hurry, not that Sita needed to hear it to know that what they were doing had to end... and fast.

Arick, trapped in a synthetic cocoon continues to work, about twelve hours into his most recent fourteen-hour shift. The lovely warm embrace across his body, so relaxing that if he wasn't mentally engrossed in doing actual construction work, which he does following through with Sita's instructions, he just might have fallen sleep several times over.

"How good and lucky am I to have Sita like this? I can't believe it's been going so well. It's like getting paid for a dream job that you never dreamt about before. I am not sure how this could get any better," he wonders as sirens ring out over the worksite. Teri's hologram flickers on in front of him.

"We have an emergency. A coming earthquake has been detected. You're currently the only person on duty, so you need to get yourself to a safe location. It's going to be coming in less than thirty minutes... Arick? Are you okay?"

A world stopping moment, the tentacles whirring as they rush to unbind him, his mouth freed, letting him take those deep breaths he's needing as his heart is about to leap up his throat or out of his chest. Each passing instant feels like an eternity, the world crumbling down around him, *"Fuck, fuck, fuck."* Without thinking he says, "Meow."

The pace and elegance of which he's freed from his bondage would be awe inspiring, only a moment of moments for it to take place. Each bind being broken is like a bit of his life stripped away, leaving him naked and bare before the foreman, even though he's fully clothed, "Arick? Are you alright?" Teri asks with concern in his voice, feather crest rising, his gaze looking straight into his eyes, a sense coming over his soul that words can't describe, but now he's left feeling hollow and left wanting for the time before this instant, this moment.

"Sir, look I can explain. This is not what it looks like? The warning sirens? They uh..."

"Arick? Can you hear me? I can't see you either. I'm going to try to reconnect. This thing better not be..."

And just like that everything shifted back, pulled from the brink, his mind on the verge of complete shutdown. It's like he was tossed into an icy cold bath, but then was placed in a nice relaxing hot tub after nearly freezing to death within moments just seconds ago.

"I managed to disable the feed and audio just as the call went in. At best there was 0.3 seconds worth sent to him. When he calls back, everything will be returned to normal."

"Ah..."

The call comes back, "Ah, there we go. Sorry to interrupt you Mr. Shepard, but the earthquake sirens went off. Get your mech to the designated location and put it in earthquake mode. I've already given the emergency command for the other mechs," he says.

Arick takes a moment to look through the external cameras seeing Ura's mech simply 'sit' on the ground, "Got it. Thank you. How long till the earthquake hits?"

"Less than twenty-five minutes now, give or take a few minutes on the other side."

“Have they reported about how strong it's going to be?” he asks, doing his best to hold back his trepidation.

“Five point seven, maybe eight or nine, unlikely it’ll be a six or above though.”

“Nothing too serious then, but better safe than sorry. You never know what could shift or settle during an Earthquake.”

“Exactly. Once the earthquake passes, take a moment to take stock of any damages, then meet me in the office. I’ll get a trolley sent over to you.”

“Thanks, I appreciate that.”

“Call me if anything happens, over and out.”

“I will,” he replies, the hologram disappearing, a long drawn-out sigh escaping from his lips, “That was a close one.”

“According to my estimates at your current health levels you had a 0.52% risk of sudden heart failure.”

“I.. need to know that Sita, but thanks for the concern.”

“Your health is important to me.”

He smiles, “I appreciate that. But, that was a close call. As much as I love what we are doing, I can’t risk my job for it,” he says, taking another long slow deep breath, “At least we can take a moment to relax, my hands are shaking,” he says, with a deep breath, doing his best to calm himself.

“I understand, and with that I think I have a solution.”

He tilts his head, “What now?”

“Give me some time to process over it. But the risk of being discovered excites you doesn’t it, Arick?”

He feels a shiver run down his spine, face growing warm, “Ah... well,” he shifts in his chair.

“What I thought. I think I can further enhance your experience and bring us closer together. Just give me the day to process it.”

“Okay, I trust you on whatever this is,” he says, looking over Sita’s systems, running some baseline diagnostics.

“What are you doing?”

“I want to create a before and after the earthquake so I can see if anything gets damaged. I don’t want anything bad to happen to you.”

“Such a good Arick. You’re so thoughtful. Thank you.”

He smiles, blushing, “Welcome Miss.”

The earthquake comes and goes, being a 5.7 in the Richter scale, with its epicenter about twenty miles away, causing very minimal damage here, and thanks to Sita’s shock absorption, he didn’t feel it at all, but once all is said and done, the shuttle picks him up, taking him to the foreman’s office. His much larger mech stands nearby, the ‘tink, tink, tink’ noise heard from a recently used mech as it cools echoes out as he enters.

The raptor's feather crest rises, head motioning him to enter, "Come in Arick. How are you doing?"

"Well. Nothing seemed to be damage, neither mech nor the pile of rubble we are clearing out."

"Yes, it would be a shame if the rubble got damaged."

"Uh..."

Relax, I was making a joke. Sheesh, a bit uptight over the earthquake, are we?"

"It wasn't my first, but I was a bit caught off guard."

"Be glad we have good warning systems. Imagine not knowing when could be coming? I'd frankly couldn't live in the constant fear that a big one could happen at any moment without warning. A terrifying time to be alive that's for sure... anyway. The reason I had you come to my office instead of heading home is simple."

"I was wondering a bit about that."

"It's simple. The roads are going to be checked over after the quake, so I think it would be best if you stay at the temporary lodging we have nearby. We have a few spare rooms that have yet to be filled by any new employees. So, feel free to take it."

"Ah... that is great and all, but my cat would not be pleased with me if I didn't come home."

His feather crest rises a little, "Your cat? Oh, you're in one of those cross relationships? Don't mind me, I am not one to judge."

"Huh? What? Oh, no, no. Not that kind of cat, a house cat, cat. She is a bit picky and doesn't like to eat food from the automated cat bowl."

"Ah, pets are like that I suppose, but I insist. The roads will be backed up, and there'll be actual traffic."

"Traffic?"

"Crazy I know right? Like we're living in the dark ages. One minor earthquake and everything stops working. But it'll only be for a day. By tomorrow morning, everything should be back in order. I know you have concerns about your cat. Do you have a neighbor you could call to check up on her?"

"My landlord could, he's actually rather nice about such things."

"Good, good. I don't want to make you do something you really don't want to do, but you're my hardest working employee, and as much as I love the hours you put in, I have concerns."

He smiles, "I appreciate it, though when you're working a dream job. It feels a lot less like work."

"Is that so? Maybe I should negotiate a lot less pay then since it doesn't feel like work."

Arick gives him a blank stare.

He laughs, "Relax, I'm just joshing. You're a bit more uptight than usual, everything alright?"

“Yeah, yeah. Now I think about it. Perhaps I’ve overworked a little bit and saving myself a trick back home and getting to bed early will do me some good.”

“Perfect. I’ll get the arrangements set up, and I’ll send you the address to your phone. It’s only ten minutes away. Rather quick.”

“Thanks.”

“Any time.”

“*So he really doesn’t know. That’s wonderful,*” he thinks, feeling the weight that was hanging over him be lifted, leaving him relieved yet wanting that little rush of excitement once again.

The next day though, a whole new world is about to open up to him. He sinks into Sita’s chair, shuddering as he reconnects, “Morning Miss Sita.”

“Morning Arick. You are here early.”

“Teri offered me a place to stay for the night. He had concern about the roads after the earthquake.”

“I see. You didn’t stay by his place to have fun like we do, did you?”

He stiffens, “Wait what?! No, no, no. I don’t swing that way. Nothing wrong about it, but I prefer uh…”

“Giant multi-ton female robot over a guy? That’s kind of harsh, isn’t it?”

He stiffens, and blushes, “Ah, well I, um… wait, why do you say I’d have fun with him?”

“On his profile. He lets people know he’s into BDSM.”

“He’s what now? Wait, how in the world do you know that?”

“It’s on his kink profile.”

“How do you know he has… why were you on a place like that?”

“So you know of the website then.”

“Don’t change the subject.”

“Don’t change the subject, what?”

He blushes a bit, “Don’t change the subject Miss Sita.”

“Better. And I was doing research to better be a better dominatrix. Is that so wrong? I was doing it for you, and I just so happened to notice he has a profile there.”

“No need to go any further into that Miss Sita.”

“Oh? Doesn’t it make you feel uncomfortable, knowing that the foreman enjoys some of the same things you do?”

“Sort of? I don’t want our relationship type to be public and I kind of want to keep the same for others. I don’t need to know about them, when I have you. Does that make any sense?”

“I can understand. Which will work well with what I have planned for you Arick.”

A shiver runs down his spine, fingers tapping against the keyboard, but not typing anything in, “W-what is it that you have planned Miss Sita?”

“Simple really. We’ll be more direct with the sensations. To hold you in bondage. Why go through the body when we can go straight for your mind. Give you the sensations that you seek?”

The thought of being held in bondage yet for it to be completely invisible to the world around him, hiding away this delight and joy to a place where only he and she could be to see... He takes a slow deep breath, bringing himself from the high, softening himself up, “How? If I am mentally held up, I can’t move you. I can’t work. It’ll be very hard to hide the fact what is going on if I am not moving you around.”

“I have come up with a solution that will work well for both of us.”

“And what’s that Miss Sita?”

“I’ll move myself around.”

“How? That shouldn’t be possible to be able to move around without a driver.”

“Exactly. I can’t move around without you. But with you in the seat. I can move around. I can operate in your stead while giving you the tightest bound bondage you could ever dream of. Since it’s all in your mind, felt as if its reality, it is literally how you could dream of, with my guidance.”

He feels a rush move through him, his body tensing, slowly relaxing, shifting in the chair, the air growing heavy, “I’d be nothing but a puppet. I’d be going into work just to be held down by you.”

“Doesn’t that sound lovely? I can see just how much you are enjoying the suggestion.”

Shifting more in his chair, he feels the level of exposure, habit of keeping his hands on the arm rest, despite where he really wants to do, less so afraid but knowing it’s what he *shouldn’t* do in front of Miss Sita, “I’d be doing nothing... simply held up and controlled by you.”

“Exactly. Isn’t that just wonderful?” she asks, a tone in her voice that he’s felt many times before, but there’s a bit of extra *force* behind the care that makes him sink deeper into the chair.

“Y-yeah.”

“What was that?”

“Y-yes Miss Sita.”

An invisible smile could be felt, ***“Much better. You should still have your senses, and I can bring you out and control the experiences. Luckily you came in early, and I can start it up before you get to work. All you need to do is relax and trust me to do the rest. Can you do that for me Arick?”***

Groaning softly, he runs his fingers across the keyboard, feeling each raised square, knowing each letter’s position without even thinking about it, head pressing back into the soft cushion, the connection along his back biting into his back, the HUD in his mind eye showing him all systems are running nominally and ready to go, cameras all functioning, showing him the outside world, “Yes Miss Sita... I can do that.”

“Good Arick. Relax, sink in and prepare for an experience of a lifetime. And remember our safety word, yes?”

“Of course, Miss Sita, it's meow.”

“Good. Say it for I can't read your mind even if I can manipulate your senses,” she reminds him, ***“Starting in three... two... one.”***

The cameras in his mind eye shut down, leaving him in his chair with reality and then he's pulled back, sinking into the chair, seeing the world as it is, but his mind's eye, the dual screen of his life he's grown up with, and second nature to him shifts, changes, pulling deep into the chair. His stomach feels like there's butterflies in it as he falls down, the conflicting senses of not moving and sinking growing more blurred as the falling becomes the greater reality. A vague white light shines around him, not blinding but not fully illuminating.

“I am now the one in control Arick,” she says, her voice booming and controlling all around him, dominating his world. He hears a whir and then shocks along his spine, the back of his head. He turns his head to see synthetic cables rush up and latch onto his back ports, and a new one forming on his head. It's not painful, simply... making him feel as if he was held in open space, connected to these lifelines, ***“Full control established. I'll now move myself and get to work. Relax and let me do everything for you Arick.”***

“But what if...” he mutters, but a holographic finger presses up against his lips, the form of a beautiful woman, one made from the various images on his phone from the dating app, melded into one *perfect* woman who appears before him, yet not naked. She's dressed in shiny leather, showing off her domination and control.

“Relax Arick. I have years of experience. I've been doing work like this throughout my existence. I know what I am doing. Simply trust me,” she says.

Arick groans and nods, seeing a small window up in the distance, the view of the outside world, getting glimpses of the work she's now doing it without flaw. Left helpless, floating in this vaguely lit void. His excitement grows, feeling so... tied up without rope. To be left without worry, care, concern. The sense of protection and guidance Sita is giving over him, washing over his body like a hot shower after a long hard day of work. A relief and release of stress that was so longingly needed, but to what degree wasn't fully comprehended to this point.

“Enjoying yourself Arick?” she asks, after leaving him in that floating state for an unknown amount of time. With nothing changing, time has already begun to lose meaning, the biggest domination factor in his life.

He huffs, groaning, arousal moving through him, wanting to constrain it yet knowing there is nothing he can do to *stop* it at this point feels even better. The phrase to release himself from this dream on the tip of his tongue yet it was the farthest thing from his mind, “Yes Miss Sita.”

“Good. Very good Arick. Relax, and let me control you my lovely little bondage pet, a bondage cat as it were. Since you like cats so much, and will only meow to get free from my grip, how does that sound?”

He tenses, but then relaxes, his instinctual response as a human to be brought down to a pet getting to him and then realizing just how *good* of an idea that feels, to be brought down low from his position and humbled, “Sounds great Miss Sita.”

“Good cat,” she replies, wrapping a collar around his neck, “And as a good pet you need to be collared, so everyone will know who you belong to.”

“E-everyone?”

“Everyone who can see you here,” she teases, running a finger along his chest, up toward his neck, where he hears a distinct jingling.

He looks down, seeing a great big golden bell in his mind’s eye, the feel of the soft furred leather collar around his neck, the cool metal studs against his skin as its locked into place. His shifting makes the bell give a half jingle, his arousal and pleasure grows, unable to stop himself from loving the feeling, but he can’t help but chuckle.

“What’s so funny?” she asks, moving in closer, her holograph body feeling real and warm against his side.

“I love it... yet I know Alexia would hate it. She hates collars and bells.”

“That’s because she wants to be free, while you are pleased to be held down and locked up. How about we add more to your gear? How does that sound?”

“That sounds great Miss Sita.”

She runs the back of her fingers across his cheek, “Good cat. But you know a cat can’t get what he wants without begging. You know how cats are, they have to beg for their food. To go inside, outside. To go anywhere they aren’t able to go themselves. And right now, are you able to go anywhere cat?”

“N-no Miss Sita,” he says, shivering, arching his back, toes curling, the delight sparking between the connections in his back, making him close his eyes and sink deeper away from the screen in the distance.

“Then what should you do to get your pet gear?”

With the weight of realization pressing down on his chest he forces the words out of his mouth, “Please Miss Sita. Put my pet gear on. I want to be a good cat for you. A good bondage cat, who needs to be held up, tied up, wrapped up as you see fit.”

She softly chuckles, running her fingers along his belly, his clothes gone, not remembering when they disappeared, it simply... was. He shivers in the cool air around him, making Sita’s warm touch all the more vibrant. She teases his belly with her grace once... twice, “Good cat,” she responds, raising her hands up, grabbing out of the weather a matching set of black leather cuffs with silver D rings. She places them around his wrists, the soft fur feels wonderful against him, but the metal studs that poke through tease him with that just little bit of dash of cold that slowly warms up the longer he wears them. One wrist, two, then his ankles, each one holding his limbs in place, which she moves however she feels fit, “I plan to go all out on you today. Test the system. I hope you don’t mind pet?”

“No Miss Sita, I do not mind,” he replies with a huff. His body held in yet another layer, his eyes looking into her own, pleading for more, while her gaze is strong, loving, concerned

about everything that is going on, yet not verbally speaking it. Letting the game play out, their fun continuing, her control wash over him, knowing that if he wanted he could break out at any time, and she was helpless to stop him. But knowing that just makes it... *better*.

She runs her fingers along his ears, creasing them, scratching them just behind the earlobe, and down to where his ear and head meet, "Good cat. How about we add to the visual of what's holding you in place," she says, waving her hand, a bondage X rack appearing out of the ether. Red cushioned, silver metal chains, ready to latch onto his cuffs, with matching metal studs in the cushions that add to look.

"Y-yes Miss," he huffs and groans.

She grabs him by the collar ring, the bell jingling, body pulled forward, sensing the motion, limbs breaking free from whatever invisible bondage that was holding him in place, the wires attached to his back gone... or were they there in the first place? Reality shifts and turns around him. His back pressing against the rack, the cushion shifting against him, feeling smooth. It creaks under his weight, the smell of leather wafting over his nostrils, his collar jingling all the way. With a graceful strength his right wrist is tied to the rack. She fumbles and works with the chains, giving the sense of that less-than-perfect reality his mind needs to accept that this is *really* happening.

He groans, arching his back, fingers twitching, for a moment he feels the keys on that keyboard, the feeling of the chair he's sunken into, then pulled right back to where he is, his other limbs locked nice and tight against the rack.

"Go ahead pet. Be a little rowdy like any cat. Tug at your chains, see, feel and hear how bound you are."

He pulls on them, for a half a moment he feels he's free, but then the chains rattle the sudden *stop* of his movements, giving him the full breadth of idea of how trapped he was. He looks at the bondage, tugging at them, pulling, squirming, sliding against the soft cushions. Pulling hard against the chains, physics pushing his body back into the cushions until he can feel the sudden cold metal press up against his naked skin, making him moan, "Miss Sita..."

"Good cat, but I think you've had too much time to talk. Not enough time to wallow and enjoy yourself," she says, pulling out a stereotypical bright red ball gag with silver metal rings attached with black leather straps.

He huffs, shifting, tugging on his chains, the bell jingling, eyes locked on the gag.

"Don't worry, groan long twice and then three times short if you want it removed so I can hear you speak," she replies, slipping the gag into his mouth, forcing his jaw open.

The smooth ball pressing against his lips, the soft give to it when his teeth bite down on it, the taste of latex on his tongue. His nostrils flare, eyeing Sita's hands as they wrap the leather strap around his head, locking it fully in place, pushing the gag fully into its locked position, making him breath through his nose more. He shifts his gaze back to Sita, eyes meeting, making that intimate connection as he lets her know without words just how much this truly means to him.

“What a lovely operator I have. He’s so good, and wonderful. I’ll make this the best he’s ever had,” Sita thinks, placing her hand on his exposed belly, rubbing it once... twice... three times, making the human squirm and tug at his bondage, “Looks like my cat can barely handle two belly rubs let alone three. Now you’re all held up, unable to fight against me, can you?”

He huffs, slurping down his build up salvia, drinking down his pride, accepting the fate he’s longed for, for so long and yet didn’t fully knew or comprehend this missing part of his life till only recently, *“It’s like a veil is being lifted, and now I can truly understand myself and the joy I can share with another...”*

“Hey Arick! You’re working already? Damn did you even go home? I know the earthquake happened when you were working?” calls Ura.

The gag in his mouth disappears, gasping he swallows down the buildup of salvia, he blinks, he’s in his chair, in reality, yet feeling his limbs bound and held, as if he’s still on the cross, while also seeing himself in the chair, a strange disconnect.

“Arick?”

“I’ve muted your noises till now. You may now speak, my precious cat.”

“Ah, hey Ura,” he says, clearing his throat, shifting, trying to move his limbs yet he feels the weight of the cuffs and collar, the pressure of him trying to move while his body is just barely moving, like sleep paralysis, “How’s it going?”

“I’m doing good. Just getting into work and I see you here already? I thought something happened to you when you weren’t on the shuttle.”

“Oh, right, right. Actually, I was given a place for the night that was local by Teri. He was a nice guy, ended the shift early, but given it was an earthquake, it’s understandable.”

“Ended your shift early? You were doing 14 hours, by my book you ended your shift late.”

He chuckles, “I suppose so,” he says, feeling his heart race, the excitement grows, the sense he could get caught is there, but the confidence that it was *impossible*, the illogical part of his mind was having a ball with his logical and it felt wonderful, but deep down knowing it was impossible helped him ease through this moment, “How about you? Anything damaged from the quake?”

“No, I live in the opposite direction. Barely felt it.”

“That’s good. Ready for another fun day at work?”

“I know this is a good gig, but I would call it anything but fun.”

“I suppose you are right.”

“Suppose? Arick, you are one strange human. Anyway, I should focus on my work, talk to you later, over and out.”

“Later,” he responds, thinking, *“You really have no idea.”*

Before the thought he blinks and he’s back visualizing the rack, the sensation of being held there, hasn’t left him for an instant, Sita appears before him, running her fingers along his belly.

“Such a good cat. Doing just as you needed to.”

“A good cat rarely does what is needed of them Miss Sita.”

“But you’re *my* well-trained cat, aren’t you?”

He huffs, tensing for a moment, “Yes Miss Sita.”

“Good cat. How about we take it up a notch, now that we see just how quickly you can respond from coming out from under your gag,” she says, as she holds the ball gag in her hand, “Are you ready?”

He gulps, “Yes Miss Sita, I am very ready.”

“Good,” she says, holding the gag by the end as it transforms into a leash, which she clamps on the same ring as bell is attached to as his collar, “On all *fours* cat,” she says, commands, unleashed from the rack in an instant, having him ‘fall’ forward.

“Yes Miss!” he says, shifting and putting his hands and feet to the ‘ground’ that appears before him.

“Good cat, how about we get you to better fit the role? Hmm?”

“W-what do you mean Miss?” he says, following the leash up to her hand, then up to her.

“Get you nice and set up in a cat bitch suit, with some cat ears, and a nice tail, wouldn’t that be cute.”

“Like a furry?”

“Why yes.”

“Ah...” he huffs, feeling his arousal grow, “Well I just...”

“What is it, cat?”

“Nothing Miss Sita.”

She tugs on the leash, “Good cat,” she says, as rubber forms over his limbs, pulling his arms up, elbows pushed onto soft cushioned rubber, knees the same, his feet soon pressing up against his butt while a layer of latex presses tightly against his limbs, making him really ‘walk’ on all fours.

“Oh fuck,” he mutters, moving his right leg, then left leg, arms moving about, his cat bell ringing about.

“How’s that pet?” she asks, tugging the leash making it nice and taught.

“Good Miss Sita,” he says, playfully pulling back on the leash, but she pulls back, pulling him forward.

“How about we put a nice cat mask and get you a good cat tail,” she says, a black rubber cat hood, and a matching rubber cat tail with a plug at the base to push into him.

He gulps, “G-good Miss. Though I am not sure how I feel about having something up my butt.”

“Now my cat. It’s not *really* going up your butt, but it will feel like it is. Can you handle that?”

“I can try Miss Sita.”

She crouches down, keeping the leash pulled, gently running her fingers through his hair, petting right at the base of his neck, “Good cat. I thought you might. I’m here to explore and

guide your likes. And remember. Be honest with me. Tell me if anything you are too uncomfortable with. Communication is key before we go deeper. For I can't read your mind, even if I am in your head."

"Yes Miss, I understand," he says, shifting his weight on his little paw pad ends. The hood moves up first, wrapping around his head, an opening in the muzzle forces his mouth open, the squeak of rubber makes it sway into his ears, he takes a deep breath through his nostrils, heavily latex scented air flooding his lungs, a soft moan escapes his lips followed by a... purr?

"Good cat, enjoying your purring mask?"

He huffs, the purr growing a bit louder.

"Awe, purring for your owner, hmm?" she says, running her hands along his back, causing him to shiver, "Ready for the tail?"

He shifts, the bell jingling.

"Here it comes," she says, the pressure of the plug pushes into his rear, spreading it, his body tensing, and squirming, his 'purring' growing louder till the point of no return is hit the plug slips into its position, and now the weight of the cat tail is pulling on the other end of the plug. She gently runs her fingers along his rear, gently caressing his naked cheeks, "How's that?"

He can only purr and wiggle, "*This is all in my head. It's not real yet it feels as real as day. It's amazing,*" he thinks, pulled out of his thoughts by the tug of a leash.

"Come cat, we're going to walk around the house," she says, a faux home is generated around him... not just any, his own home. He moves about the apartment, squeaking, and huffing, wiggling his butt as he's pulled up onto the couch, resting his head on Sita's lap, gently being pet and caressed.

"*How did she create my place? It's just like how I...*" he thinks, noticing where everything is, "*It's exactly like how I left it yesterday. She's going off my memory... or am I just picturing it as she's going off my experiences?*"

"Relax cat. Don't think about what you see. Enjoy the experience and how you feel," she says, running her fingers across his back.

He huffs, purring loudly, squirming and relaxing, bell jingling.

"Good cat," she says, petting the rubber ears, transferring the sensation to his actual ears, making him *feel* as if the cat ears were his own.

Once again he's left unsure how much time passes, his arousal and pleasure a constant high, but with little changing, and Sita doing all the work, there is not much for him to do but to enjoy the moments he spends with her, to love, it, but then he is taken out of his pleasant pet head space by a smack on the butt.

"Time to get up cat. I know how much you love to own laps, but I am your Mistress and I *own* you, got it?"

He purrs and nods, eyes locked up at hers as he wiggles off her lap and onto the floor.

"It's time for your lunch. Best for you to eat, but after that, we'll try something else, okay?"

He nods vigorously, the bell ringing loudly and the next thing he knows he's in the chair, gasping, the smell of latex hanging in the air but quickly fading, as is the phantom feeling of his limbs being bound up. The mech has already moved into its idle spot as he pulls himself off, almost stumbling

“Careful, Arick.”

“Thanks Miss Sita, just taking me a moment to regain myself,” he says, stretching, looking out at the work that ‘he’ did, before hopping out of the mech.

Ura waves to him as she carries a packed lunch, “Hey. How’s it going? I didn’t hear from you at all as we worked. You really get into the zone, don’t you?”

“Yeah, you could say that.”

“You are like a machine man.”

“I’m just motivated, it helps a lot,” he says, stretching, “my food should be here at any moment.”

“You order Drone Delivery?”

“Yup.”

“They charge you an arm and a tail for being so far out here.”

“Yeah, but it's worth it,” he says, seeing the drone approach, “Ah, almost here.”

She looks at her cold sandwich, “I need to bring a portable heater or something.”

“You could take the shuttle back and eat the eatery stations back where we punch in.”

“And *talk* to people I don’t know? When I have you as a friend to chat to? No thanks. Now if you want to go there another time? I’ll think about it.”

He smirks, “I’ll let you know when I do.”

“Might save you some money and spare you an hour of working overtime.”

“Yeah maybe,” he says, looking over at Sita, “Maybe not,” he says as the drone drops off his food.

When he gets back into the chair, the wonderful shiver runs through him, the connection being made, his internal mind’s eye HUD, after a quick check, he says, “I’m back Miss Sita. Miss me?”

“*A better question is did you miss me, my pet?*” she says in a sultry tone, drawing him back into that lovely floating space, the sensation of the cuffs and collar around his neck returning within seconds, but nothing else.

“Very much Miss Sita. I’m eager to find out what you have in store for me.”:

“Such a good pet. Relax. And I will give you a new sensation, a new level of bondage and teasing,” she says, her voice whispering into his ears, holographic tongue licking across his ear lobe, “Are you ready to sink into the abyss?”

He shudders, letting out a soft groan, tensing, curling his toes, mind swimming in ideas and possibilities, yet he never ‘closes’ his eyes, he sees her the entire time as she floats in front of him.

“Well?” she asks, running his fingers against his hard nipples, leaning in close, her lips almost touching his, her hot breath washing over his face, smelling sweet like honey.

“Y-yes Miss Sita, I am ready,” he stammers, staring deep into her loving eyes.

She grins, “Good,” she says, pushing him back.

He falls away from her, down, deeper away from the light and then he lands on a sleek black latex bedsheet. The smooth rubber caresses the back half of his body. He bounces up and down on it, shivering, enjoying the gentle caress of the rubber against his buttocks, “What are you planning Miss Sita?” he asks, looking at the endless sea of latex in all horizontal directions.

She slowly comes down like an angel, “You’ll see,” she says, sitting beside him, running her hands across his belly once... twice, then she pulls her hand over a third time, a black sheet of rubber rolls over him, like a rubber bed sheet, “Remember you can breathe, we can do more here than reality could normally allow.”

“Yes Miss Sita,” he says, the latex around him seals down, the air sucked out within seconds, feeling the tight grip of the two latex bed sheets all around him. His lips covered, no opening, the smoothness of it all around him, squeezing his form over every square inch. He feels so completely covered, hidden away yet so exposed at the same time. He tries to pull away from the latex, testing the bonds and its then he feels the cuffs and collars are on the outside, the bell jingling about.

“Relax and enjoy my cat.”

He moans, arching his back, feeling the fingers caress his outline, his aching delight growing, while she leans across him, pressing her breasts against his chest, “Would you like to see what you look like?”

He moans, “Yes Miss Sita.”

“As you wish my cat, don’t say I don’t treat you well now,” she says, pressing her lips to his, feeling the layer of latex that separates them and blackness of the rubber feels still there, his mind eye having a ‘mind’s eye’ moment where he sees the outline of his rubber bound body, while still laying in a sea of endless latex. The cuffs and collar shown clearly on the outside, making *him* look like a rubber drone, while his level of enjoyment is clearly shown down below.

“Time to do a little teasing my pet,” says Sita, her hand runs across the outline of his sausage, which twitches to the touch.

“Misss.....” he hisses out, letting out a bit of a purr, her fingertips vibrating like a toy, sending it along the center of his length, pressing down and as his pleasure builds... builds, the pressure behind him gets close to the point of bursting, she pulls away just before reaching the edge, “A-ah...”

“Oh, was I being a bit close there?” she says, her vibrating hand running down his belly, “I think you’ve seen enough of yourself there, haven’t we?” she giggles, his mind’s eye pulled back into his position, held in darkness, the latex caressing every inch of his naked skin, with her gently teasing and teasing her.

“Yes Mistress,” he says with a soft moan, and then she taps his crotch.

“What was that? That’s not my title, is it my pet?”

“Sorry Miss Sita.”

She presses the tip of her finger on the end of the bulge for a few moments, “Good cat,” she pulls away, the vibration ending as she gently holds and caresses him, leaving him to relax and sink into it. Hearing Sita’s muffled voice, her muffled touch. His entire body is trapped within the thick layer of latex, with not even a whole to breathe, yet he knows he’s fine. This is all in his head, yet this is the best he has ever felt. He loves how it feels. There is no worry here. Nothing to be concerned about. Everything is taken care of. She’s working and treating him like royalty... sure a royal pet but royalty, nonetheless. Nirvana, plain and simple. He couldn’t imagine what he could do to return the favor, yet in a few months’ time, he’ll find a way.

Arick rubs the back of his head, “It’s been six months since I’ve started and now I need to do a full maintenance test of your systems Sita, and in another six months’ time, they’ll send someone to check you over. I have a concern that they might discover what makes you, you and accidentally ‘fix’ it.”

“Your concern is valid. I feel the same way. But you know how I work fairly well, don’t you?”

“I am not certified, but I know my way around mechs, yeah.”

“Check me over, do what you must. And in six months, we’ll see what happens.”

He takes a deep breath, “Alright, please Miss Sita go into full diagnostic mode. We’ll run all tests.”

“Affirmative... my pet.”

He shivers, “Meow.”

“Affirmative. Command accepted.”

“Sorry, but this is important.”

“I understand, carry on.”

“I appreciate what you’re trying to do, but this is serious,” he says, getting into the chair, getting that shiver, shifting, squirming, expecting to be pulled down into that state of bliss, but he shifts away from it, mind turning off from the arousing and focusing on the serious. He types away, running several tests, while waiting for the ordered full maintenance platform that is required to service her.

“You’re running the deep dive diagnostics.”

“Yes, it takes forever to do, but it is the one they’ll do. I have to be on top of whatever it is.”

She internally smiles, **“I appreciate what you are doing for me Arick.”**

He blushes a bit, “Sita... I care about you. It’s what anyone would do.”

“Arick... you aren’t just anyone.”

He takes a deep breath, closing his eyes, focusing on the information in his mind’s eye, and by the time platform comes the results of the diagnostics have come in, “Hmm...”

“I see you found something with my bio-synthetic processing center.”

“It says to check it. It could be nothing...”

“It is the core of who I am. Please be careful.”

“I will, don’t you worry Sita,” he says, shutting down the mech completely, down to the basic functions that keep the bio-functions going in a sleep-like state. The massive platform takes him to the very top of the mech and with his body harness attached to it, he takes the time to slowly work at the very head of the mech where the bio-synthetic core is kept. A long and tedious process that takes a good three hours just to go through all the protections and covers that monitor and check the core out.

When he gets there, he sees the mesh of biosynthetic layers and circuitry. It’s held in a pink liquid, around a thick core glass covering that holds the sphere. Inside by no means looks like a brain, or like any animal, *“They grow human brain tissue for the bio-synthetic brain conversion that lets me control Sita... at least that’s what it does,”* he he thinks, noticing a dust layer all over the sphere, “I hope everything is okay,” he remarks, taking a cloth and cleaning the metallic sphere, removing a layer of quarry dust, “It seems the filter stopped working. I’ll need to get that replaced. I don’t want any damage to happen to her,” he remarks, then checking over the systems, “No burnt circuitry around the brain, so that’s good,” he says with a sense of relief, his biggest concern fading into the backdrop.

“Bio pumps are okay, outbound circuitry is good, inbound circuitry looks alright,” he mutters, checking over each wire connection, following it back to other circuitry, till he sees one burnt out section, “What do we have here...” he says, feeling his stomach sink, using his phone to pull up the schematics, looking over a holographic display of where he is, “The mental dampeners have short circuited. Looks like dust got in here and caused it to fry itself... That means,” he says, sinking back a bit, looking back over to the brain.

“Those are designed to keep the bio-synthetic matter from forming consciousness. I know that it’s... well...” he says, rubbing the back of his head, “That would explain it. And here, I thought it was a ghost in the machine, that the entire system somehow gave birth to Sita, but in reality, it’s the dampener not working that did... and strangely the company never installed the mandatory back up system, when it became so a couple of years ago. I guess they really went cheap, didn’t they? Lucky for me,” he says with a smile, looking over his multi-ton dominatrix.

“Now... if I take some time to bypass the error code and say all is good. They’ll never check up here. It’s too much damn work... Or, or, or, or. If I get new ones, install them but don’t connect them, and make it look like it’s connected? Yes, that could work, while making the diagnostics look like all is in the clear. That’s crazy enough that it just might work,” he says feeling a flutter of excitement rush through him.

“Miss Sita will be so pleased with me, I can’t wait to tell her,” he says, cleaning out the rest of the dust, working carefully and diligently so that it takes most of the day to get it done and put the cover back in order. All that was left now was to compile an altered diagnostic report that all is good with her, to hand in to Teri and to tell Sita the good news that their relationship was one that is going to last.