

GYNOID by RamiUngar

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Anon Editor's notes:

+Converted from screenshots using Tesseract OCR (Wattpad prevented copying text)

+I aimed to do minimum changes, so only about five words have been edited.

+Italics indicated by using chan format of two single quotes,

'Mmm...such beautiful robo booty!'

PART 1

Toby inserted the memory card and battery pack into the back of her neck, flipped on the power switch, and closed the slot. There was an electronic humming and the girl in the rectangular crate uncurled herself from the fetal position. She sat up, her pink nightdress rustling softly, and looked around the room until her eyes fixed on Toby. Immediately she smiled at him, brushing a lock of hair out of her eyes. Sitting at his desk, Toby felt his face grow warm.

"Greetings." said the girl. "I am a Xingke Robotics Company gynoid, Yintu Companion model, personal designation Ariel. My serial number is MA6540032B, registered to Dresden Paris Crimson for private use. My functions include 'housekeeping', 'childcare', and 'sexual relations'. It's a pleasure to meet you." The girl spoke each word in a clipped sort of way, always placing stress on every second syllable. When she listed her functions, she said them quickly and unstressed, as if she were parroting back something someone had taught her to say.

Toby watched as she stood up, stepped out of the crate, and bowed low to him. His stomach did a backflip as he saw her bare shoulders, her breasts pressed against each other by the fabric covering them. "N-Nice to meet you too," he said as she stood up straight. "And call me Toby."

The girl Ariel said, "I will call you Toby from now on. Okay?" Toby realized she was asking him for approval and nodded his head. Ariel smiled again, and then asked, "What may I do for you, Toby?"

"Er..." Toby blushed and looked away before glancing back again, taking her all in. She was almost exactly his height and looked to be around fifteen or sixteen, the same age as him, with lightly tanned skin and shiny black hair that ended just above her shoulders. She had dark, almond shaped eyes, long eyelashes, a small button nose, and brilliant, white teeth that shown between a pair of soft pink lips. All this was wrapped in a bright-pink babydoll dress with a short frilly skirt and tied around the back with ribbons so that it clung tightly to her frame, as well as a yellow pendant that hung from a choker around her neck. She was so beautiful, it seemed impossible.

But of course, that was the point. She was a gynoid, a robot designed to look like and imitate an actual human girl, and one Toby had himself designed, picking out each of her physical characteristics so that she would be as appealing as possible to him.

This thought made him wonder, not for the first time, what the hell he was doing, Toby knew the reputations of people who got their own androids and gynoids. The robots themselves were limited in what they could do and where they could work. Due to the public's fear of robots taking their jobs, one of those safe places to work was the sex trade, where the law saw robots the same as sex toys. The people who used robots as sex toys, especially the ones who got their own, were said to either be freaks who couldn't get legal sex any other way, or the pimps and madams who rented their property

out to those freaks.

Under normal circumstances, Toby wouldn't be anywhere near a gynoid, let alone order one and have it in his room with him. He didn't want people, or himself, to think he was a freak, when he already had enough problems interacting with others to begin with. But what could he do? He'd dug himself into this hole, now he had to dig himself out.

Ariel said something, startling him from his thoughts. "Um...what did you say?" he asked.

"I asked why you assigned Ariel as my name designation." she said, still smiling.

Toby stared at her, his brain unable to process the question. When the neurons finally connected, he said, "Um...thought it was a nice name. Everyone these days likes Asian names or weird names like Brick or Waterfall. Ariel was...not that." he finished, feeling lame. Then he added, "Why do you ask?"

"Your body language indicates nervousness and embarrassment." Ariel answered, still wearing that smile. Toby didn't like how she smiled at him. It never changed or flickered, and seemed as false as the plastic choker around her neck, which was actually the cover for the data port, and power switch hidden in the back of her neck. All of it was fake, just, like the girl before him, who continued, "My programming indicates that establishing connections by asking safe questions is the best way to reduce encumbering emotions."

"Oh." said Toby, looking at his feet. A long, uncomfortable silence passed between them. Ariel broke the silence by asking, "Toby, why did you order me?"

Toby looked up at her and ran his fingers through his hair, frustrated. "I-I..." he stammered. If this was what her programming thought would get him to open up to her, he might as well send her back to the factory right now. "I just did, okay? It's not that big a deal."

And then Ariel did something Toby hadn't expected: she walked right up to him, took his hand in hers, and placed it on her chest. He stared at where his hand was, feeling how warm her skin was, how real it felt underneath the thin fabric of her nightgown. His eyes traveled up to her face, where her smile had changed the slightest bit, now much more sympathetic, maybe even empathetic (or was he imagining that?). He could almost hear his heart trying to break through his ribcage.

"Toby," Ariel repeated, putting her other hand on his shoulder, Toby's stomach doing another backflip as she did. "Why did you order me?"

"W-Well." Toby looked from her pretty face to her hand, resting comfortably on his shoulder. No matter how fake she was, she still seemed like a real girl to him. "My friends are—you see, I...well—I'm trying to hook up with this girl at school." He felt his face go hot. "People think we'd make a great couple. And...everyone thinks I've already lost my...everyone thinks I've already done it." He still couldn't look at her. "But I haven't. And if we end up...you know...I don't want her to think I'm...you know...terrible."

He looked at her face, hoping to see that sympathetic smile again. To his relief it was still there, and it was not a trick of his mind. The hand on his shoulder moved up to his cheek and caressed it. "I can assist you with that." she said, "What is the designation of your IHC system?"

"Ronald." said Toby automatically.

"Would you please ask 'Ronald' to bring up the Settings for this room?" she asked, doing that parroting thing again.

To the room, Toby said, "Ronald, bring up the Room Settings."

"Bringing up the Room Settings." said the electronic voice of Ronald, the Integrated Household Controller system of Toby's home, its voice coming from everywhere at once. A holographic screen popped up beside Toby and Ariel, showing a diagram of Toby's bedroom as well as several configuration options. Taking her hand off of his, Ariel scrolled through some of the options, made some adjustments, and then clicked SAVE before putting her hand on Toby's again.

The holographic screen winked out of existence and Ronald intoned, "Turning on Station 581: Classic Romance Music. Adjusting lights to Setting 11: Lover's Glow. Activating Scented Airflow option 17: Vanilla and option 54: Jasmine" Invisible violins played around the room as a woman began to sing about the destinies of lovers in the stars. At the same time the lights dimmed and became bright red, while sweet scents filled the air, making Toby feel giddy.

With her hand on his shoulder again, Ariel directed Toby around the crate she'd come in and to his bed. He had just enough time to realize the irony that his gynoid was taking him to his own bed before she pushed him gently onto the comforter and then climbed onto him, much lighter than he'd expected her to be. He took in her beautiful face, felt her warmth against him, and even smelled her scent, a sweet, flowery fragrance. The electric humming he'd heard when she'd first booted up was gone now. He could almost believe she was human.

And then Ariel lowered her face to his and kissed him. Toby closed his eyes, lost in the sensation of warm lips. Something soft and moist slipped between her lips into his mouth, wrapped around his tongue, held it for a magical moment, and then slipped out again.

When she pulled away, Toby was panting with exhilaration. He pulled her back to him, untying the bows on the back of her dress, kissing her passionately. She kissed him back just as passionately, arms wrapped around his shoulders. Suddenly Toby didn't care if she wasn't human. He wanted her, and he would have her.

The bodice of the dress fell away, revealing her round, soft breasts. Toby put his hand on one of them, felt its softness, played with the erect nipple. Ariel inhaled, her back stiffening as he touched her. And that was all he needed. He flipped her onto the bed, kissed her again, and then, forgetting everything that had told him ordering Ariel was a bad idea, he took her.

On Monday, Toby arrived at Lucas Preparatory Academy feeling nervous and more than a little disgusted with himself. By the time he left at the end of the day, he felt angry and humiliated and his uniform was caked in clay.

"Cheer up, Tobes." said Garth Gleisser, one of Toby's classmates and friends, patting him on the back. Toby noted how Garth then checked his hand and rubbed it on his pants before continuing, "Everybody gets embarrassed in front of the girl they like at least once. And hey, she was laughing with the rest of us. I think you still got a chance. You just gotta be...more scarlet, man."

Toby only grunted. He wished he could be more scarlet, like those guys in boy bands or the heroes of action movies, or even like some of his friends who could sleep with any girl in school with just a few words. He wished he knew how you got to be that scarlet, because today he was so far from scarlet he was green.

Toby stared across the front lawn, where among a group of pretty girls stood a tall, black girl with an oval face, long curly hair, and a very nice figure. From the way the other girls interacted and gathered around her,

it was clear to any observer that this girl was the leader of their small club. Her name was Lapis Lazuli Oduye, and she was the daughter of the Nigerian ambassador. Since her arrival midway through their freshman year, Lapis had enjoyed immense popularity with both the boys and the girls for being not only wealthy and connected, but also for being smart, pretty, and a natural leader.

Since he'd first met Lapis, Toby had had very little interaction with her, even though they ran in similar circles. Toby was shy by nature, and he had never been good at talking to girls, let alone girls who were always surrounded by their giggling friends. But lately some people, and Toby himself, had noticed Lapis checking him out. Rumors started flying that she was interested in him, and Toby's friends began to encourage him to try and make a move on her, maybe even hook up with her.

As he watched Lapis, she glanced his way and Toby looked away, his face turning red. When he looked again, she was getting into a hovercraft with some of her friends. They would probably go stroll around the National Mall this afternoon, or go shopping at some of the pricy boutique stores in some of the swankier areas of town. And Lapis would probably not spare a thought about Toby Crimson, or if she did it was to laugh at him. Toby sighed. "Why do I even bother?" he asked.

"Because dude, you need to get laid," said a new voice. A moment later Toby was in a headlock as Tim Nguyen, a slim Vietnamese boy with spiky hair and a cheeky grin noogied his head a little too hard. Toby beat on Tim's side with his fists until he was freed. Tim checked his coat to make sure nothing had gotten on it before continuing, "Seriously man, you got to get with that." He pointed his thumb at the hovercraft flying away from the school, "that" probably meaning Lapis. "How'd you get with that senior at that Halloween party when you can barely speak to a girl?"

"Alcohol was involved." Toby lied, wishing for the thousandth time he hadn't come up with that crazy story. Since Halloween freshman year, his friends had believed Toby had gotten it on with a senior at a party held at a friend's house. In reality, Toby had spent most of the night sipping a very bitter beer in the back of a home movie theater, watching other people getting it on while a movie played in a background and wishing he'd dressed as something more colorful than a ninja. He'd told the story about getting it on with a senior because apparently all his friends had gotten it on with someone that night, even Garth, who was almost as bad with girls as Toby was. He'd hoped it wouldn't become such a big deal, but somehow it had become another piece of his totally undeserved popularity.

"Well, you still got a year and a half to get in her pants." said Tim, walking off across the quad, Toby and Garth following behind. Tim was the only one of them with his license and he was their ride home today. "But I would get in there before someone else does. Someone much more scarlet than you." He said the last part like he might be the one to scoop her up. Toby ignored the bait.

As they reached Tim's hovercraft in the parking lot, a blonde-haired girl with twin pigtailed ran and jumped at Tim, wrapping her arms around his neck. "Hey sexy!" said Yu Seligman, Tim's girlfriend, as she kissed his cheek. Tim laughed and kissed her mouth, drawing it out so that his friends could see what they were missing out on. When they finally came up for air, Yu asked him, "Whatcha doing?"

"Just about to drive these guys home." he said, gesturing at Toby and Garth. "Gonna smoke some weed on the way. You in?"

Yu looked at Garth and Toby with distaste before saying "Sure. That'd be scarlet," and letting Tim lead her to his hovercraft.

Pretty and athletic, Yu was the daughter of a powerful city DA and a

stock broker as well as being the captain of the girls' basketball team. She and Tim had been the school's star couple since they got together back in August. Tim liked her, and Yu seemed to love everything about him, except for his choice of friends, namely Toby and Garth, something Toby hadn't quite figured out why yet.

When they were all seated in the hovercraft, Tim passed out four joints and set the coordinates for their route. The craft changed gears and drove automatically, giving Tim the freedom to light up their joints with the lighter app on his phone. They spent a good solid ten minutes on the way to Garth's house, enjoying the buzz the weed gave them, keeping an eye out in case cops or someone they knew saw them smoking while underage. Toby was just relaxing when he saw a holographic billboard showing a beautiful man and woman, posed like the Vitruvian man, Chinese characters flashing above their heads. On the side of the billboard a translation in English read, NEW X MODEL ANDROIDS AND GYNoids FROM SHANSHEN CORPORATION. AVAILABLE NOW FOR YOUR ENJOYMENT. ORDER TODAY. Listed below the translation were a phone number, web address and QR code.

Next to Toby, Garth took a drag on his joint and said, "I get that those creepy bots aren't going to go away any time soon, but can't they advertise an American company? Why all the Chinese crap anyway?"

"Because dipshit," said Tim, scrolling through the radio stations, "the American crap is just crap. Asia produces all the best stuff. You've got me as proof of that."

"Oh, is that why Yu's parents stole a Chinese name for their kid?" said Toby. Tim and Garth laughed while Yu, who was white and Jewish and about as Chinese as Toby was a cat, glared at him. Toby didn't mind. He just wanted the conversation to move away from the Chinese robotics company. After all, Ariel was from one of those companies, and she was modeled after an Asian girl too. He didn't need a reminder that he'd made himself freak with her over the weekend with the best quality product Asia had to offer.

And then Yu said, "So Toby, how'd you get covered in clay anyway? I got a text about it, but I'd like to hear it from someone who was there."

Toby flinched. "'Not that subject either!'" he thought. "'Dammit Yu, you bitch.'" He tried to change the conversation, but Garth and Tim were already talking before he could get a word out.

"Oh, you should've been there!" said Tim, laughing, "So we're in Ceramics class, and Mr. Smooth back there is sitting next to Lapis. So he tries to chat her up."

"I was on the laptop right next to them." Garth chimed in. "He was so bad! 'Er...Lapis...do you-I mean, would you...are you...have you ever...you know" Garth laughed. "Just plain terrible."

Yu tittered. "You're so green, Crimson." she said. Toby only glowered and sunk deeper into his seat. Yu turned to Tim and asked, "So what happened next?"

"Well, Toby's busy forgetting how to have a conversation—" said Tim.

"And Lapis is just looking at him like she's getting her very own improv show—" said Garth.

"and the idiot's still trying to work on his pot so that the teacher doesn't bust him for not paying attention—"

"But he's not paying attention to what keys he's pressing—"

"And the wheel's just speeding up—"

"And when he finally realizes he's got to turn the machine off or his project's gonna fly everywhere, he still presses the wrong keys—"

"And his project flies off the wheel, up into the air, and on top of him!" The craft exploded into laughter, everyone but Toby bent over in hysterics. Toby only huffed and threw the last of his joint out the window. He wasn't really getting much of a buzz today anyway.

He spent the rest of the ride in silence while Yu updated them on how basketball practice was going and Garth told them the latest story about his elder sister's problems with the law. Garth was dropped off, then twenty minutes later Toby arrived home, glad the ride was over. He watched as Tim and Yu drove off, probably heading somewhere private to fuck themselves silly. Tim liked to brag how Yu couldn't get enough of him, he was just so good in the bed. Toby thought that Tim should go fuck himself if he was so good.

As he walked into the foyer, Ronald chimed, "Welcome home Dresden. How was school today?"

"Awful." said Tim, throwing his bag on the floor. "Any messages for me?"

"You have one message from Marcus Crimson." Ronald answered. "Shall I play the message?"

"Leave it for later, I'm not in the mood." said Toby, taking his shoes off.

Toby's parents were Marcus Crimson, the lead guitarist and one of the vocalists for Crimson Fury, a heavy metal band that toured seven months out of the year and recorded or partied the other five, and Jetta Hollande, a French model/actress who spent her time at various shoots and movie sets around the world. This parentage gave Toby a weird sort of celebrity at school, where most of the kids were already the child of someone important or well-known. Toby felt that the attention was undeserved, seeing as he didn't really take after either of them.

Suddenly Toby heard footsteps on the stairs and looked up to see Ariel coming down, wearing a French maid outfit. This outfit, the babydoll dress, and a set of normal day clothes had come free with Ariel when Toby had ordered her. He'd thought it was sexy at the time, a backless, sleeveless thing with frills and matching shoes, cuffs and cap. Now, he just found it gross, like Ariel was. Like how she had made him.

"Welcome home Toby." said Ariel. Then, "You are covered in clay and water particles."

"Yeah, no shit" Toby snapped. "I'm going to go take a shower. Go clean my clothes for me, would you?"

"Okay." said Ariel. "Would you like me to join you in the shower afterwards?"

"No, just make me a sandwich for when I get out." He pushed past her on the stairs without waiting for a reply and headed straight for the bathroom. Leaving his clothes outside, he turned on the shower and stepped in, rinsing the clay out of his hair and thinking about how Ariel had offered to join him. Stupid gynoid. She might be programmed with near-human intelligence, but she definitely wasn't smart enough to see how much Toby hated himself now because of her.

After Toby had had his first time with Ariel, he'd spent pretty much the rest of the weekend enjoying his new toy. Ariel had been more than willing to be played with, had even taught him things he'd never dreamed possible. He was having such a good time, he'd stopped caring that she was only a robot that looked like a girl.

But then this morning, when he'd told her to put on the maid outfit and make him breakfast, he'd started to care again. He'd popped his cherry with a gynoid. A fucking gynoid. And this same gynoid was wearing a maid's outfit in his kitchen and smiling like an idiot while making him waffles and orange juice! He was playing house with her, acting like they were a real couple. If anyone saw him with her, if anyone knew what sort of things were going on in his house with her, what would they say? That the son of Marcus Crimson and Jetta Hollande was a freak who was using the porn addict and secret pedo's outlet for legal sex, that's what! He wondered what his parents would think, each probably halfway around the world and not giving their son or each other much thought, if word got back to them about that. They probably wouldn't have anything good to say, that was for sure.

He'd considered returning her, but now that he'd already had sex with her, she was his forever. What a fucking nightmare he'd gotten himself into. And it still hadn't paid off! He was nowhere near getting with Lapis, who probably thought he was the greenest loser who had ever been dumb enough to flirt with her, and he was unlikely to ever get with her anyway.

In other words, he'd gone to a whole lot of trouble for nothing but a pile of shit. But then again, this was him they were talking about. Why did he expect any different?

He got out of the shower, toweled off, and went to his room to change. When he got downstairs, he found Ariel in the kitchen putting the finishing touches on a BLT sandwich. For the first time since he'd gotten home, he noticed she'd put her hair up in double pigtails. He wondered if that was a new style for girls these days. Certainly Yu Seligman was sporting the look without worrying if she looked like she'd stepped out of a kindergarten class.

"Here you go, Toby." said Ariel, setting the sandwich in front of him. "Would you like anything else with your meal?"

"Soda." he said, taking a bite and discovering that, just like breakfast, the sandwich was very good. Apparently robots were very good cooks, something that hadn't been included in the advertising.

Ariel set a can of synth-cola in front of him and sat across from him, watching him eat with such intensity that Toby was a little creeped out, by it. He took a swig of soda, cleared his throat and said, "Ronald, I'd like to hear that message."

A holographic screen appeared above the table, displaying a video loading sign. A moment later a face appeared on the screen, a man in his forties with multicolored hair and studs and tattoos all over his face. His cheek bones matched his son's perfectly.

"Hey Dresden." said Marcus Crimson, his Australian accent still strong despite nearly twenty-five years living in America. "Well, I'm in Bangkok tonight. I'm going to be playing for one of their Democracy Now & Forever rallies. They've had democracy for a record twelve years come Sunday. Guarantee you though they'll lose it again in five years, God bless them. Anyway, you behave yourself and do well in school. I'll try and call you later. You know, you should come out here some time, watch us perform live. It'd be a ton of fun. And one of our roadies has this girl, round your age. You'd like her, she's really something else. Unless of course you've already got someone? Anyway, call you later champ. Bye now."

The screen winked out and Toby took a vengeful bite of his sandwich. "He never calls when I'm actually around", Toby thought, as he did every time his father left a message.

Suddenly Toby felt hands on his shoulders and jumped. He dropped his sandwich and looked behind him to see Ariel standing there. Slowly she began to knead his shoulders with the palms of her hands, fingers gently gripping his collarbone. He jerked away from her. "What are you doing?" he snarled.

Smile unfazed, Ariel said, "I noticed a significant increase of tension in your shoulders and back area while you were listening to the video message. I am attempting to relieve you of this stress."

Toby stared at her. "Why would you do that?" he asked.

"Because it's what I am programmed to do."

Toby felt his anger rise in him. "Why do you even care?" he asked. "You're just a machine. You're only supposed to do what you're told to do!"

"I am not a machine." Ariel clarified. "I am a Xingke Robotics Company Yintu Companion Model gynoid with next generation human-interaction—"

"Oh shut up." said Toby, turning forward in his seat. With a huff he pushed the sandwich away and laid his face and arms on the table, staring ahead. A silence fell, during which the only sound was that of the clock on the wall.

Finally Ariel said, "Toby, why are you upset? I'm sensing another increase in stress throughout your body."

Toby groaned. "Because I'm not scarlet."

A pause. Then, "I do not understand. What does 'I'm not scarlet' mean?"

Toby turned around and saw Ariel wearing a quizzical look, something he hadn't seen on her face before. He scratched his head, trying to come up with a good answer. "Um...scarlet means—well, when someone or something is awesome, people say they're scarlet." Toby explained. He was surprised she didn't know what "scarlet" meant. It was just one of those words he'd grown up with, never questioning or really thinking about its meaning. Perhaps it was just an American thing, which was why Ariel's programmers hadn't put it in her lexicon.

"And you are not scarlet?" asked Ariel.

"No, I'm green." Toby replied, turning forward in his chair again. "That's the exact opposite of scarlet."

"Why are you not scarlet?"

"Because my attempts to talk to girls usually end in failure, I'm not like my parents at all and I had to order a gynoid just to have sex, among other things. No offense, by the way."

"Toby, who decides what is scarlet?" asked Ariel, as if she hadn't heard the thing about gynoids or didn't want to clarify whether she could feel offended.

Toby blinked. "I don't know." he said. He'd never thought about it. "It's just...something people usually agree on, I guess."

"But there are others who disagree with what some believe is scarlet, correct?"

Toby turned back to face her. "Um...I guess so?"

Ariel smiled triumphantly. "Then I think you are scarlet, Toby." she said.

Toby rolled his eyes. "You're just programmed to say that because I'm your owner." he said.

"No, praising my registered user due to ownership is not part of my programming." Ariel corrected him. "I really think you are scarlet, Toby."

Toby's eyes widened. "You mean that?"

"Yes."

For a moment, Toby didn't know how to respond. He just stared at her with wide eyes, Then he said, "Say I'm scarlet again."

"I think you are scarlet, Toby." Ariel repeated.

"Again." said Toby.

"I think you are scarlet, Toby."

"Again." He had her repeat it a few more times before he made her stop. Then he sat forward in his seat again, feeling exhilarated and maybe a little lightheaded, It was the first time he'd ever been called scarlet with such sincerity. Toby took a sip of soda and then said, "I'd like that massage now."

Ariel put her hands on Toby's shoulders and began to knead them with her palms. He lay against the table, feeling the hands move up his neck and then down his spine. "Why do you think I'm scarlet?" he asked, sighing contentedly as her fingers massaged his scalp. She really was quite good.

"I think you are very scarlet because you are very intelligent, because you are a capable programmer, and because you have created an amazing portfolio by your own hard work and economic insight." she said.

Toby sat up and turned around. "How do you know that?" he asked, incredulous. Granted, everything she'd just said was true, but he hadn't told her about his homemade programs or shown her his portfolio or anything.

"I noticed when you activated me that among your books you have several non-fiction volumes aimed at the college level or higher." Ariel explained. "At four o'clock Sunday morning you went on your personal computer and used four screens at once while running several programs at the same time, an activity that requires keen intelligence, focus, and programming skills. Two of those programs were investment account managers, while a third involved recent stock market data. That is how I acquired this information."

Toby stared at her, a little impressed despite himself. "Thanks." he said after a minute. "For saying I'm scarlet, I mean."

"I am happy to be of service, Toby." Ariel replied. "May I be of further assistance?"

"No, I'm good." said Toby, standing up. "I've got homework, so I'm going to get on that." He paused. "Afterwards...would you watch a movie with me?" he asked.

"I would be glad to." said Ariel. Toby left the kitchen in high spirits.

Later that evening, Toby found it hard to concentrate on the movie. It wasn't bad or anything, it had a pretty good story and cast. It was just that...well, he didn't know what he felt. Weird, but not in a bad way. And

it had something to do with the fact of Ariel sitting next to him. Finally, unable to stand it any longer, he pulled out his phone and began, for no reason in particular, to scroll through photos on the holographic screen.

"Toby, is something wrong?" asked Ariel, who up till now had been preoccupied with watching the movie. Toby ignored her, scrolling through his photos. There was he and the guys at a basketball game; jamming out at a concert; Tim acting like he was head over heels in love with an interactive department store mannequin. Toby scrolled through the photos a second and third time before putting down the phone with a heavy sigh.

"Hug me." he said. Ariel dutifully pulled him towards her. Resting his head on her shoulder, Toby sighed again, but this time it was less heavy. This was nice. Being with her was nice. Almost nicer than being with his friends, which sometimes felt like more work than it should be.

He wondered again what his parents would think if they knew what he was up to. Probably they'd blame themselves, admit that they never were around enough and that they shouldn't have left him alone with the IHC on nanny mode and an allowance he'd turned into an investment portfolio big enough to buy his very own gynoid without a significant loss. Well, whatever. He was enjoying himself. Why was that such a bad thing?

"Hey." he said, running a hand up Ariel's thigh. "Let's go upstairs."

"Okay." she said.

Later on, in the early hours of the morning, Toby found himself unable to sleep. Instead, he just watched Ariel, lying on her stomach and feigning sleep. She even feigned breathing, her back rising and falling slowly, her nostrils quietly pulling in and pushing out oxygen. If it weren't for the fact that Toby already knew the truth about her, he'd have thought she was a real girl.

'If only she was a real girl.' he thought. 'Then what would I need Lapis for?'

And then an idea occurred to Toby. And he found himself very taken with it. Leaping out of bed, he pulled on his boxers and sat down in front of his desk, firing up his computer. At the same time he pulled his laptop out of his bag and fired that up too before grabbing a pen and notebook from his desk drawer. From the bed Ariel said, "Toby, is something the matter? I notice a significant increase in excitement in your body language."

"I'm fine." he said, connecting his laptop to his computer. "Open up your data port, okay?" Ariel obeyed, sliding open the slot on the back of her neck normally hidden by the false choker. Grabbing the USB cord that had come with Ariel when he'd gotten her, he inserted one end into his laptop's port and then placed the other in Ariel's.

Ariel sat up straight. "New devices detected." she said. Toby ignored that, and on his laptop clicked several keys in quick succession. Immediately several programs popped up on all five screens, each of them displaying several lines of code. Toby stared at all five screens at once, not missing a beat as he wrote down notes on the pad of paper. Here was Ariel's programming, her soul. And he was breaking it down so that he could understand it. Maybe even learn how to innovate with it.

"You are scanning my coding" said Ariel. Then, "Why?"

Toby didn't answer. Instead, he took notes and imagined the possibilities. He imagined Ariel, among a crowd of people and no one

the wiser of what she really was. He imagined her, as nearly human as a gynoid could possibly be. And he wondered if he could be the one to make that possible.

"Toby? Dude!" Toby blinked and looked to see Tim holding out a brown pyramid-shaped block partially wrapped in gold tinfoil to him. They were on a bench on the school quad. Classes had let out an hour ago and at this point only teachers, students in clubs, and hanger-ons like Toby and his friends were around. It was the perfect time to share something special between friends, which probably explained why Tim looked so peeved. "I said do you want some chocolate?"

"Huh? Oh yeah." Toby broke off a piece of the chocolate and popped it into his mouth. It was really sweet, only the second piece of chocolate he'd ever had in his life. He turned to Tim and said, "Dee-lish! Thanks, man. Where'd your dad get this stuff anyway?"

Tim didn't answer him though. Instead he looked down the bench at Garth, who was also looking at Toby funny between bites of chocolate. He looked back at Toby and said, "You okay, dude? Lately you've kinda been a little bit..spacey."

Toby blinked. "No, I haven't," he said, though he knew Tim was right: his mind had been drifting more than usual these days. And Toby knew the reason why: over the past two months, he'd been obsessed with Ariel. Or to be more precise, he'd been obsessed with her programming. Since that first night he'd plugged into Ariel's databanks and started examining them, he'd dived into them several more times, studying the complex code that made Ariel who she was and learning to copy it.

Over the past month, he'd been experimenting with writing similar programs, ones that could be added onto the ones Ariel had. He had already downloaded one into her, an emotion matrix that—

"Dude!"

Toby jumped. He'd gotten lost in his thoughts about Ariel again. God, he really was becoming a gynoid freak lately, wasn't he? He looked at Tim, who had shouted at him and was looking more annoyed than before. "Sorry man." he said. "I..ve got a lot on my mind."

For a moment, neither Tim nor Garth said a word. Then Tim said, "Are you feeling okay, man? You're not on something, are you?"

Toby blinked twice before bursting into laughter. "No. Why do you ask?"

"Well," said Garth. "You've been acting really weird since the ceramics accident. You're staying in more, you're not on the net as much, you keep drifting off—"

"And you haven't tried asking out Lapis lately." Tim added. "We've been..." He looked at Garth and finished, "you know...worried."

"Just because I haven't been busy trying to get into Lapis's pants doesn't mean I'm having a hard time or I'm on drugs." said Toby.

"You in someone else's pants?" asked Garth. "Because nobody at Lucas Prep would turn down a chance with Lapis unless they were doing something just as good. Look at Tim."

"What he said." said Tim, breaking off another piece of chocolate. "So, you got something going on with someone else or what?"

"Someone else?" Toby's mind flashed to Ariel, all the things they'd

done together in the safety of his house, all the things he'd told her while snuggled together on the couch or in his bed, how she smiled at him and at times it seemed like a real smile, a loving smile. Just thinking of her made him feel very warm inside, like drinking hot synth-chocolate on days when the weather actually dipped below fifty degrees.

Something must've shown on his face, because Garth and Tim exchanged a meaningful look before Tim shouted, "Oh my God, you are!" Both boys leapt off the bench and clapped Toby on the shoulders. "You sly dog!" said Tim, giving Toby's scalp a rough noogie. "Why did you keep this from us? Who is it? Do we know her? Or is it a guy?"

"It's not a guy." said Garth. "Toby doesn't swing that way. Not that we would care one way or another if you did, man."

"Is it Snowfall Kruczynski? Or LaShonda Tremont? No, she's dating someone from that women's college in Pennsylvania. Oh I know, you're seeing Aaliyah Hamud-Cruz!"

"She doesn't go here!" Toby managed, throwing Tim off of him. With a deep breath, he added, "You don't know her."

"Then who is she?" asked Garth. "And why haven't you said anything to us? Dude, we've been trying to get you laid for months! Wait, is it the senior you did back in freshman year? Did you find out who she was and start something with her? I can get why you kept quiet if it is. I mean, you are jailbait for two more years, right?"

"Not her either." said Toby, wishing once again he'd never told that story in the first place.

"Then who?!" Both boys crowded around him, shutting out the sunlight. Toby felt himself shrink under the pressure of their gazes, his brain struggling for a response. They wanted to know the identity of the girl he was with, but how could he tell them that the girl wasn't actually a girl, but a machine made to look, act, and feel like a girl? If he even hinted that Ariel wasn't a real girl, he knew how they'd react, how they'd look at him. He had to say something that wouldn't tip them off, something that wouldn't make him a pariah. But what?

"What are you guys up to?" Tim and Garth moved away as Yu Seligman and Lapis Lazuli Oduye were coming towards them, along with Alex Shakti, a gender-fluid student who Toby knew more by reputation than through actual interaction with. The two girls and Alex saw Tim's chocolate as he moved away from Toby and their eyes went wide. Tim offered them some and they took, their faces rapt with joy. A silence fell, and Toby wondered if he'd been forgotten.

Then Lapis said, "Hey Toby, can I speak to you?"

Toby inhaled, his heart suddenly beating like a jackhammer. For what must've been the hundredth time today, Garth and Tim exchanged meaningful looks. Slowly Toby nodded, stood up, and walked with Lapis away from the bench, aware of four pairs of eyes drilling holes in the back of his head. When they were out of earshot, he asked, "What's up?" Inwardly he cursed himself for asking such a stupid question. Couldn't he have said something a bit more scarlet?

"Well," said Lapis, her Yoruban accent making her words sound slow and rhythmic, "I was supposed to go with my dad to a play on Sunday, but my dad has an old friend coming into town this weekend and he had to cancel. So I thought, if you didn't have anything going on—"

"I'd love to." Toby stammered.

Lapis smiled. "Alright then." she said. "We can grab dinner before the

show. That cool?"

"Yeah." Toby nodded. "That would be great."

"Alright then." said Lapis. "I'll text you the info. What's your number?" They exchanged phone numbers and returned to the bench. Alex Shakti went up to Lapis as they returned and looped one arm through hers. "Bye Toby." said Lapis, walking off with Alex. "I'll text you later." They turned one corner around the school building and were out of sight.

Toby stared after Lapis for a moment, but then something stepped in front of him and lifted him up into the air. "Dude!" shouted Tim, spinning him through the air. When he was let down, Toby felt his legs almost give out and grabbed the bench to steady himself. "You did it! You got with Lapis! You finally did it!"

"He didn't do that much." Yu sniffed haughtily. "She was already looking for someone to go to that play with her. Toby just happened to be available."

Tim ignored her. He was already going over things Toby had to do to ensure he got into Lapis's pants, Garth butting in every few tips to give his own input. It was only when Tim noticed that Yu was looking annoyed and was gathering up her gym bag to leave that he stopped and ran up to catch with her. Looking behind himself he called, "See you guys! Toby, you the man! Show her what a stud you are!" and then was gone.

Toby looked at Garth. "Want a ride home?" he asked.

A little while later they were cruising down the highway in Toby's new car, a blue Tesla Hover G9. He'd gotten his license a month ago, and two days later his folks had sent over the car. Despite the fact that it drove itself, he piloted, wanting to keep his skills sharp. Beside him, Garth smoked weed and listened to the radio. "So dude," said Garth, "you're getting with Lapis. That's awesome."

"We're just going out on a date." said Toby, making a left turn. "And as Yu pointed out so perfectly, Lapis asked me out"

"Yeah, she did." Garth agreed. "I hate that bitch."

"You got that right." said Toby. "What's her deal, anyway? Why does she hate us so much?"

"I think she hates me because I'm a scholarship student." said Garth.

Toby nearly crashed into the car in front of him. He looked at Garth, who seemed more fazed by the near collision than by the revelation he'd just blurted out so casually. "You're a-?"

"Don't act so surprised." said Garth. "Yeah, I am. My grandfather's a lawyer, but he lost most of his money in a bad investment when I was ten. We're still trying to recover. All we really got left is the house."

Toby switched the car into autopilot and turned to Garth. "So you got to Lucas on scholarship." he said. He didn't need to ask why Garth had kept it from him: Lucas Preparatory was known as a school for the elite and a gateway to success. The famous, wealthy, and influential expected their kids to get in, do their time, and from there enter the best colleges, which would then lead to them getting the best jobs after graduation. Scholarship students were rare, usually poor, and often looked down upon. Those that Toby knew of kept to themselves, trying to avoid trouble in a place where kids of a higher social circle could get away with making fun of and occasionally hazing those from the lower circles. Even Toby avoided them as much as possible.

Which left one question. "Why tell me?"

Garth shrugged. "Because you're more down to Earth." he said morosely. "You don't seem like the guy to blab to everyone or look down on a friend, even if he's on scholarship."

"I would never." said Toby. "Dude, you're my friend. Probably my best friend. I couldn't look down on you even if I wanted to." Garth brightened a little when he heard that. "But how did Yu find out about it?"

Garth shrugged. "Her dad's a DA, so maybe that's how," he guessed. My grandpa's a lawyer too, so maybe her dad heard something through the lawyer grapevine and let it slip to Yu over dinner or something."

"If she hates you so much, why doesn't she blab?" asked Toby. "She could ruin you with a single post on Tell-All."

"Because I got something on her," Garth admitted slyly. "So we're at a draw until one of us decides to screw our reputation and tell the world what we got on the other."

"What do you got?" asked Toby, interested.

Garth waved his hand dismissively. "Can't tell you dude." he said. "Would if I could. It's really crazy shit." Toby's disappointment must've shown on his face, because Garth added, "Hey don't get all worked up about it. And hey, don't tell Tim 'bout the scholarship thing, okay?"

Toby swore he wouldn't. He knew how Tim would react if he found out he hung out with a scholarship student. Tim was a great guy usually. A little haughty, a bit of a jerk and occasionally too rough when excited, but a good guy nonetheless. still, he put a lot of work into his reputation and his popularity. He only screwed or dated scarlet girls, he only did stuff or wore clothes that enhanced his image as a scarlet guy, and he looked down upon those people he considered too green, scholarship students being among them. If he found out about Garth, he'd probably publicly humiliate Garth before distancing himself from him. All to protect his reputation. Because that was just the kind of guy Tim was.

Silence fell between them. Finally Garth cleared his throat and said, "So, you've got a date with Lapis. You better be ready to put the moves on her. Otherwise you won't get a chance with her ever again."

Toby grinned nervously. "Y-Yeah," he said, though he thought he'd be lucky to get anywhere near putting the moves on Lapis.

They talked about nothing in particular for the next twelve minutes or so until they reached Garth's place. Garth said they'd see each other in the morning, and then they fist-bumped, their fists touching each other for a second longer than usual. Then Garth went inside and Toby started home, turning the car back onto manual. As he drove, he thought about his date Sunday with Lapis and became excited. He was going to dinner and a play with one of the most popular girls at Lucas Prep. His friends had been pushing him to this for months! And if he could get her to really like him, to kiss him, hell maybe even sleep with him, all the people saying he wasn't scarlet enough, that he didn't take after his parents at all, that maybe he should hang with a greener group of friends, would shut up and have to respect him.

He was still buzzing with excitement when he got home, whistling a pop song from the radio as he closed the garage door and turned off the Hover's engine. He was still whistling as, bag slung over his shoulder, he entered his house. And then a familiar voice called, "Toby,

I am in the living room. Come join me."

Suddenly Toby felt a stab of panic and guilt. Here he was, celebrating his victory over getting a date with Lapis, and Ariel was in the living room. When he told her, how would she react? He'd spent so much time with her and—

Toby stopped himself. Why was he getting himself worked up over this? She was a gynoid, one he'd ordered so he could pop his cherry and get some experience 'for' Lapis. Hell, Ariel knew that. She'd wormed his reasons out of him their very first night together. She should be happy that he'd finally gotten a date with Lapis. Maybe she'd even volunteer to help him prepare for the big night.

And yet for some reason, Toby couldn't shake the feeling that by dating Lapis, he was being cruel to Ariel.

Toby walked into the living room, where Ariel was sitting on the couch. She stood up as he walked in, wearing an orange blouse with ruffles at the end of the sleeves and a pair of brown synth-alligator pants with an attached skirt that was short in the front and long at the back. It was one of several new outfits he'd bought her recently, something he'd seen some celebrity wear on TV. Now that he looked at Ariel in that getup though, he thought it was ridiculous. Ariel, on the other hand, didn't seem to mind at all.

"Hello Toby." she said, and he couldn't help but notice her usual smile was a bit wider, her eyes more lively. Was she glad to see him? No, it was his new emotion matrix, the one he'd downloaded into her. It was meant to help her create much more authentic imitations of human emotions. He was glad to see it seemed to be working, He'd thought for a second that she was actually filled with joy at his return home. "How was school today?"

"Good." he said. "I finally got a date with Lapis."

"That is good." she said, her smile not breaking for even an instant. "Will you still be requiring my services now that you have achieved a date with Lapis?"

The question filled Toby with a horror he didn't know he could feel. "Of course I still need you!" he said immediately, a little surprised by his own intensity. "I-I like having you around. You're...you're special to me." He looked away from her, feeling a little embarrassed.

"Okay then." Toby glanced back at her and saw Ariel still smiling at him, which made him smile too. "I will continue to strive to be of service to you. Would you like your massage now?"

"Yes please" Ariel sat down on the couch while Toby took off his school jacket and sat down in front of her. This had become something of a routine between them: Toby would get home and tell Ariel about his day while she gave him a massage, he'd do his homework while she cooked his dinner, and they'd sit together while Toby ate his meal. Usually afterwards they'd watch some TV or play a VR game, and after that Toby would shower, often with Ariel there to wash his back, and finally they'd settle down in bed either to have sex or, if Toby was too tired or Ariel's batteries needed recharging, to cuddle, which was just as nice. It was a pleasant way to live, like being a married in one of those popular TV shows from last century.

Toby blushed. He and Ariel married? Now there was a crazy thought. And yet—

"Tonight's dinner will be chicken marsala and mashed potatoes." Ariel said, interrupting Toby's thoughts. "Would you like anything to go with it?"

Toby thought for a moment. "Actually, could you change your outfit before dinner?" he asked, looking behind him.

"You do not like it?" asked Ariel.

"It looks ridiculous on you," he said. "I'll order you something better."

"Okay then." said Ariel, her fingers moving up Toby's neck and onto his temples. Toby closed his eyes as she rubbed circles on his skin with the tips of her fingers. "I will change my outfit before dinner. Anything else?"

"Yeah, let's do some roleplaying later." he said. "To help me practice for my date, I mean." Toby surrendered himself as Ariel confirmed they would practice later, thinking to himself that maybe he didn't really need to practice for his date with Lapis. Maybe what he instead needed was to act like he was with Ariel or with his friends. And if he did, and he didn't get too nervous or scared...perhaps everything would turn out alright.

PART 2

Everything did not turn out alright.

Toby was on his way home, rain making it difficult to see where he was going despite his windshield wipers moving at their fastest speed. Eventually he put the Hover on autopilot and leaned back against his seat, hands over his face. Why couldn't he talk to her? Why did things go so abominably wrong? Why, for the first time when it really mattered in his life, could he not be scarlet?

A few minutes later, the car turned into his driveway and stopped. Taking over the controls, Toby signaled the garage door to open. Nothing happened. Toby blinked, sent the signal again and waited. still nothing happened. He groaned. 'Today just keeps getting better', he thought miserably. Toby opened the door, ran outside, and tried manually inputting the garage door code. The holographic screen flashed ERROR! PLEASE CONTACT VENDOR FOR ASSISTANCE! at him. With a cry of rage Toby hit the holographic panel with his fist and the screen winked out of existence.

Angry, dejected, and now soaking wet, Toby turned off and locked the Hover before trudging into the house. When he got in, he stood there in the entryway, ignoring Ronald's greetings. He ignored everything around him until he heard footsteps and saw Ariel in front of him, wearing an apron over a button-down shirt and ankle-length skirt. "Toby, you are soaking wet." she said. "Shall I fetch you dry clothes—"

Toby hugged her, burying his face in her hair. At first she stood perfectly still, as if she was taking a moment to process what was going on. Then she hugged him back, her arms crossing along his spine. "Toby," she said. Still buried deep in her hair, Toby noticed how much her speech patterns sounded like a normal person's now, none of that stressed-unstressed stuff she'd done when they'd first met. At least he was good at something, even if was doing mods to a gynoid. "What is wrong?"

"I had a bad date." Toby replied. He refused to say anymore.

They stood there for a while, neither moving, before Ariel let go of him and cupped his face in her hands, lifting it up gently so that he was looking straight into her eyes. Through the strands of wet hair over his eyes, Toby could see concern on her face. Without a word, she took his hand and led him upstairs to the bathroom. Toby went, too tired to really care. Once in the bathroom she plugged the tub drain, turned on the hot water, and when the water in the tub was high enough, helped him into it. Toby slid down into the bath, already feeling much better

than before.

Ariel stepped out of the bathroom with his wet clothes, leaving Toby to soak. He dipped his head underneath, held it there until his lungs screamed for air, and then brought it up, sucking in a huge gasp of air before laying his head against the side of the tub and shutting his eyes. Only when Ariel returned with a towel and bathrobe did he open his eyes and get out, letting himself be wrapped in the white, fuzzy fabric. When he was dry, she led him downstairs to the living room, where a mug of hot synth-chocolate was waiting for him on the coffee table. He sat down on the couch and took a deep sip, enjoying the sweet aroma.

For a while, nothing was said. Finally Ariel asked him the question he'd been expecting from her. "Toby, what happened on the date?"

Toby didn't want to speak about it, didn't even want to think about it. Tomorrow his botched attempts at romance would be all over the school. It'd be all anyone could talk about. He'd have it follow him everywhere he went. Couldn't he just avoid it now?

He glanced at her concerned face. The words spilled out.

"I got there to the restaurant" he said. "And Lapis was waiting there. She was really pretty, wearing this shiny blue dress. She had all these markings on her face, those color-changing fake tattoos that all the celebs are wearing these days. Anyway, she's so stunning people are staring at her. Even the guys with pretty girls on their arms are checking her out. And I'm...standing there feeling like I'm totally out of my league." He grimaced, running his hands through his freshly-dried hair.

Ariel patted his shoulder. "Go on"

Toby sighed. "Well, I'm just staring at her, and she sees me and asks me if I'm just going to stand there with a bunch of flowers in my arms or if I'm going to give them to her and open the door for her," he continued. "So I go to open the door for her, and I get the feeling she's judging me, and I know I'm giving a pretty bad first impression.

"And it only gets worse once we're inside. I try talking to her, but...I can't find anything to talk about with her. I try school, but that's boring, and we talk about that with our friends all the time. Then I try asking her if anything exciting has been happening to her this weekend. And she says, 'This date is supposed to be exciting' And I feel like such an idiot because of course this date is supposed to be exciting. What was I thinking asking her that stupid question?"

"Oh Toby." said Ariel sympathetically.

"And the worst part is that at this point I know for sure she's judging me." Toby cringed a little just remembering it. "She's got her arms crossed in front of her chest, she's got her...her lips pursed." It was the only way he could think to describe it. "And she's just looking at me like she was promised a car for Christmas and instead got some ugly sweater. And I'm just sitting there, sipping soda and thinking to myself that I should've stayed home.

"After that we barely talked at all. We tried- tried to start new conversations, but nothing worked." Toby sighed again. "So I excuse myself to go to the bathroom. I don't actually go, I just stand in front of the mirror trying to get a grip on myself. When I finally get the courage to go back, I see some guy's sitting across from Lapis, and she's just laughing along with him."

"Who was he?"

"No idea." said Toby. "At least, not at first. I hid by a staircase where I could listen to them. Turns out the guy's the restaurant owner's

nephew, and he saw Lapis sitting all by herself after getting off his shift in the kitchen and thought he'd go and talk to her. And Lapis is just telling him about how she was supposed to be having this great date, but the guy she's having it with is super-green. 'I thought that because his parents are pretty famous, that he'd be as scarlet as they are,' she said. 'But he's just a quiet little mouse' Toby cringed again, remembering how close to home that one had struck.

"And he asks why she was dating me in the first place. And Lapis says, "Because his parents are super-famous, he banged a senior in his freshman year and all my friends told me we'd make a cute couple!" And I...I realized that she'd never really wanted to go out with me. She'd just done it to shut her friends up."

He paused. Ariel took the opportunity to ask him a question. "Did you ever really want to date her?"

Toby seriously thought about the question. "I don't know." he said. "Maybe." He heaved another sigh. "Anyway after that, they got up and left. Guy paid the tab and everything, said he would show her a night she'd never forget. Lapis was telling him she'd enjoy that. They left, and after a minute, so did I. I got the car from the valet and headed home. It started to rain...and you know what happened next."

"Oh Toby." she said again. "I'm so sorry."

"Yeah, me too," he said. Ariel hugged him and tried to lean his head into her shoulder. Instead Toby missed the shoulder entirely and laid his head on her lap. Ariel accepted this, placing one hand on his shoulder, the other brushing his side gently. For the first time that night, Toby let out a sigh that wasn't full of sadness.

"You're the only one who gets me, Ariel." he said. "Nobody else makes me this happy or comfortable."

"Of course." she said. "That is what I am here for."

"I'm glad you're here." he said, lifting his legs onto the couch and stretching out. They stayed like that for a few minutes, neither saying a word. Toby closed his eyes, wishing he could feel this comfortable no matter where he was. Hell, he could have had a much better evening if he'd been this relaxed. Of course, that might have meant switching Ariel in for Lapis during the date, but still that would be—

And then a thought came to Toby. Opening his eyes and sitting up, Toby said, "Hey, how about I skip school tomorrow and we go on a date?"

"A date?" Ariel repeated.

"Yeah, you and me." said Toby, excited. "We go out, have a good time. Go to the park, see a movie, whatever we want to do. How about it?"

"Okay then." said Ariel, smiling. "We will go on a date tomorrow."

Toby was so happy, he couldn't stop himself, He leaned forward and kissed her. As always, she kissed him back, matching his rhythm with hers, but this time there was something different about this kiss, something...deeper, he guessed.

When he drew back, Toby felt exhilarated. Ariel smiled radiantly at him. He wanted to kiss her again.

And then his stomach growled. Toby looked down at his middle, startled, He'd forgotten that he had missed dinner. He looked at Ariel, who glanced up from his stomach at the same time he did. Toby started laughing, and Ariel joined him, her laughter sounding as real and as sweet as any he'd ever heard.

"Would you like me to warm something up, Toby?" asked Ariel, standing up.

"Yeah, I'd like that" Toby took her hand and she led him to the kitchen, where she started pulling leftover lasagna out of the fridge. Toby watched her, thinking she looked very pretty in an apron. He wondered what she would wear for their date tomorrow, and couldn't wait to see it.

Toby couldn't remember being this happy in a long, long time.

The sun kept peeking in and out from behind the clouds as Toby walked hand in hand with Ariel through Gonzales Park, a three-dimensional park that was shaped like a multilayered wedding cake. At the moment they were strolling along on the fourth layer, home to scenic trails and lakes that sparkled in the midday light. As it was a Monday, most of the layers were devoid of people. Those people they ran into though—an elderly couple sitting on a bench, a young family having a picnic with their twin boys, two neo-hipster men with colorfully-braided beards pedaling on a double-bike—glanced their way and stared for several seconds. The elderly couple glanced at each other as if remembering fond times, the husband gestured his head in Toby and Ariel's direction and said something to his wife, and the man on the front seat shouted something to his partner, who laughed.

Toby had a feeling what they were saying. "We were just like that when we were young, and I remember when we came through this park like that" and maybe "Hey, that's the straight version of us, hon". And he knew they were saying it because he was with Ariel, who had put on a pink shirt, a short khaki jacket, and a blue knee length skirt with sequins studded along the hem. To finish the stunning picture she made, her hair had been tied back in a ponytail with a feathery scrunchie. To Toby, she looked prettier than she had ever looked before, and he was proud that he was holding hands with her. But even more importantly, he was grateful that he could have a girl as beautiful as Ariel with him. Like a dream come true, almost.

They walked a bit farther along the trails, a break in the clouds bathing them in warm sunlight. As they turned the corner around a copse of trees, Ariel said, "Toby, it is the Capitol!" She pointed beyond the layer's balcony towards what looked like a long, white needle poking out of the ground towards the sky. It was the Washington Monument. Toby glanced from the needle to Ariel, wonder on her face. He realized it was her first time seeing it—her first time seeing anything outside of the house, now that he thought about it—and smiled. Even a gynoid...even Ariel could appreciate some of the amazing things life brought you. He smiled. Her childlike wonder was cute.

"Come on." he said, leading her towards the balcony, where an old viewing binocular was standing. He slid his credit card in the slot and there was a clicking noise as the binocular activated. "Take a look." said Toby, who had seen the Capitol up close numerous times already. Ariel bent forward in front of the binoculars, adjusting them as she focused on the distant Capitol.

"I can see the White House!" she said. "And the Supreme Court, and the Mall, and the memorials and museums, and the Washington Monument." She paused. "Toby, why did they erect a monument in the form of a simple tower—Toby?"

The moment she had said "erect", Toby had burst out laughing. It was the most common joke about the Monument, but the innocent way Ariel had said it, as well as the bemused look she was giving him now, made it seem as if Toby had only heard it for the first time today. When

he was able to get himself under control, he said, "It's nothing," and kissed Ariel on the cheek. Then, as a thought occurred to him, he asked, "Are you enjoying yourself?"

A voice in him told him that it was a stupid question to ask, why would a gyn—what did it matter if she was enjoying herself? But Toby ignored the voice. He wanted to ask. He wanted to know if she was having fun with him. It seemed as if his own happiness today hinged upon it.

To his delight, Ariel nodded. "I have never been outside your house before, so all this is new to me." She gestured all around them, turning in a circle with her head raised towards the sky. The way she did it made her seem angelic to Toby. "My programming did not prepare me for how wondrous the outside world is. I find it quite enjoyable. Tell me Toby, do you come here often?"

Toby thought about the question. "Not since I was a kid." he answered. "Back then my mom was having a hard time getting acting jobs, and she mostly modeled around town. When she wasn't doing that, she often took me here to the park. We often played on the playgrounds"—he pointed to the very bottom of the park, where several playgrounds surrounded the first layer—"or on days when it wasn't too hot or crowded, to the amusement park." He pointed to the first layer, a large theme park complete with Ferris wheel, roller coasters, and many more rides. Toby leaned against the balcony, remembering when he was small and his shyness wasn't as much a problem as it was now.

"I remember when I was about six or so," he said, diving deep into his memories, "my mom brought me up to this layer and she let me view through one of the binoculars. Actually, I think it might've been this one." He patted the metal thing, producing a hollow rapping noise. "My mom picked me up and let me see the whole Capitol. She pointed out the different buildings, told me what went on there and the people she knew who worked there. I thought my mom was so scarlet, knowing so many people.

"And then I told her that one day I was going to be President of the United States and live in the White House" Toby's grin faltered a little as he remembered what happened next. "My mother had told me that was a stupid idea. 'Ou do not want sooch a 'orreeble job" he said, his impression of Jetta Hollande's French accent spot on. "Ou should do some-teeng more passionant'" He sighed. "It kind of made me feel down, because it made me think my mom thought I wasn't good enough to be President. I didn't get that she just thought I could do better than be a politician. I just thought...not too long after that, Mom got this part in a spy movie. She left for nine months in Bahrain, and ever since I only see her occasionally." Toby lapsed into silence, only broken by the click of the binoculars timing out. Hearing that, Toby mentally shook himself. Now was not the time to be moping. He was with Ariel and he was supposed to be having fun. And dammit, that was what they were going to do.

An idea occurred to him. "Hey, how about a photo?" Toby pulled out his phone and brought up the camera app. "You, me, and the Capitol behind us? That way we'll remember it forever."

He stood against the balcony and Ariel slid in beside him. Putting an arm around her, he took several photos, giving enough time between each photo for them to adjust and make a new pose. First they were smiling; then they were making funny faces at the camera; then Ariel was kissing Toby's cheek; then Toby kissed Ariel's; then they looked deep into each other's eyes; and then they kissed; and then they just looked at each other, and Toby felt a warm sense of contentment come over him.

Finished with the photography, Toby slid his thumb across the screen to post the photos online. Then he stopped himself, What was he

thinking? He had to keep those private! Quickly he moved his thumb away from the Share button and instead opened a file for them. He'd post them into Ariel's data banks and maybe even print some out later.

Slipping his phone into his pocket, Toby noticed the sun was directly overhead and that he was getting hungry. Turning to Ariel, he said, "You want to grab some lunch? I think there's a snack bar around here somewhere—"

He stopped and frowned. Ariel didn't eat. Where was his brain today?

Ariel didn't seem to mind though. Instead she said, "I would love some lunch", her usual smile on her face. Toby grinned as well, took her hand, and started walking towards where he thought the snack bar might be. A few minutes later they found a long, rectangular building with two windows and a large sign displaying the menu. Several picnic benches and a couple of garbage cans sat in front of the building, the tables shaded by large umbrellas. They walked up to the first window, Toby quickly perusing the menu before making a decision.

"Hi," he said, looking at the window, "I'd like a—"

He stopped as a human face with pimples and curly red hair poked out of the window. An actual person was manning the snack bar today. He was surprised. The last time he'd been here, the snack bar had been fully automated, a serving robot that looked like a giant silver worm with many tiny arms and a camera where its face should've been taking his order. The man in the window, who looked maybe a few years older than Toby, gave him a quizzical look. "Something wrong, sir?"

"Um...don't they usually have rob—" He stopped, glanced briefly at Ariel, and cleared his throat. "I mean, since when did they get people running this place?"

The cashier dropped the quizzical look and laughed. "Oh, I'm just temping." he said. "You see, the normal robot is on the fritz and had to go to the shop. 'Them bots come with warning labels not to mess with their AI programming, but do the folks who own the park care?' The cashier rolled his eyes. "Anyway, not even food stands are allowed to be closed when the rest of the park is open, so I got called in. So, can I get you anything?"

Toby cleared his throat again. "Um yeah, one dog with synth-mustard and a large Aqua-Health."

"I will take a large Aqua-Health too, please" said Ariel, winking at him as she said it. Toby grinned at her.

The cashier disappeared from the window, reappearing two seconds later with their drinks. He disappeared again, and a moment later Toby heard the sound of a printer making his hot dog, The cashier returned with his hot dog. "That'll be eighteen-ninety-three." he said, taking Toby's card. "Say, do I know you?"

"I don't think so," said Toby, though he thought the guy, on second glance, looked a little familiar. And then Toby recognized him: the name didn't register—he thought it was Vinny or Vishnu, maybe—but he'd been a senior at Lucas when Toby was a freshman, the son of some alternative energy magnate who dropped out midway through the year. How had he ended up here?

"Yeah," Vinny-or-Vishnu was nodding his head. "Yeah, you were there when I went to Lucas Prep. Aren't you the son of some rocker or something—?"

"Thanks for the food." Toby took his card and receipt and led Ariel away from Vinny-or-Vishnu. They skipped the tables and instead ate by the

balcony, Ariel pretending to take sips from her health water and dumping the actual water over the edge.

"You know, my friend Tim never drinks Aqua-Healths." said Toby. "Says he can taste all the nutrients they put in it and that they make the water taste weird. I've never noticed a difference."

"Why did you want to get away from the man at the snack bar, Toby?" asked Ariel.

Toby grimaced. "Well, I didn't want to talk to him."

"Why?"

"Er..." he said. How he could tell her that someone who recognized him from school, someone who saw him while he was with Ariel, filled him with dread? He felt like he'd be being cruel if he told her that. "No reason. Just..today's special. I didn't want our date to be interrupted by someone I don't really know asking endless questions."

Ariel seemed to accept that answer. They finished eating—or rather Toby finished eating and Ariel dumped the rest of the water out of the bottle—and threw the bottles in a recycling bin. "So where would you like to go next?" asked Ariel. Toby thought about it and then grinned. He knew exactly where he wanted to go.

Ten minutes later the elevators deep within the center of the park opened up onto the very top layer: the water park. About half the size of a football field, the park contained several pools, including a wave pool, a lazy river, a sprayground, and three gigantic, twisting waterslides. Toby felt his excitement grow as he realized that the park was almost empty, save for a few suntanning adults and a children's party over by the sprayground. He and Ariel might as well be alone!

"Come on!" said Toby, leading her towards the check-in area. "Let's rent some suits and go have fun!" A minute later they'd checked in and stepped into the changing booth. Toby stood stock still as the booth measured him and then gave him a number of options on what to wear. He chose a pair of blue trunks and a black surf shirt. A moment later his, clothes disappeared, replaced by the trunks and surf shirt. He stepped out of the booth and glanced at Ariel as she stepped out of hers. What he saw made his jaw drop. The top was a blue bandeau made to look like a pair of seashells, while the bottom was a sheer green material flowing downward to her ankles like a skirt. The effect was that she looked almost like a mermaid. Toby felt his stomach do an excited backflip.

They went down the waterslides, got knocked about a bit in the wave pool, and played a little basketball in one of the other pools, each point rewarded with a kiss. They were enjoying the lazy river, Ariel lying against him in a double raft, when Toby felt a drop of water hit him on the head. He looked around, seeing no one around who could've splashed him. He was about to ask Ariel if she saw or felt anything when he noticed how dark it had gotten. And then the rain began to fall.

The few adults suntanning were already moving under the roof of a pavilion, while the kids' party ran screaming from the pool with the basketball hoop. Toby and Ariel scrambled out of the raft and the lazy river, Toby thinking fleetingly how people hated to get wet when it wasn't by choice before grabbing Ariel's hand and dashing for cover. The pavilion and changing booths were on the opposite ends of the pool from them, so they jumped into another pool and swam underneath a plastic rock-cliff jutting over the water, a waterfall flowing over the sides of the cliff so that everything underneath was hidden from the outside world and vice versa.

Toby felt the waterfall rush over his head and back and then emerged out of the water with a great big gasp. He looked around the small, dark space, spotted a curved alcove in the cliff where people could sit, and flopped onto it. "I really wasn't expecting that." he said as he shook water from his hair. "I checked the weather, and I know the rain wasn't supposed to start till this evening—"

He stopped as Ariel joined him, her legs crossed in front of her so that she really did look like a mermaid. She pushed some wet hair out of her eyes and smiled at him. "How long do you think the rain will last?" she asked, beads of water glistening all over her body. The effect made her already beautiful body seem otherworldly.

At that moment, he forgot that she was a gynoid. He forgot that he had designed her, that he had messed with some of her programming, that, she was programmed to be devoted to him. She was Ariel, his Ariel, who thought he was scarlet and took care of him and got him more than anyone else did. And that was all that mattered.

Ariel asked him if something was wrong. He didn't answer, but instead embraced her and kissed her. "I love you," he said.

A moment passed. Then the girl in his arms said, "I love you too, Toby."

That was all he needed. He was kissing her, whispering "I love you" to her over and over. He was going to make love to her right here, right now. He didn't care who knew. All that mattered was that they were together, that they were one in their love for each other. He—

"Toby, I have approximately twenty-nine minutes of battery left." said Ariel suddenly. "If I do not begin to recharge in twenty-eight minutes, I will automatically begin to save all data and shut down."

It took Toby a moment to process what she was saying. Then it hit him like a ton of bricks. "We have to go." he said. They jumped back into the water, ran through the waterfall, got out of the pool, and rushed to the changing booths. Not caring about the rain, Toby ran towards the elevators, nearly dragging Ariel behind him. She was slowing down, he could tell by her reactions, she was trying to save power. When the elevator finally hit ground level, Toby lifted her onto his back and began to run to the Hover, sliding her into the passenger's seat and jumping over the hood to the driver's side.

On the way home, Toby kept his foot on the pedal, running red lights, making turns too quickly. He didn't want Ariel to run out of power. In the back of his mind he knew it wasn't that big a deal, that she could be charged up again and everything would be fine. But he didn't want her to run out of power and shut down. Somehow, it seemed like if he let that happen, she might never wake up again. So he drove, leaning close to the wheel, glancing at Ariel every few minutes. Not once did she move the whole ride home, and that made Toby even more scared. It wasn't until he pulled into the driveway that he felt he could give a sigh of relief.

Later, as they lay spooning in his bed, Toby reflected on the events of the day. He was still surprised that he'd been so desperate to get her home, to get her charged. No, not charged. Protecting her life. Like getting a sick person badly-needed medication in an emergency. She wasn't just some gynoid, after all. She was Ariel. And he was her protector, so he would rush her home if she needed it, and goddamn the consequences.

Toby kissed her shoulder and neck. "I love you." he said. "I love you so much."

"I love you too, Toby." Toby felt warm hearing that. Well, warmer anyway. He thought he might be coming down with a fever or

something, He'd have to get some sleep tonight and try to take it easy tomorrow.

Suddenly there was a pinging noise, and Ariel passed Toby his phone from the nightstand. Toby unlocked it and immediately a hologram popped into the air, displaying a picture with the caption DUDE, VLAD MCMANNUS SAID HE SAW YOU @ GONZALES PARK 2DAY W/ SOME GIRL. WHO IS SHE? SHE'S HOT! The picture showed Toby and Ariel holding hands, throwing bottles in a recycling bin. Toby checked the sender. It was from Tim.

Toby felt his heart begin to beat loudly against his chest. Ariel was out of the bag. This had been what he had been afraid to consider. And now he would have to deal with it when he went to school tomorrow.

PART 3

As it turned out, he didn't have to deal with his friends until a week later. The fever Toby developed turned into a full-blown cold by morning, no doubt helped by a sleepless night worrying about questions he'd receive in school as well as being caught in the rain two days in a row. Luckily he had a great nurse at home, so he was able to endure it rather comfortably. When he received messages from his friends—none of them actually visited, though Toby didn't really mind that—he only told them that he'd tell them everything when he got back to school.

And in the meantime, he planned. He programmed. He downloaded new information into Ariel's memory banks, new protocols for interacting with people other than him. On the Internet he uploaded documents, created social media pages. He was determined to make sure that no one ever thought Ariel was anything but the wonderful girl she was.

Even so, when he arrived at school on Monday, he was unnerved and a little overwhelmed by how many people were staring at him harder than usual. And then came the questions.

"Dude, who's the girl?" asked Tim the moment Toby reached his locker. Behind him were a growing crowd of people, including Garth, Alex Shakti, Yu Seligman, and a bunch of other people Toby knew, as well as a lot of people he didn't know. "Man, she was hot! How did you keep such a fine thing from us?!"

"Was that the girl you said you were seeing?" asked Garth. "Was that why you weren't in a rush to get with Lapis?"

"Lapis saw the photo." said a girl from somewhere. "She's pissed. She thinks you were trying to make her a side dish!"

"I-I wasn't trying to make Lapis a side dish!" Toby said. "I-I only did it because everyone wanted me to go on a date with her—!"

"So who's the new girl?" asked Alex, wrapping an arm around Toby's shoulders. There was a whirring noise, and a small plastic blade popped out of Alex's sleeve, probably some prop from the drama club's latest play. "You either tell us or we'll be forced to get rough." he added wryly.

Toby pushed Alex away and cleared his throat. Almost at once the crowd around him went silent, leaning in towards him. Slowly, he said the speech he'd rehearsed what must've been a hundred times over. "Her name's Ariel Bostelli. Her parents work for a robotics company. She's mostly homeschooled so she doesn't know a lot of people her own age. We met through a chatroom not too long ago, and now we're...we're a couple." Toby said this last part casually, even shrugging as if to say it wasn't a big deal. He waited. Nobody said anything. He

wondered if they had bought his story. The seconds ticked pass and he became more and more sure that they'd seen right through him.

And then Tim threw his arm around Toby's neck and gave him a rough noogie. "Dude!" he shouted. "You dog! It's about time you got something! I was worried after what Lapis said, but looks like I had nothing to worry about."

"Bet he only got her 'cause she doesn't know many other guys." said Yu snidely. Nobody besides Toby seemed to hear her though, because everyone else was congratulating him, patting him on the back, asking for more details on Ariel. Toby couldn't believe his luck. They believed him. They actually believed him! He was in the clear, no one would know the truth about Ariel, and he—

"Hey Tobes, here's an idea." said Garth. "There's a party going on at the Commodore Club this Saturday. Tim's dad is hosting, it's the launch for some new IHC system. Shakti and I were going to go with Tim and Yu. Maybe you could join in? Lapis is already coming with this guy she met, Raphael something or other, so we can afford two more. Right Tim?"

"Yeah, we can squeeze a few more people in." said Tim. "I'll give my dad a call. That cool with you, Toby?"

Toby had anticipated they'd invite him and Ariel out to something. "Yeah, that's scarlet." he said, playing it nonchalant. "I'll give Ariel a call and ask her about it. But first I gotta visit the office. Been gone a week and all." With a bit of effort Toby managed to extricate himself from the mob around him and dash down the hall before they could grill him some more on Ariel. Instead of going to the office though, Toby hid himself in a supply closet and called Ariel at home. She picked up on the third ring.

"How did it go?" she asked, not a trace of her original speaking manner left. To Toby's ears, it sounded like he was speaking to a normal girl. Damn, he was good.

"They bought it" he said. "We've been invited to a party this weekend. We'll have to download a few more programs and practice for the weekend."

"Toby, why must your friends not know I'm a gynoid?"

Toby didn't answer that question. Instead he said, "I just don't want them finding out."

"Okay." said Ariel after a pause. "By the way, your mom left a message. Would you like me to have Ronald forward it to you?"

Toby shrugged. "Fine by me."

There was a pause, and then there was a pinging noise. Toby saw the message icon flashing and pressed it to listen. Jetta's crisp French accent came on, sounding a little tinny at the other end.

'' 'Bonjour'' Dresden, 'ow are 'oo? It's Maman. I 'ave not 'erd from 'oo in such a long time. I was tinkin' that maybe I shouldn't be separated from 'oo for so long, and then I 'ad the most wonderful idea. My next movie will be feelmin' for seeks months in Morocco starting in June. I will be 'ome a beet before that, so why don't 'oo join me on set for that time? It would be such a great learning experience for 'oo! And your Papa is on board wi' it, 'e thinks eet ees a wonderful idea too! Well, give me a call when 'oo get the chance, ''mon cher. Au revoir'', Dresden!"

The message ended. "Did you hear that?" Toby asked Ariel.

"Yes, I heard it" she replied. "Why do your parents call you Dresden?"

"Dresden is where my parents met and then got married." Toby explained. "Paris is where they say I was conceived. I never really liked it."

"Are you going to take your mom up on her offer and go to Morocco?" Ariel asked.

Toby sighed. "I don't have time to think about that now." he said. "Look, I'll call you on my way home."

"Okay, I love you, Toby."

"Love you too." He hung up and left the closet, heading towards his first class and making a mental list of updates for Ariel to work on later.

"Toby, ten minutes till we have to go." Ariel's voice carried up the stairs to Toby's room, where he was checking himself out in front of the mirror. The event's dress code was semi-formal, so he was wearing a black suit jacket and pants, a white shirt, and a tie with horizontal barcode patterns. He combed his hair to the side and surveyed himself. Yeah, he was ready for the show tonight.

That's what tonight was, anyway. Not a group date, but a show, one he was putting on with Ariel. And at the end of the show, if they were lucky, everyone would be fooled into thinking that Ariel was a real girl and that Toby was her boyfriend. And after that...well, he hadn't really thought that far ahead. But he wouldn't be thought of as a freak just because of who he loved.

Just then he heard footsteps on the stairs and Ariel appeared, wearing a silver dress with blue sleeves and sparkly roses around her wrists and waist. Her hair had been streaked with blue and wrapped in an intricate bun. "Are you ready to go?" she asked.

"Yeah, I'm good to go." he said, quickly kissing her. He didn't have time to appreciate how pretty she was, or that she'd put on eyeliner and mascara, or that she smelled like strawberries. He was too keyed up for that. "You ready for tonight?"

"Of course." said Ariel, stroking Toby's cheek. "Don't worry. We'll be fine. You've done everything to make sure your friends believe I'm not a gynoid."

"You're not just a gynoid." he told her. "You're more than that. Anyway, let's get going, We need to pick up Alex and Garth soon." They looped their arms around one another and made their way downstairs. At the foot of the stairs, Ronald came on.

"Dresden, a reminder that you must give Jetta an answer regarding her invitation to join her in Morocco—"

"Tomorrow morning, I know." said Toby dismissively.

They were soon heading for Garth's house, the traffic light for a Saturday evening. When they arrived, Garth and Alex were waiting on the front porch, the former wearing a red shirt and frilly black vest, the latter wearing a slim red dress, cybernetic components all along his arms and neck, and a mohawk-like cut with ponytails on either side of his head. They stepped into the Hover and introduced themselves to Ariel. Toby put the car into autopilot and turned his chair to face them, his heart pounding in his chest.

"Dude, you snagged yourself a good one." Garth whispered as Ariel admired Alex's tech accessories. "How'd you land yourself such a

babe?"

Toby shrugged. "I went online and shopped for pretty girls." Garth laughed while Toby inwardly breathed a sigh of relief. So far, so good.

About twenty minutes later, the Commodore Club came into view, a giant square brick building with red neon looping all around it. Near the entrance Toby spotted Tim and Yu in matching green-and-silver clothes and Lapis and another man in a red dress and black suit, respectively. Toby recognized the guy Lapis was with as the guy who'd picked her up on that disaster of a date they'd had the other night, tall and stocky with short hair and a scruffy mustache.

They stepped out of the Hover and Toby handed the key to the valet. He introduced Ariel to Tim, Yu, Lapis, and the man Lapis was with, who introduced himself back as Raphael Ortiz. When Toby shook his hand, they stared at each other for a second before letting go of each other's hands. Out of the corner of his eye, Toby noticed similar staring going on when Ariel shook Yu and Lapis's hands.

"So how'd you land this girl, Crimson?" asked Yu, sounding like her normally bratty self. "You kidnap her little sister or something?" There were a few chuckles, but they were quickly cut off as Ariel slipped her arms around Toby's shoulders.

"Hey, he's cute." said Ariel, one of thirty comebacks he'd programmed into her in case someone made a jab about their relationship. She kissed his cheek and added, "I landed him." Toby smiled as the girls looked at him with wonder, while the guys and Alex looked at him with respect. Now they thought Ariel had been the one pursuing him. Let anyone call him green with that thought planted in their heads.

They talked a bit more before stepping inside the club, where about two hundred people in elegant attire were already dancing, eating and drinking, and shouting to be heard over the pumping music. Robotic waiters flew throughout the room, offering drinks and hors d'oeuvres to the guests. One drone offered them champagne despite none of them being old enough to drink it. Everyone but Toby and Ariel took some, their excuses being that Ariel was allergic and Toby was driving.

From there the night went pretty smoothly. There was plenty of dancing, during which Toby's eyes never left Ariel for a second, There was lots of talk and laughter, and Toby learned that despite his initial reservations, he actually liked Lapis's date Raphael. He was humble, unpretentious, and very funny, and didn't seem to think badly of Toby because of his botched date with Lapis.

And no one, not one of them, suspected anything of him or Ariel.

At some point Toby left to use the bathroom. When he stepped out, he found Lapis waiting there for him, a sour look on her face. "Um...hey Lapis." he said, surprised. "C-Can I help you with something?" Lapis' frown deepened and Toby wondered if he'd said something to offend her.

"What was it about her that made her so much easier to talk to?" asked Lapis.

Toby was so surprised by the question he answered without even thinking about it. "She never judges me."

Lapis raised an eyebrow. "Judges?"

"Well, on our date—"

"You call that a date?" Lapis scoffed, folding her arms. Toby felt sweat break out on his brow. "'Not again'', he thought.

"Listen up, Crimson." said Lapis. Toby blinked; she'd never used his last name in any of their scattered conversations before. "I don't know what you got with that Ariel girl, but get this: people form opinions about other people. It's what we do. Sometimes they're not going to be good ones. So if that scares you, you better hang onto that girl. Because if you don't, you'll be using your right hand for the rest of your life!" And with that she walked off in the direction of a robot carrying a tray of champagne. Toby stared after her in wonder for a moment before returning to the booth he and his friends had occupied, where Ariel was talking with Garth, Alex, and Raphael about the song the DJ was playing. Tim and Yu were nowhere to be seen.

"Hey man." said Raphael. "What's up with Lapis? She followed you to the bathroom."

"Hell if I know." said Toby, looping an arm around Ariel and kissing her cheek. "I don't understand what makes girls tick."

No guy does." Raphael replied. "Even me, and I get a new one every month. Then again, maybe that's why I don't understand them." The table burst into laughter before moving into other subjects. At some point Tim and Yu wandered back to their booth, Lapis following and swaying a little as she walked.

"What's up, bitches?" Tim allowed Lapis to slide in next to Raphael before sitting down with Yu.

"Nothing much." said Garth. "How long's this party going on till, anyway?"

Tim checked his watch. "Damn, wraps up in twenty minutes." There was a collective groan around the table. Toby groaned as well, though inwardly he cheered. To him, that meant the show wrapped in twenty minutes, and then he and Ariel were in the clear.

Tim signaled a waiter drone, which brought them all a round of neon blue martinis. "Well, I say we finish up with a toast. To fucking good times and having good fucks together!"

The table exploded with laughter. "Dude, you're so crude!" shouted Garth.

"Hey Toby! Ariel! You two gotta drink as well!" said Alex. "And none of that allergy bullshit."

Toby felt a brief flutter of panic but suppressed it. "Hey, only if she's drinking too." Toby pointed a thumb at Ariel.

"And I get sick when I drink," she said to the table.

"Oh come on. Just one drink!" said Garth. "You two can't let us all go home with you two the only ones not having fun!"

"Hey, I'll have some weed on the way home—"

"Hold them down!" There was a roar of drunken applause as Tim jumped on the table and grabbed two martini glasses. He ran across the table and jumped into Toby's lap. Toby cried out as a drink was thrust in front of his face.

"Tim, what the fuck are you— The rest was literally drowned out as Toby had martini thrown down his throat. He coughed and spat some of the cocktail out, his mouth burning.

"Toby—!" Ariel reached for him but Alex grabbed her and laughed drunkenly. Lapis crawled onto the table, holding a martini glass too.

Toby saw that Yu and Garth were egging Tim and Lapis on while Raphael laughed and wiped tears away from his eyes. He realized that all of them were drunker than he'd thought, and a sense of dread fell over him.

"Guys, you gotta stop!" Tim poured another drink down Toby's throat as Garth helped Alex with Ariel, who was struggling madly, her robot strength making it difficult to keep hold of her. Finally they managed to get her to keep still as Lapis held the drink to her lips. From somewhere Yu appeared beside her with two glasses of her own, giggling tipsily.

"Sorry, Ariel!" said Yu, the straps of her dress falling over her shoulders. "But ya gotta drink too! Them's the rules!" Toby watched as the girls poured martini down into Ariel's throat, a throat that had no esophagus, and then as she expelled it from her mouth in a geyser. Garth and Alex let go of her while Lapis and Yu backed away, shocked expressions on all their faces. Ariel sat up, and Toby thought she actually looked dazed.

"Emergency expulsion protocol activated." she said. Then, "Back wall of throat punctured." To everyone's shock, including Toby's, Ariel reached into her mouth, her hand disappearing up to the wrist. A moment later she pulled her hand out, an olive pierced with a toothpick held between her fingers. "Item retrieved. Possible leakage confirmed. Damage to systems pro-'ah!'-bable." Ariel jerked wildly, her voice becoming an electronic whine for half a second.

"What the hell?" said Lapis.

"Oh my God!" Raphael was standing and pointing at Ariel. "Look at the back of her neck! She's a gynoid!"

Toby looked, and saw to his horror that the slot hiding Ariel's USB port and power switch had slid open somehow. And all the others could see it. They knew. 'Show's over'. Toby thought wildly. Then, 'I have to get her out of here'. He reached and grabbed Ariel's hand, pulling her onto her feet and away from the booth, heading for the exit. From behind him he heard the others shouting after him.

When they were in the alley outside the club, Toby stopped running and turned to Ariel, who still had a dazed look on her face. "Ariel! Ariel!" he shouted, grabbing her by the shoulders. "Speak to me! Are you alright?"

For a moment Ariel didn't say anything, she didn't even seem to be aware of her surroundings. Then she said, "System backup protocols initiated. Diagnostic search for damage 'run'!-ning." Her voice became a whine again, and she jerked in his grip. Toby stared at her, terrified. What would happen to her? Did the martinis permanently damage her? What if-

The exit door burst open and Tim, Yu, Garth, Alex, Lapis, and Raphael walked out, forming a semicircle around him. Toby scanned their faces and saw that they looked very pissed.

"What the hell, man?" said Tim. "You brought a fucking gynoid? You lied to us and tried to make us think she was your girlfriend?"

"No!" said Toby. "Well yes, but--"

"Oh my fucking God!" said Yu. "I always knew you were a loser, Crimson, but this is the greenest thing you've ever done!"

"Anything else you want to tell us?" asked Tim. "Before we never hang out with you again and make sure nobody else does either?"

Toby stared at them, looking for a friendly face and finding none. At first

he felt panic, but then, strangely, he began to feel really calm. The cat was really out of the bag now. Might as well just tell them everything.

"Yeah, Ariel's a gynoid." he said. "And you know what? I love her." He heard several loud inhales. He pressed on. "I don't care that she's a robot. She's kind and sweet and cares for me. I love her for that."

"She's programmed for that!" said Alex.

"I don't care what anyone else says." Toby continued, ignoring the interruption. "She's a real girl to me and that's all that matters. And you know what else? I also didn't bang that senior freshman year." Several more loud inhales and even a few gasps. Toby could almost hear what was left of the reputation he'd built up over the years crack and fall off him. Strangely, he actually felt lighter than he had in ages. Clean, almost.

And then an idea occurred to him. Maybe he could still find a way to make this alright.

"But you know what else? I don't care. We all have secrets we don't want the world to know or that we're ashamed of. After all, Garth's a scholarship student."

"Dude!" Garth's face looked shocked and angry as all eyes turned to him.

"Garth, you're on the funds?" said Lapis, disgusted.

"Always said your friends were super-green, Tim." said Yu as her boyfriend stood fuming beside her.

"Oh, is that so, Yu?" said Garth. "Because you used to have quite the thing for one of us losers, as I remember."

"What?" Everybody's attention turned to Yu, who suddenly looked mortified.

"Gleisser, you better watch what you say right now—" Yu began.

"Yeah, back in freshman year I went to a storage closet to smoke some weed during study hall and caught Miss-Too-Scarlet-For-Losers kissing a photograph of Toby and touching herself between her legs." Garth revealed, sneering. "The only reason she hates him now is 'cause he never noticed the signals she was sending him!"

All eyes turned to Toby, who was just as shocked as anyone, and then they turned back to Yu, who seemed on the verge of crying as Tim stared at her with sudden disgust. She turned to him, but then he slipped his arm out from around hers. And then the waterworks really began. "Look, I did like him, I thought he was one of those shy but sweet sensitive types!" said Yu, looking desperately at Tim. "I only found out what a loser he was later, but I swear Tim, I never knew he was a freak—Lapis, what are you laughing about?!"

"So you're not the perfect girl you pretend to be." said Lapis. "That's good to know. I always hated that about you."

"You bitch!" Yu shouted, "Well, you're not so great either! Your mom's a drunk with an eating disorder! I know your dad covers it all up for his career! Maybe you are too, all the champagne you were drinking in there!"

Lapis gasped, suddenly on the verge of tears. "Well, did you know your super scarlet boyfriend over there got Marvin's disease last month?" she said. Tim's eyes went wide with horror, a look Toby had never seen on him before. "Yeah, that's right, bitch." said Lapis. "I overheard him

shouting at Taylor Astoria behind the football field. Turns out he got it from her. Yeah, your boy likes to fuck trash on the side!"

Yu turned to Tim and began hitting him in the chest. She was still crying, but now she was full of anger. "You bastard!" she shouted. "You could've exposed me! You know how much trouble I'd be in if my parents found out I got Marvin's from you!"

Toby's panic began to rise. He'd just meant them to open up to each other, show they all had secrets! He didn't want anyone getting hurt! He had to get them back on track now.

"You see, everyone has things they don't want others to know!" he shouted, and the attention was on him again. "But you know what, there's nothing wrong with that—"

With a roar of anger, Tim flew at him with his fist, slamming it straight into Toby's cheek and sending him to the ground. Toby stared up at him in horror, barely aware of his throbbing cheek. "Tim!" he said. "Why—?"

"This is your fault!" shouted Tim. "You and your stupid little sex toy!" He gestured at Ariel, who hadn't moved or spoken once since the others had come out of the club. "Now I'm going to make sure you can't fuck her ever again!"

"Tim, no!" Toby shouted as Tim ran at Ariel. It had all gone wrong. He'd been trying to bring them closer by making them reveal secrets about themselves they didn't want others to know. It always led to everyone getting closer when it happened on TV! He hadn't expected everyone's secrets to be so dark! Now Tim was on the warpath, Yu and Lapis were cheering him on, and Garth, Alex and Raphael were just watching, not encouraging but not trying to stop it either. "It's gone wrong!" Toby thought, anguished. "It's all gone so wrong!"

Toby scrambled to his feet and tried to stop Tim, but he was only pushed back against the wall. "You wait your turn." Tim growled, "I'll take care of you next. But first, you're going to watch me take this pile of junk down." Tim swung a fist into Ariel's stomach and then threw her at a dumpster. Toby cried "No!" as Ariel fell to the ground and then shakily got up, her dress stained and ripped. Tim was stomping towards her, ready for the round two.

"Defense mode initiated." said Ariel, suddenly aware of her surroundings again. As Tim swung his fist, Ariel grabbed it in midair. There was enough time for Tim to register shock that his fist had been caught before Ariel kicked his legs out from under him. As Tim fell with a cry, Garth rushed forward with a roar, his fists swinging wildly. Ariel only stepped to the side and let Garth run straight into a wall. As Garth fell, Tim stood up again, but before he could do anything, Ariel grabbed him by the front of his jacket and flipped him into headfirst into the dumpster he'd thrown her against a moment before.

Toby stared as Ariel surveyed the scene and then began walking towards him. Of course, her defense mode. He'd forgotten about it. Most androids and gynoids came standard with some form of non-lethal self-defense in case they were attacked. But was she still in defense mode? Was she going to hurt him?

Ariel stopped in front of him. When she spoke, it was in her original speaking patterns, all stressed-and-unstressed and without abbreviations. "Toby, backup and diagnostics have been completed." she said. "Some recently downloaded programs could not be saved. systems require maintenance, and defense mode was activated recently. A full report of damages will be prepared as soon as possible."

"Y-Yeah." said Toby, relieved. "Let's go home and do that."

"Hey, where do you think you're going?" Yu shouted. She and Lapis began to move towards them, but then suddenly Alex and Raphael stepped in front of them. At first they, and Toby, were surprised by this. But then Yu and Lapis became angry again. "Get out of the way." Yu growled.

"No." said Alex.

"Raphael, don't make me angry." Lapis warned.

"You already are." Raphael pointed out. He looked behind him and shouted to Toby, "Get out of here, now! Before you make things worse."

"But I—" Toby began.

"Just go." said Alex, and Toby saw a sad look on his face as he kept Yu from getting any closer to him. "You've caused enough trouble already. Get out of here!"

"But—!"

"Toby!" Alex shouted at him, his face sad and angry at the same time. "Just go."

Somehow Alex's expression was enough to get Toby moving again. Grabbing Ariel's hand, Toby ran from the alley with her and got his Hover from the valet. He drove home like a maniac, glancing at Ariel every now and then. To his horror, she was not looking at him or smiling, but staring blankly ahead of her. Every time he saw her like that he pushed his foot down on the accelerator, desperate to get home.

When they were finally home, Toby turned off the engine, jumped out of the car, and actually carried Ariel in, slamming the garage door behind him as he did. Letting her down, he let out a sigh of relief, "We're home." he said. Home. Where it was safe.

And then Toby was crying, He tried to wipe away the tears, but then he got whatever he'd landed on in the alleyway into his eyes and that made him cry harder. It didn't matter though. His life might as well be over. Soon news of what happened in the alleyway would spread to everyone at school, and then it would be reposted and texted and talked about over and over again until it fell into the hands of some reporter or gossip site, and then the whole world would know about it. He could already imagine the headlines: CELEBRITY'S AWKWARD TEEN SON HAS LOVE AFFAIR WITH GYNOID. He wondered how his parents would react to that and fell to the ground, sobbing.

Then there was a cool hand on his cheek. Toby looked and saw Ariel, smiling at him. "There, there." she said, still speaking strangely. "What is wrong, Toby? Is there anything I can do to be of service to you?"

Toby sniffed. "Not unless you can erase the past." he said. "My life's ruined. All my friends hate me, and soon the whole world will know why. I'm...I—" He couldn't look at her, so instead he looked at his shoes. "I was never meant for this world." he said. "It's just too cruel."

Ariel lifted his face up to look at him. Toby saw no hint of the malfunctioning girl he'd seen in the alleyway or the car. He just saw her, so angelic, so caring and forgiving. She'd never hurt him, never at all. "I know." she said. "I know. I am like that as well. I am made to look like someone from this world, but I am never really part of it. Even with the best programming, I can never truly be what my creators intend me to be."

Toby sniffed again. "We're alike like that, aren't we?" he said. "We just can't be like everyone else. Why is that, anyway? Why can't we just fit

in?"

Ariel shrugged. "I do not know." she said, hugging him. Toby hugged her back, bringing her close to him. He breathed her scent in, already feeling so much better.

"You know what?" he said suddenly. "Screw the world, Screw everybody in it. We just need each other to be happy. If the world doesn't like it, then that's its own problem and the world will have to deal with it. Right?"

"Okay then." said Ariel. They held each other a little while longer, Toby letting his sadness and fear drain out of him. All he needed was right here.

And then he had a thought. "Ronald!" Toby said. "Tell my mom I'd like to go with her to Morocco."

"Okay Dresden." said Ronald. "I will inform Jetta immediately."

To Ariel he said, "We'll go to Morocco together. I don't know how, but I'll get my mom to agree to it. I'm sure once she meets you she'll like you. And once we're gone from this place, nobody will ever get between us or put us down for being together. How does that sound?"

He didn't wait for an answer. He just kissed her. And then he was carrying her up the stairs to his bedroom, to their own private kingdom. He would check her systems and get some repairs done. And then he would be with her. It was just the two of them, it would always be just the two of them, and they would be happy together forever.

Upstairs, he laid her on his bed and grabbed his toolkit. Then he looked out into the hallway, turned off the lights, and closed the door.

END