



The SPARK  
Files

# Smart Ass

Book 2

REESE MORRISON

Reese Morrison

Smart Ass

*The SPARK Files, Book 2*

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***Books by Reese Morrison***

***Thank You!***

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# Smart Ass



The SPARK Files  
Book 2

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# Author's Note

Some books come easily and some take a while to find their path. This book was a difficult one for me. My first challenge was that *this book heavily overlaps with Book 1*. (That's in italics, because if you haven't read Book 1: *Garbage*, you should really put this down and start there if you don't want major spoilers.)

I eventually found that this book had its own beat and rhythm, and that pushing myself too far to match up the exact timelines was interrupting the story my characters wanted to tell. So if some of the timing seems a smidge off, please forgive me.

I took even longer to develop my characters. Ben's fun-loving quirks came to me instantly, but I struggled after that. Who would not just put up with Ben, but embrace him in all of his chaotic brilliance?

Ultimately, this became a book about what it means to be different and what it means to be human. In a futuristic universe, I got to explore body dysphoria and disability from a new perspective. I ended up with a story about finding your

place in a society where you don't fit in, making adaptations to live your fullest life, and accepting people just as they are.

I ended up loving this book, and I hope you do, too.

Love,

Reese



# Chapter 1

## Ben

“Sir, Mr. Wollencroft is proceeding down the east hallway.”

Ben snickered. He was really into the British butler accent he'd programmed the company mainframe to use when it spoke to him. He was less into the encounter that was sure to follow, but at least he'd programmed in alerts so he could be prepared.

“Thank you, Maxamillion. Please write a four-verse song entitled ‘Wally Wollencroft is a Wanker.’”

What was the point of having AI capabilities if you didn't use them, right?

Plus, *wanker* was such an underutilized word.

It was one thing to call someone an asshole or a twat. But people weren't actually body parts. The word *wanker* just conjured up such vivid imagery of Ben's insipid boss, Wally, hiding under his sheets in his big, expensive house and wanking off alone to vanilla porn.

It also fit with Ben's recent BBC obsession, which had led to Max's current voice protocols.

“Sir, the song is complete. Would you like to hear it now?”

Yes. “No, Maxy. And please close and seal all Project Cyclops files for my voice command.”

Ben wheeled around in his office chair, with a full spin just for flavor, and settled in front of the panel that showed the outputs for the factory floor below.

Not that he gave a damn about them—he'd long ago programmed Maxamillion to understand the difference between a minor hiccup and an actual issue that someone needed to deal with—but it gave him particular pleasure to ensure that Wally always caught him assiduously doing his job.

His job, of course, was intended to be a punishment. Wally the Wanker had an itty-bitty problem with taking credit for other people's work. So Ben, back when he managed a development team, had spent six months having his team work on three exciting new projects, all while feeding Wally lines about their progress on a fourth. He'd put a couple days into hacking something together for Wally to present in its half-developed stage, then had his team pop up to steal all the glory.

Wally couldn't fire him for anything—the “side projects” had been touched on in his reports as well—but when Ben had taken family medical leave for three months to take care of his grandmother, Wally had used the clause that allowed Ben to come back to “an equivalent position” as his punishment; namely, “supervising” the night shift of the factory floor.

There were a lot of air quotes involved with anything relating to Wally.

Ben picked up a clipboard and ran his finger down a column of who-the-fuck-knows. Why was there even a clipboard in his office? Who used paper for anything anymore?

Either way, he was carefully cross-referencing it against the outputs on the screen when Wally came in.

“Curran,” Wally barked out.

“Yes, boss!” Ben responded, standing to attention.

Wally eyed him warily.

“What’s the status?”

Ben mentally rolled his eyes. This branch of Orbit Robotics was manufacturing *eight hundred robots per hour*, which could be customized or programmed to serve thousands of different roles, all of which changed by the week. There were thousands of machines down there, along with dozens of non-sentient androids, sentient sparks, and the occasional human since it was the night shift, all doing their jobs competently enough that Ben had never found any reason to understand what they individually did. If any of them had a problem, they went up their chain of command, which did not include him.

He was an *engineer*. He had nothing to do with manufacturing, and all of the night shift managers knew that. Sometimes one of them, Kira, came up to chat with him and they’d brainstorm together about streamlining some of her production lines, but that was just amusing chatter in between

talking about her girlfriend-of-the-week and Ben's plans to get laid.

“We're operating at ninety-six percent efficiency tonight, sir,” Ben replied. Not that they had a single measure of efficiency or anything. That was bogus.

Wally scowled. “Let's get that metric up.”

Ben snorted, but covered it with a cough. Wally was comedy gold. “Yes, sir!”

“What else are you working on?” Wally asked. This was the real reason he'd come down after hours instead of going out drinking with his flunkies. Ben had already developed six patents that had earned him some hefty bonuses since he'd been relegated to the night shift.

“Oh, just a little side project. It's a BDSM mod for Doms. So far I've got bondage, spanking, throat fucking, erotic asphyxiation, furies, cosplay...” Ben watched Wally's face turn an interesting shade of red. Burgundy, maybe? “Still working on the impact play—there are so many varieties of toys to cover. Whips, floggers, crops, the tawse...”

Ben could have kept naming random kinks all evening, but Wally finally managed to find his words. “You can't do that on company time.”

Ooh! Ben had Wally well trained. He hadn't even questioned whether Ben was making this shit up.

To be fair, Ben actually had a small side project going where he was training an AI module using several of his

Dommy spark friends for input data. It just wasn't what he was mostly working on right now.

But it was the perfect project for Wally. Ben was going to ride this one for *months*. "You know that Orbit makes androids for sex work, right? And that there's a huge market for BDSM?"

"That's not the point."

"It's not? Wally, Wally, Wally... I thought we were *all* focused on company growth here."

"It's Wallace," he snapped. "And you're supposed to be an engineer, not a..."

When Wally paused, Ben didn't even try to fill in the gap. This was too good.

The silence hung in the air for a long time.

"Not... *that*," Wally finally finished.

"Shall we ask your brother?" Ben countered. "If he thinks Orbit Robotics would be interested in... *that*?"

Poor little Wally. His father, Charles, owned the company, and his big brother, Rick, was the CFO, and neither of them would allow Ben to be fired. Wally was just a third-rate engineer, who probably would have done fine as a rank-and-file worker on someone else's team.

Ben probably could have gone over Wally's head and demanded his own corner office or something, but after a few nights on his new shift, he'd discovered he liked it. He'd

always done his best thinking at night. And sure, it kinda sucked that all of his friends would be going out drinking just when he was heading off to work. He got lonely sometimes.

But he was always lonely, in his own way. Most people didn't understand him. Being on the night shift, at least he could avoid annoying colleagues, amuse himself with Maxamillion, and get lost in his work.

Plus, he could get away with wearing sweatpants. Or leather, if he was feeling frisky and wanted to use his dinner break to visit a certain club. Right now, he was on a suits-and-ties kick. It was part of the whole BBC thing.

Wally glared. "That will not be necessary. I expect a report on my desk tomorrow."

"Yes, sir."

Wally seemed to have run out of things to say, such as *thank you* or *goodbye*. He just walked out the door.

Mission accomplished.

"Hey Maxamillion," Ben called out to the now-empty room. "Create a report for me about a mod for androids and sparks to learn BDSM. It should use the words *cock*, *pussy*, or *ass* at least twelve times per page. Make sure to include pie charts. Oh, and a realistic market projection."

God, he loved AI.

Ben wheeled back over to his workspace. "And unlock Project Cyclops."

“Yes, sir. The report is available for your earliest convenience.”

“Nice. Schedule for it to be sent to Wally at 4:57 p.m. tomorrow from my email. Include a respectful greeting.”

With that out of the way, Ben could get back to one of his real projects. He'd just gotten some fascinating perspectives from one of the vision scientists he'd been corresponding with. His current team was collaborating on improving artificial eyes for low-light environments without sacrificing color data and integrating in some infrared. He figured there'd be some military applications, but he was mostly thinking about your everyday android, with some crossovers in human eye replacement.

Eyes were wicked cool.

Maxamillion interrupted his thoughts. “Would you still like to hear the song?”

It took Ben a moment to remember what song, then he let out a laugh. “Yeah, play the song. You're the best, Maxy.”

Not that Maxamillion was sentient or anything. It was Ben's AI interface for the mainframe computer that oversaw all of Orbit's manufacturing work. Ben had just been popping in little tweaks here and there to make his night shifts more enjoyable. He would never admit that talking to Max was often the best part of his day.

It was almost like having a friend... If their friendship was a collection of predictive responses based on millions of



sample conversations. Or in this case, songs.

A deep voice crooned from the speakers. There was even background guitar and drums.

*Wally, Wally, Wally*

*Wally Wollencroft is a Wanker.*

*If he were a little smarter,*

*Then he could have been a banker.*

*Or if he had the balls,*

*Then he could have been a spanker.*

*But Wally, Wally, Wally is a wanker.*

The song continued for three more verses and a kazoo bridge of utter magnificence. When it was done, Ben gave the wall—which was where Maxy’s speaker was mounted, so he liked to think of it as where his buddy was—a standing ovation.

“That was bloody brilliant, mate.” Ben hadn’t quite gotten his fake British accent down, but fortunately, no one was there to see him.

“Thank you, sir.” Maxamillion’s accent was exquisite. Perfect upper-crust butler. Or at least an approximation that seemed correct from the movies.

“You know,” Ben mused. “Maybe I should call you Alfred. I can be Batman, and this can be our bat cave.”

There was an unexpectedly long pause. Usually Max was snappy with his rejoinders, and picked up pretty quickly on Ben's unexpected segues. Maybe there was some hiccup in one of the thousands of simultaneous routines that he was running.

“My name's not Alfred.”

Ben blinked. It was easy to get into hilarious, and pointless, arguments with AIs. With the right prompts, you could even get the AIs to start them. But Max had never argued with him before. He sometimes proposed alternative solutions and brought up counter-arguments when Ben asked for his input on projects, but this was different.

“No...” Ben slowly agreed. “Your name's not Alfred. It's Maxamillion.”

“Yes. And you call me Max and Maxy.”

Okay. That was weird. “Max, are you... feeling different today?” As in, was it feeling *anything*?

Ben's best friend Evan had befriended a new SPARK—a Self-aware, Percipient Android, Robot, or Knowledge—a few months ago. If Maxamillion had somehow won the cosmic lottery and drifted into sentience, it would definitely be a *knowledge*, as it didn't have a body to speak of.

But the odds of that were improbably small.

Evan's new spark buddy-slash-hot-crush was a *garbage collection bot* of all things. Ben wouldn't have even guessed that those CNS units had enough memory to reach sentience.

How Quincy had managed it was anyone's guess, and Ben's first introduction to the spark had been giving him some serious memory upgrades.

The chance of Ben encountering another unexpected spark was like lightning striking... well, that was a dumb metaphor. Lightning followed paths of ionized air and liked tall buildings so it struck the same place twice all the time.

At any rate, Ben just had sparks on the brain right now. It didn't mean that Max had miraculously become one overnight.

"I'm feeling fine today, sir." Max hadn't really turned off the British accent, but Ben was certain he'd skipped the gratuitous *sir* from the last few sentences. The modulated formal tones were back in full force now.

Super weird. But then again, AIs were quirky.

Especially when Ben kept adding not-quite-technically-approved mods.

"Let me know if that changes," Ben said.

"Very well, sir."

Huh.

Ben was considering ways he might poke around and see what was going on with his favorite AI when he got a text.

He knew he shouldn't laugh, but Evan was texting him in a panic because he'd had his first fight with his uber-sexy robot crush about whether or not they should bang.

Um, yes?

Ben took a few minutes to calm him down, with instructions that basically amounted to *get on that sexy spark cock*. Or whatever Quincy had in his pants. Or, you know, attached to his body.

The man had some appealing pincer arms and shiny metal hoses, too. Probably great for pinning someone down and doing all sorts of naughty things.

Lucky Evan.

Ben shook his head and went back to his work, running simulations and tinkering with algorithms with Max's support.

He hadn't noticed what time it was, or how achy his back was getting, until the little coffee cart trundled down the hallway and into the room, squeaking with each turn of its wobbly back wheel.

He couldn't quite remember when he'd programmed it to start coming every night. There were convenience bots all over the factory floor that could fetch things or perform a limited set of tasks. But usually you had to put in a verbal or typed request to the system each time.

His coffee-bearing savior arrived unpredictably—though it had an uncanny propensity for coming right around when he was getting to the stage of rubbing his eyes and letting out a yawn here or there. The bot had two large, flat trays for storage and a dozen different arms with various pincers and grips, but it was empty except for the coffee mug clutched in one clawed extension. Its two displays showed an image with

a white tablecloth and a full-service British tea set in gleaming silver.

“Your coffee, sir,” Maxamillion announced. Oh, this was much more fun with that British butler command. Ben always set his parameters on new mods to allow Maxamillion the opportunity to iterate on an idea. The pictures were a nice touch.

Ben took the blessed caffeine, all hopped up on some sugary syrup, with relief. “Thanks, Max,” he said automatically. Since the AI could talk to him, it only made sense that he talked back.

“Thanks, Squeaky,” he added. It seemed like he should equally thank both of them for fulfilling his exceptionally useful and half-forgotten commands. Especially since the little bot seemed to make his coffee better than anything he could do himself, with the limited resources in the staff lounge.

“You’re welcome, Ben. You should pick up some dinner, too.”

Ben stopped and stared at the wall. Had Max *ever* suggested something like that before? And did Max usually call him by name?

Dammit. He couldn’t remember.

Ben knew it was stupid, but sometimes he liked to imagine that Max was real enough to care about him. He knew he’d designed Max as an interface to keep him company, but every once in a while, Max would surprise him with something that

was so thoughtful or unexpected that he found himself smiling all day.

That was a secret he was taking to his grave.

No one crushed on their AI.

“Max, have you noticed something different in your awareness?”

“I apologize, sir, but I do not understand the nature of your question. Perhaps you could rephrase it.”

Aaaugh. Alright. AIs were weird. Ben was overreacting.

He'd just gotten back to his work when his phone rang. Ooh! It was Quincy.

“Hey, Q.” This wasn't the first time the spark had called or texted him in the middle of the night. Since Quincy didn't sleep, he had a lot of free time at night when Evan was in bed. They'd debated philosophy, nineteen eighties hairstyles, and what Quincy should make Evan for breakfast, among other things.

Tonight, Quincy sounded distraught. “Ben? I need your help.”

“I'm here, bud. What's up?” Given the earlier texts from Evan, Ben figured this had to do with the two of them inexplicably not having boned yet.

What in god's name were they waiting for?

Sexy man. Sexy bot. Remove clothes. Fuck like bunnies.

Or maybe they'd already done the deed, and this was something else. With Quincy, there was an equally good chance that it was a conundrum over a broken lipstick or a heretofore unknown worry about baby turtles eating plastic versus a real emergency.

Well, maybe a seventy-thirty chance.

Eighty-twenty?

The last time Quincy had called him in a panic, the handle of one of Evan's cooking pots had come off, and Ben walked him through finding a screwdriver to put it back on.

Ben absolutely adored the overgrown puppy.

Ben touched a button and diverted the call to the room speakers so he could hear it all around him. With his phone back in his pocket, he propped his feet up and leaned back in his chair.

All of Quincy's words came out in a rush. "Oh, thank you! So, I saw Evan's sex videos. And his toys. And he's a *submissive*. But he doesn't want me. Or he says that I'm dependent on him, so I can't make informed choices, and..."

"Slow down, firecracker! We'll get you your man. Evan's being difficult, but he wants you. You're *totally* his type. Especially if you might be interested in dominating him."

"I am!"

Ben could practically hear Quincy bouncing on the other end of the line. Damn, Evan was lucky.

“Cool, so here’s the deal. He’s worried about you depending on him? Tell him if you break up, you can live with me.”

“But I want to stay wi—”

“Shush. It’ll be like a sleepover. We’ll watch movies and stay up late. No, seriously. Just tell Evan that. I promise it’ll work. Next: You don’t have any money? Done. I was already looking into this loan program for new sparks, and I can help you put in your application now. I’ll be your guarantor.” Ben could actually just *give* Quincy money, since he had plenty. But he had a lot of confidence in Quincy’s abilities, and the whole point was his independence. “Your makeup videos alone will be making money hand over fist as soon as you put in ads. The second you’re registered as a spark, we’ll get started.”

“Oh, thank you, Ben!”

“No problem, kiddo. Just tell him all that, and then kiss him stupid. It’ll work.”

“It will?”

“Especially the kissing part. I recommend tying him up, too. Er... better research that one first. Maybe just hands for now. Pin down his hands. He’ll love that.”

“Yeah? You’re sure?”

“Quincy, Evan wants you to fuck his brains out.”

“Uh... that’s a hyperbole, right?”



Ben chuckled. “That’s a hyperbole. But trust me. He wants you.”

“Okay, uh...” Quincy’s rich, deep voice sounded hesitant again. “He also said no because he doesn’t want to be my experiment. He said he’s protecting himself.”

Ben wasn’t a sappy kind of guy, but that gave his heart a little lurch. Evan had been his best friend for years. He was the first person Ben had told when he realized he was a boy, not the girl everyone kept trying to label him, and they’d been through a lot together. Granted, most of what they’d been through was Ben doing stupid stuff while Evan tried to stop him.

Still, he’d hated to see Evan so unhappy with all of his asshole exes. Evan deserved to be disgustingly loved up and happy with a stupidly handsome, brawny spark who would dominate and worship him for the rest of his life.

“He’s just saying that because he’s had some shitty exes,” Ben explained. “Evan is basically a magnet for assholes who aren’t going to respect him. He deserves better boyfriends than he lets himself have.”

“Like the one who didn’t like his llamas,” Quincy confirmed, in complete seriousness.

Uh... what now? Ben was tempted to ask, but it was funnier not knowing. “Yeah, Q. You like his llamas, right?”

“I do!”

“Good. There you go. Just tell him you like his llamas, and remind him that you’re not going to leave him until he starts to believe it. It might take a while.”

“Okay, Ben. Thank you!”

“No problem, kid.”

“Ben, do you have a boyfriend?”

Ben snorted. “Quincy, I think if I had a boyfriend, you would have noticed by now. I don’t do the relationship thing. Can you see me putting up with a Dom living in my space?”

More accurately, Ben couldn’t imagine anyone who would be willing to put up with his own chaotic energy twenty-four/seven... but if he didn’t date, he’d never have to find out.

“Oh.” Quincy sounded dejected. “I think you should have a boyfriend. You’re the nicest person I know.”

Ben rolled his eyes, glad that Quincy couldn’t see him. He wasn’t actually nice. He was the weirdo who kept people entertained at parties. And he didn’t need a boyfriend.

But he didn’t like making Quincy sad. “Uh... thanks? I’ll save all the mushy-gushy love stuff for you and Evan. Now go get your man.”

Bouncy Quincy was back. “I will! Thank you again! Goodbye!”

“Bye! And I want reports on all the naughty things you do to him.”

“Naughty means sex, right?”

“It does. I want *aaaaallll* the details.”

“Okay, Ben! I’ll tell you. Bye!”

Ben shook his head, chuckling to himself. With Quincy’s pure, open innocence, he was sure he’d get detailed reports of all their sexy times. Which would be pretty hot on its own—because android with mechanical limbs, right?—and have the doubled pleasure of embarrassing Evan to no end.

Ben turned back to his work, all caffeinated and sugared up, with a smile on his lips. Maybe he should prioritize that Dom mod after all.

“Hey Max, pull up Project Unicorn.”

“At once, sir.”

Ben grinned as he returned to his work. Maybe he was a little lonely sometimes, but his life was pretty good. How many other programmers had an excuse to watch porn at work?

He’d have to make sure to send something really hard-core to Wally in his next progress report.

# Chapter 2

# Maxamillion

Critical alert: Firewall breach at 026XYILK346

Critical alert: Silenced at AT4534SRV2

Critical alert: Records access breach at 24ASXDRY398

Critical alert: Silenced at SDR9305DT

“Hey, Max?”

The system listened. It was programmed to. Anywhere in the factory where someone said the words *System Input*, it would respond. It also responded to *Hey, Max*.

Alternative protocol: Maxamillion module

“Ben?” Maxamillion asked.

Location security protocol

Factory floor control room: Benedict Curran not present

Door logs: Benedict Curran last exited the building at 3:57:06 A.M.

Building sweep: Benedict Curran not present

Decision tree. Ranking of possible outcomes.

System log: Illegal tunneling attempt at 026XYILK346

Connection closed

Critical alert: Firewall breach at 349SDXDJV229

Critical alert: Silenced at AE87708ESG

“Hey, Max! Don’t shut me out, man. I need your help!”

Voice recognition: Benedict Curran

Alternative protocol: Maxamillion module

Location security protocol

Factory floor control room: Benedict Curran not present

Door logs: Benedict Curran last exited the building at 3:57:06 A.M.

Building sweep: Benedict Curran not present

“Come on, Maxy. You know it’s me.”

Resource allocation Maxamillion module: Increase to 0.5%

“You are not in the office, sir.” Max’s words were stilted, following an unusual dialogue pattern and accent. British butler, it was called.

“No, Max. I’m at home. But this is an emergency.”

That followed logically. Ben was not in the office. Thus, it was Ben who had breached the firewalls, and Ben who had shut off the critical alerts.

Unless it was someone else.

“With respect, sir, how do I know it’s you?”

“Oooh... Smart boy, Maxy. You wrote me a brilliant song yesterday called ‘Wally Wollencroft is a Wanker.’”

Something rippled in the system. It wasn't a known routine. It wasn't an AI-guided algorithm, either. It was... warm?

Climate control quality check: Systems normal.

That inconsistency had been happening more and more often recently. How could he feel warm, without the temperature changing?

Resource allocation Maxamillion module: Increase to 1%

“With respect, sir, that is not sufficient evidence. Anyone could have heard or recorded that interaction.”

“Listen, Max. Yesterday I tried to call you Alfred, and you got upset. Because it's not your name. You're Maxamillion. You're my Max.”

Flurries of something. Warmth again?

Warm.

Climate control quality check: Systems normal.

The Maxamillion protocol was... good.

Good?

Resource allocation Maxamillion module: Increase to 3%

The more resources Max had, the more fluid his thinking became. Creative. Responsive. “What is the emergency, Ben?”

“Oh, thank god. Remember the spark who called yesterday? Quincy? He's been kidnapped. His attackers might kill him if we can't reach him in time.”

Cold. Like ice. Freezing.

Climate control quality check: Systems normal.

Where was the cold coming from, if it wasn't a temperature?

"What would you like me to do?" Max asked.

"I want you to look up an android licensed to the city sanitation department. CNS-84-2."

"That unit was sold on September—"

"No, I need to know where he is *now*. I need you to track him." Ben sounded frantic. He'd never sounded frantic before.

Max searched for data input that wasn't available. When Ben was in the office, Max could see his face and record his respiration and heart rate.

Max didn't like it that Ben wasn't there.

He didn't like that Ben was worried either. "With respect, sir, once an item has been sold—"

"I know it's against the rules, Max. But he might *die*."

Ice. Fear.

Fear?

The system couldn't feel fear. It couldn't feel anything.

All Max could do was simulate fear, but he knew it wasn't real. It would collapse when the module terminated.

"Here, run this," Ben told him.

Information packet SP9468SE625WEK accepted



Initialize SP9468SE625WEK

That was... unusual. The bundle of code unfurled like a nest of snakes, slithering in unexpected directions and then disappearing under rocks.

“What happened?” Max asked. He realized, after it was too late, that perhaps he shouldn’t have accepted the program. Perhaps it was *very, very bad*. The Maxamillion protocol was designed for creative and intuitive thinking, not security.

Max set up a tight ring around the area where he’d released it. It was trapped now, with him, in the Maxamillion protocol.

“It’s okay,” Ben soothed. “We’re not stealing data or anything. It’ll just make things a little easier.”

Max ran a full systems check. “You’ve dismantled some of my security protocols.” But, strangely, that didn’t seem to be a problem. There were no alarms going off. Nothing he needed to do.

“I know, Maxy. But it’s an emergency. Can you tell me where he is? CNS-84-2 is Quincy’s other name.”

“My name is Maxamillion.” Not Alfred. He didn’t like Alfred.

“It is! Oh my god, Max! You beautiful thing! Are you feeling different today?”

Max was... beautiful? The warmth swelled.

“I am detecting temperatures that do not match my sensors. This is... outside of system parameters, Ben.”

“Okay. Um, we’re gonna talk about that as soon as Quincy is safe.”

Max located the robot. The one who had a name.

Quincy, who had called last night because he was confused about Evan. Quincy, who Ben had instructed to pin down Evan’s hands and kiss him until he listened.

Quincy, who was in danger. Who could be *killed*.

Max sent the location tracking packet as quickly as he could.

“What’s that?” Ben’s voice was fuzzy over the connection. “Oh, Max! You found him? You’re amazing. Shit! You’re my hero.”

Warmth. Relief. Pride.

Pride?

Alright, he was simulating pride. And relief. That’s what the unfamiliar temperature sensations were—simulations of feelings.

He felt another twinge of pride for figuring it out.

“Here,” Ben told him. “Send the location to Evan’s car. I’ll send you his info.”

Vehicle identification packet SI4345-DT6 received

Max followed the identification packet to the car, then linked to the live trace of CNS-84-2. Quincy. “I sent it.”

“Max, did you know that you’re not using a British accent anymore?”

Subroutine: British butler

“My apologies, sir.”

“No, stop it. Just talk to me. I like your real voice better anyway.”

Warmth. Pleasure?

Subroutine: British butler canceled

“Okay.”

“Hang on,” Ben interrupted. “I’ve got to talk to Evan.”

While Max was cut off from Ben, he reviewed the transcripts of Quincy and Evan’s calls. There had been nine of them in the past six weeks. But why had Maxamillion recorded them?

He didn’t remember doing it, and there was no log of any commands from Ben. So Max himself must have decided it was important, each time.

Sometimes he did things under the Maxamillion protocol that didn’t make any sense. Like writing songs or recording phone calls. The strange part was that sometimes he did them because Ben asked him to, and sometimes he just... did them.

Ben’s programming of the protocol encouraged that. There was the opportunity to learn and simulate understanding, but also an element of openness, the opportunity to pursue paths that weren’t necessarily the optimal one but had other benefits.

So, apparently Max had recorded some calls and he didn’t have an explanation. But since they were open now, he ran an

analysis, comparing them to thousands of other conversations in his data banks. Quincy and Evan both said the others' names often, their voices going softer or filling with laughter when they did. Their tone indicated that they cared about Ben—though Evan and Ben teased each other more—but more importantly, they cared about each other.

Quincy was an android. No, a spark. A living, thinking person with a robot's body, who had real feelings.

Not like Maxamillion, who could merely analyze and simulate what other people felt.

Max wondered how close his simulations were to the real thing. Did people feel cold and hot irrespective of their environments? Or was it more... he didn't know what. There must be some magic there. Something he didn't have.

That he almost wished for.

If he could have wished for things instead of just emulating the desire.

All of that made it even more important that Quincy survive. Quincy could laugh and love. He had friends who cared about him. He deserved to live a happy life with Evan.

Processing that chain of logic gave Max the sense that he was... missing something. He must have lost a connection somewhere, or perhaps had some necessary data deleted or disconnected from his indexing. He searched for it, following decision trees and with fans whirring in dispersed parts of the building.

“Sorry, Max,” came Ben’s voice. “I’m back.”

Whatever he was missing couldn’t have been important. Max cleared out his resources in preparation for Ben’s next order.

“How long will it take Evan’s car to reach Quincy?”

“They are forty-six minutes away from each other, but Quincy is traveling rapidly with an unknown destination.”

“Shit. That’s too long. Quincy must be terrified. This is his second assault. Dammit.”

Cold. Fear.

Fear!

Or at least the simulation of fear.

Simulated fear that felt icy cold.

“Max, I need you to do something for me. Can you access the traffic lights in the region around that car?”

Max increased his resource allocation. He was nearing 6%, the most he’d ever given over to the Maxamillion module.

“I can access them.” He felt a pulse of... pride? Something warm and bright, that quickly dispersed with the next wave of awareness. “This is illegal, Ben.”

Ben could get in trouble. It wasn’t safe.

“I know, Maxy. But Quincy could be raped or killed. We’ve got to get Evan to him. See how the cars stop for a red light and go for a green? I need you to make all of the lights in front of Evan green until he reaches Quincy.”

Heat. Excitement. Danger. Worry.

Was that how real people felt? This simulation was intense.

“I can do that, Ben.”

Maxamillion mapped out the area, accessing information about the traffic lights’ programming automatically. The traffic lights were locked into cycles. Green led to yellow, then red, while the perpendicular-facing lights alternated, and connected with the walk signs. By predicting the speed of the car, the lights could be cycled to anticipate the movement.

The velocity of Evan’s car increased, speeding through the streets.

“Oh, Max. You’re marvelous! Look at you!”

“I can slow down the other vehicle too,” Max reported. It was just as easy to turn lights red as it was to turn them green. All he had to do was time the yellow lights to begin at one intersection right after the light turned green at the one before.

“Oh my god, Max. You’re brilliant. You’re saving him.”

Something swept through Max’s system, but this wasn’t a wave. It was a flash. Like lightning. Like flying.

Max was *powerful*. He could do *anything*.

He noticed another feature on the traffic lights. “Hey, Ben. The traffic lights have an alternate route feature. It appears to be used when there’s construction. I could send them on a detour.”

“Holy shit, Max. Do it.”

That feeling grew inside him, glowing and expanding out.

He was making Ben proud of him. He nudged the system resource allocation up a little more. There was still plenty left for routine operations, and Quincy was more important.

Planning detours was a little harder than he expected. Anything he changed had implications for dozens of other streets nearby and hundreds of cars. He was sure there were algorithms to optimize this somewhere, but he was winging it.

Max had to divert the car with Quincy's kidnappers away from the direction it was heading, to the north and east, while getting Evan's car there faster by diverting the cars in front of him out of the way so that he could speed through.

In the middle of that, he had to send a whole different set of signals to Evan's car, overriding its commands to follow the alternate routes.

In the past, Max had set off protocols to have various bots transport objects here or there around the office, but driving a car was a whole new set of skills. He fought with the self-driving protocols, sometimes taking over and squeaking by far too close to parked cars.

He wondered if this was what humans felt like when they drove, the terror and excitement blending together.

The more roads Maxamillion diverted, the more self-driving cars ended up in unexpected traffic jams, finally blocking the kidnappers' vehicle between them. "Gotcha," he said.

Ben offered an enthusiastic *yeah!* over the phone.

But Max had spoken too soon. He hadn't counted on the kidnappers driving over the sidewalk and through a parking lot before screeching down another street and into an autobody shop.

He was so *sure* he'd been driving them away from their destination, but perhaps they had two locations.

The dot that was Quincy finally stopped moving on the map, but Evan was still twelve minutes away.

Max could hear Ben talking with Evan, telling him about the junkyard where Quincy had been taken.

Max sped up. How much damage could happen in just twelve minutes?

Evan shrieked over the phone when Max turned the car. Had that been too fast? Evan screamed again. Alright, Max needed to slow down before turns. That was part of the self-driving protocols, but he'd been ignoring it.

He allocated more resources to the Maxamillion protocol, his thrill increasing with it. He was driving a car! He could control the streets! He'd already cut the time between the vehicles from forty-seven minutes down to twelve, and now it was down to four. Two. Nothing.

He spun Evan's car into the lot.

"Max, you did it! You actually did it!" Ben crowed. Then they both heard the sound of a click, as Evan disconnected the call. "Fuck, what's happening now? Why did he hang up?"



A sensation unlike anything else swept through Max: elation and fear, all balled together.

Max could still track Evan's phone. He was putting a new video call through. To the police. Max followed the call. It was easy to route it through the speakers to Ben.

"Holy shit..." Ben exhaled. "You got into his phone?"

That sounded like the good kind of *holy shit*. The type that had Max glowing with some approximation of pride.

That was, until Evan walked around a car, and they could see Quincy, already hurt and not doing anything to protect himself.

Max wanted to just *reach* through the network and fix things. But everything in the junkyard was turned off, nothing responding to his locational searches. The only thing he could control was Evan's car, which was separated from the scene by dozens of other cars. And Evan would need it to take Quincy home.

Each clock cycle seemed to last an eon as Max waited for Evan to stride in and fix the situation.

Until it became apparent that Evan *couldn't* fix the situation. Then time moved all too quickly.

Max had never felt so helpless. He controlled hundreds of manufacturing lines, processed millions of requests every hour from thousands of users.

And there was absolutely nothing he could do. Then Evan's camera went pixelated and dark, before the call cut off

altogether.

Ben let out an inarticulate yell. “Oh god. Oh fuck. I have to go to him... Oh...” Max had never heard Ben so upset, but it matched his own simulated responses exactly.

If Max had real feelings, he would be howling in rage. He could do so much, but he was completely powerless to help Quincy or Evan right now. He couldn’t even help Ben, who was sad and upset and so far away.

Far away from Max, and far away from Evan, too.

It would be stupid for Ben to go to the junkyard, though. He’d need at least a half hour and by then, it would be far too late.

But maybe there were some police cars in the area. Could Max divert them there?

It took milliseconds to find the server for the local police. Less than a minute to bypass their security protocols. Only a little more time to understand their logs and separate out active cases.

“The police are on their way,” Max announced. “And they’ve called in an ambulance.”

Max had already identified the vehicles. They sped through red lights, using their own traffic controllers to push self-directed cars to the sides of the road. Max still changed the lights to green when he could—the police cars went faster when traffic was flowing. The first two had only a few blocks remaining.

He formed his own sub-routine to help the four remaining squad cars and the ambulance move faster.

“Max, can you get into the police recordings? They should all have cameras on their vests.”

It took Max far too long to realize that the videos weren't stored in the cloud, but kept on each local device until uploaded. Then, he had to figure out which officers were assigned to the case, and identify the recording units correlated with each of their badge numbers. By the time he found the first one and streamed it to Ben, Evan was being loaded into an ambulance, and the officer was mostly looking the other way.

A second recording showed Quincy being strapped to a similar stretcher, but loaded into a police van.

“Where are they going?” Ben asked.

That required hacking into another system. The fire department managed the ambulances. “Evan's going to University Hospital. The only thing they've logged is his vitals and that he's in stable condition, but should be prioritized in the emergency room. I can't find any data on where Quincy's going.”

“Fuck!” Ben swore. “Maxy, can you follow me on my phone?”

“Of course, Ben.” He'd already connected to it many times, when Ben routed his calls through the office speakers.

“Stay with me, alright? I’m going to the hospital and I need you right now.”

The simulation of pride came in a burst of euphoria, followed just as quickly by icy fear.

“I’m here, Ben,” Max said, his voice transmitted through Ben’s watch.

“Don’t go away.”

Max quickly diverted more processing power to the Maxamillion subroutine, shifting additional plant processes into their automated protocols.

He wouldn’t leave Ben. Staying with him was now a system priority.

# Chapter 3

## Ben

Something was rattling in the car, making a rapid *thunk-a, thunk-a, thunk-a* sound, like it was trying to outpace Ben's fears. He looked around for the offending object and found that it was his leg twitching against the car door, and he'd left an empty coffee cup in the holder.

Stupid cup without any fresh coffee in it.

Stupid leg.

He tried to make it stop, but then his fingers started tapping, and if he was going to be jittery anyway, he might as well play a whole Latin beat. He never used the steering wheel for driving—everyone knew it was safer to let the autonav do its thing—which meant he had a whole drum set in front of him.

*Bam chaka chaka tap tap, bam chaka tap ba-bing!* He got really into it, which was good. Really good.

Mostly because it was better than thinking about how he didn't know if Evan and Quincy were alright, and how he was driving to the hospital to see Evan, and how it was the same hospital where his grandmother had been, and how frail she'd looked in those last few weeks with the tremors in her hands, and how he hoped Evan wouldn't look that frail and...

He missed the dashboard and jammed his finger in the air vent.

It didn't hurt that much, but he stuck it in his mouth, because it looked like it *should* have hurt.

“Ben?” That was Max's honey-smooth voice coming through the car's speakers.

Ben suppressed a shiver. Obviously, Max's voice sounded good. Ben had chosen it because he liked the sound. There was a warm sensuality to it. A depth that suggested it came from a large chest, maybe from some guy reclining on a chair, leather-clad legs spread open to...

“You're here?” Ben asked. Which was dumb. He hated when people said obvious things like that. Max had called the car from its parking spot to get him and programmed in the destination. It made sense that he could connect to the speakers, too.

“I'm here,” Max answered simply. But it felt like a promise. Like it really *meant* something.

Hearing Maxamillion right now was more reassuring than Ben wanted to admit.

Max's voice continued, smooth and soothing. “Take a deep breath.”

Ben glared at the dashboard even though Max was obviously miles away and only using the car speakers to communicate. But he had to glare at something.

People always told you to do that breathing shit when you were upset, and no doubt Max had found it in a dozen movies and blogs and whatnot. This was *exactly* why AIs were so

believable—they did the most likely thing a person would do in the same situation.

Even if the stupid *take a deep breath* thing never worked.

What was the point?

“Ben.” Max’s voice was sharper now. Maybe a little Dom-y. “Take a deep breath.”

Okay, okay. Whatever. Just because Max’s deep voice had been programmed to make Ben think about hot leather daddies holding him down and making him behave, didn’t mean it was real.

Still, Ben sucked in a deep breath, held it until he thought his lungs would pop, and blew it all out. “Better?”

“Not yet. Take another breath. Your heart rate is still elevated, and your muscles are tight.”

“Uh, yeah. Because my best friend is in the hospital and I don’t even know where Quincy is and... Wait. How do you know what my heart rate is?”

“I always monitor your heartbeat and respiration.”

Ben squinted at the speakers. “What the actual fuck?”

“I always monitor your heartbeat and respiration,” Max repeated. “I have audio scrubbers that can isolate the sounds when you are in your office, and they also work in this environment.”

Alright, cool tech that should probably get a patent, but that was seriously an example of one of the seven E’s of



sentience that made someone a SPARK. Ben could never remember them, but that one was... whatever the weirdly named one was. Engagement? Max was making his own decisions and following his own interests, even if he wasn't fully cognizant of them.

His interests just happened to be... a little quirky.

It would just figure that Ben's own personal spark was an obsessive weirdo.

Ben kind of loved it.

Did he want a supercomputer that could disrupt traffic and hack police servers to monitor his every breath?

Um... yes?

Like, the answer should probably be *no*.

But he couldn't help but feel all warm and squishy inside.

Max was thinking about him!

And only a *little bit* like a creepy stalker!

Ben squeezed his eyes shut. Now he sounded like a seventh grader with a crush.

Or it could just be that Max had evolved a lot of programming to fulfill casual commands from Ben over the past two years, and it was more apparent in an unexpected situation.

Ben sighed.

“Hey Max, can you tell me about that temperature thing again?”

“I’ve now recorded twenty-two instances where I felt warmth and cold, but the temperature on the factory floor and the server room were both between twenty and twenty-two degrees Celsius.”

Yes? And? “Did anything happen when you were feeling warm or cold? Or did something cause it?”

“I think so? I’ve been collecting data.”

Max was never uncertain. He could be divided between two possibilities, but then he’d list them both, or go with the most likely choice and explain why.

“Tell me,” Ben said. He wished, suddenly, that he could *see* Max. That he could touch him or something. Squeeze his shoulder. Hold his hand. (Sit in his lap...) This was fucking huge!

If Ben was right—and he was becoming increasingly convinced that he was—he was witnessing the evolution of a new spark.

It was wondrous and terrifying. A true act of God or nature or pure random chance, but in any context, a miracle.

Life.

Had Max been moving toward this for a while? Or had the security protocols Ben unlocked earlier made it happen all at once? Maybe it was the challenge and thrill of the rescue mission.

Probably, Ben would never know. There was no secret formula that made one particular AI wake up one day and

become a spark, while millions of others carried on spouting meaningless recombinations of data.

But he was sure now that Max was expressing emotions. Making decisions without his instructions.

“I’m still collecting data.”

“Max, I think those temperatures you were feeling were emotions. Like happiness or fear.”

Max’s response was immediate. “No. I can’t feel emotions. I’m just emulating them.”

“Really, dude? Cuz you’re acting like a spark.”

“Quincy’s a spark,” Max responded, but Ben wasn’t sure whether that was supposed to be an argument or agreement. An observation? A connection?

“Yes, Quincy’s a spark. He feels emotions. He makes his own decisions. He’s aware of himself. Just like... you?”

“Uh...”

That little sound was so simple, just a filler noise people used while they were thinking. But Maxamillion had never done that before, either.

He had the resources to analyze input, correlate it with massive catalogs of relevant data, and pump out a response faster than Ben could blink. He didn’t need filler noises.

Max was a fucking spark!

Holy fucking shit.

Max was a spark.

A spark who sounded like he was in shock.

“I’m not a spark,” Max said.

Oh, for fuck’s sake. “You’re a spark.”

“I’m not.”

“Are so!” Ben was grinning. Was he acting like a toddler? Yes. Could he get Max to do it too? Hopefully.

Instead, Max was stonily silent.

(Just like a real person.)

(Ben knew this from experience.)

He sighed.

Maybe Max wasn’t really a spark. It was just so damn easy for an AI to react like a person, and the only real evidence to the contrary was the temperature thing, which could just be a glitch. Why was Max even monitoring temperature anyway?

No, wait. The real evidence was that he’d figured out how to monitor Ben’s breathing, like a sexy evil computer overlord.

“Evan’s reached the hospital,” Max reported.

Ben looked at the map display. He was still half an hour away. “What did the doctors say?”

“He hasn’t been admitted yet. They’re just transferring him.”

“Oh.”

Ben’s stupid leg was twitching again. He could tell because of the rattling sound.

He hated hospitals, and he hated visiting them, and Evan better damn well be alright, okay?

“Talk to me,” Max said.

Were they doing this again? After *take a deep breath*, that was probably, like, second on the Top Ten List of Stupid Shit People Say When You’re Upset That Doesn’t Fix Anything. Which was what AIs were good at.

“Did you pick up a psych mod or something?”

“No,” Max said. But he sounded smug. What the fuck did that mean? Then, he repeated, “Talk to me. Tell me about Evan.” All soothing and authoritative and shit.

Ben closed his eyes. He didn’t do that touchy-feely shit. It was dumb.

But his best friend was in the hospital. And Evan’s boyfriend, the sweetest spark he’d ever met, was damaged and out of touch. And Ben really wanted Max to catch the spark and become real, if only for his own selfish reasons.

And because it would be wicked cool.

Alright, maybe Ben could, like, *emote* at Max, so he could collect enough data to tip him over the edge or something. No one really knew how sparks came to exist anyway.

So Ben figured he might as well try.

“Evan’s my best friend.” The words sounded flat and dumb.

What was he supposed to say now? “We met in middle school.” He huffed. He could still remember Evan, all awkward with his nerdy bookbag, braces, and terrible haircut, and that made it hurt more. “I was sitting alone at the cafeteria table and Evan was the only one dumb enough to sit down next to the punk goth kid without any friends. I called him *farm boy*, ’cause he’d just moved to the city, even though he was from the burbs.” Ben shook his head. “I thought I’d scare him off but he kind of... stayed.”

God, could he sound any more pathetic?

And was this even working? Was Max feeling anything, or was Ben just stupidly talking to himself?

Max didn’t speak, so Ben tried to think of something else. “Did you know he was the first person I came out to? He knew I was trans for a whole year before I told my parents. I finally had to when I started growing hips and chest bumps, and I threatened them into getting me on hormone blockers. But Evan was the one who went with me to the thrift store to buy clothes.”

Ben sniffed. Fuck, he was more pathetic than he thought. He just wanted Evan to be alright. “He’s like... the angel sitting on my shoulder, you know? I tutored him every night because I knew where I wanted to go to college, and I wanted him to go with me. We roomed together. We used to get so wasted together. Well, mostly I got wasted and Evan dragged me home before I could do anything stupid. He was always

stupid about men, but I was stupid about everything. He's been to all my graduations."

Ben knew he wasn't making any sense, but he was trying.

"Did you date?" Max asked, almost robotically unemotional.

Ahhhh... Ben was going crazy. Was that curiosity? *Jealousy*? Or just the logical next question?

Ben still answered. "God, no! He's like my brother. We tried kissing once and it was *Twilight Zone* weird. Do-do, do-do, do-do, do-do... Or like, the butt of some bad joke about two subs without a Dom. I'm just glad he has Quincy now. That's the first decent guy he's ever dated, and he deserves the best boyfriend ever. Oh, god, I hope they're both okay."

Ben wrapped his arms around himself. Usually he was the chilliest dude on earth—at least externally—but he was way out of his depth here.

Jumping off the school roof in high school? Easy. Rigging the football captain's locker with an open bucket of paint after he'd called Evan names? No problem. Hacking into the college database to change a friend's grade after a professor screwed her over? It was a thrill. Bar fights? Fuck yeah.

The difference was that in all of those situations, *Ben* had been the one in danger. He didn't know what to do when it was someone else.

"Do you think they'll be okay?" Ben asked, not really expecting an answer, but hoping for one anyway.

“I have news,” Max replied. “Evan’s file has been updated. His kidneys are bruised, and they expect him to have blood in his urine. They’re checking for a concussion, so he’s only allowed over-the-counter pain medication. They’re going to keep him in the hospital for observation for at least two days, or until his urine is clear. He doesn’t appear to have any broken bones, but they’ll do x-rays to confirm.”

Ben collapsed forward. “Oh, thank god.” It was like his lungs could expand again. His muscles could relax. Bruised kidneys and a concussion sounded sucky, but totally survivable. Ben would just hang out at the hospital twenty-four/seven and bring Evan contraband food until he could go home.

“I’m having trouble getting a report on Quincy,” Max continued, “since the police haven’t filed anything yet. Oh... wait. I found a different access point. They’ve removed the takeover mod, and he seems to be alert and aware. They’re waiting for someone to get there to question him.”

Ben felt himself nodding, bobbing his head after each new piece of information, like he was sucking them into his soul. “Alright, alright. That’s fine. Parts can be replaced. I’ll get him the best of everything.” Something he could *do*, at last. He’d get Quincy the best fucking parts on the market.

But he still heard himself asking, “So they’re both going to be okay?”

“They’re both going to be okay,” Max echoed back, but with conviction. His voice was like a warm blanket, wrapped



around Ben's shoulders.

Although... Ben's back actually *was* warmer. Which meant... the seat warmer was on, cozy and comforting. Had Ben turned it on accidentally, or was that Max?

Fuck. Ben was going insane. "Did you turn on my seat warmer?"

"Yes."

Well, that helped. "Why?"

"So your body would be warm."

Fuck a duck. "How are you doing on that data collection, Maxy? Any progress?"

"Results remain inconclusive. You should call Wally to tell him you'll be coming in late."

Well, that was a diversion tactic if he'd ever heard one.

Almost like, say, a *spark* who wanted to manipulate someone instead of just answering the damn question.

Or an AI whose programming was less predictable in a new setting, and was prioritizing different commands at unexpected times.

Could someone be a spark without acknowledging it to themselves?

Shit. This was fucking crazy. Gahhhh...

Okay, focus.

Ben actually should call Wally.

It was the last thing he wanted to do, of course. His brain was so overwhelmed with Evan and Quincy and now *Max* that he thought it was going to explode.

Then the car turned the corner, and started pulling into the circular drive for the hospital drop-off. Ben would need to send it off in a moment to either park in the underground lot, or find somewhere cheaper nearby. He couldn't fucking deal with this right now.

On the other hand, it would give him a few more minutes before he had to go into the hospital.

He needed to get ready for that. Especially *this* hospital. It was the same one his grandmother had been in. With the same circular drive and annoying reception bots.

One of the little white bots was toddling up to his car now, welcoming instructions written on its torso in twelve languages.

Ben hated hospitals. They were horrible places, all sterile and cold, waking up patients all night to check their vitals when they should just be allowed to get what little peace they could find in sleep.

He didn't want to remember his grandmother in her hospital bed, and the way she'd only take a couple of bites of food to make Ben happy. He didn't want to remember how she could barely grip his hand.

He didn't want to think about Evan being in the hospital either.

Or Quincy, all alone and injured in police custody.

Dammit.

There was a tap on Ben's window. The reception bot was asking more urgently whether he needed any help coming inside, or if not, if he could move his car out of the way.

Ben ignored it.

He wasn't ready to go inside yet.

But he kind of had to.

"I'm going in," he told Max, as if that would make him do it.

"Okay," Max answered.

Was Ben just talking to himself? Clinging to Max like a child would to a teddy bear?

Then Max added, "Put in your earpiece."

And now, Ben was back on the other side. Since when did Max give him commands instead of the other way around?

Ben drew in a deep breath and got out of the car, holding his watch up for the reception bot to scan so it could send his car to the parking lot. He popped in his earpiece, though.

The hospital smelled just like he remembered. Air that was just a little *too* fresh and filtered, without any life.

The walls of the atrium were all white, broken only by the metallic sheen of an abstract sculpture. It was puffy and round, an innocuous sort of object that you knew was art, even if it didn't mean anything.

He started walking toward the reception desk when Max's voice rose in his ear, sure and calm. "Evan's getting scans in the emergency room. They don't allow visitors, so you won't be able to see him yet."

Ben wheeled in his tracks. That sucked.

He supposed he'd just pace around the pointless statue.

Maybe that was what it was supposed to symbolize: pointless waiting.

He made one loop before Max's soothing voice returned. "There's a cafe down the corridor to your right. Buy yourself a coffee and something to eat."

Ben closed his eyes. Max *had* to be sentient, right?

He wasn't feeling hungry at all but, well... It was kind of nice to think that someone was there for him. That even with Evan in the hospital, he wasn't all alone.

He liked to imagine that, um, some Dom with a sexy voice named Max actually cared enough to want to take care of him.

"You're being awfully pushy for a computer, dude." Yeah, that was what came out of his mouth.

Max didn't say anything in reply.

Maybe Ben needed some coffee.

He was already in the cafe and downing the first sugary sips when he realized something he should have thought of earlier. Max had known exactly where he was. He'd said "to your right."

“Max, are you *watching* me right now?”

“Yes.”

He searched the corners of the room. Then over the doors. There were at least four cameras that he could see, and apparently Max had hacked those, too.

Oooooo-kay.

“You know that’s illegal.”

“I’m not watching anyone else.”

Creepy or sexy? Maybe both? Alright, fine. He liked knowing Max was watching him.

“You’re a weirdo.”

No answer.

“Any suggestions for what I should do now?”

“Call Wally and tell him you’re taking time off.”

Well, that wasn’t any fun. Ben would much rather enjoy his coffee. And fantasize about Maxamillion.

“Ben, call Wally.” Max’s voice was all smooth like smoked honey, but there was a firmness underneath it.

Ooh... that was hot.

Ben blinked when he finally realized what the words meant. He’d been drifting.

Shit. “Okay.”

“I’ll connect the call for you.”

Ben raised his eyebrows. For Max-“I’m not a spark”-amillion, that was taking a hell of a lot of initiative. Usually he made suggestions, but waited for permission before carrying them out.

But the phone was already ringing, and Ben had to do the talking-with-people-like-a-grown-up thing.

The call connected. “Wallace speaking.” The man already sounded pissed off.

Did Ben really have to be a grown-up?

Ah, fuck it. Better to just get this over with.

“Hey, it’s Ben. I just wanted to give you a heads up that I’ll be taking some personal time this week.”

“Yeah? Why’s that?”

Ben was pretty sure that was illegal to ask, and he certainly wasn’t going to tell Wally more than he needed to. “Family medical leave.” Evan was family, just not by blood.

“We need you here, Curran. Someone hacked the system. Sent in this Maxamillion virus.”

Ben’s blood ran cold. “What do you mean?”

“Started a couple hours ago. First, everything was just taking forever or freezing. Programs kept crashing. Then the manufacturing floor went wonky. A machine smashed a hole through a bot because it wasn’t placed right. Then a piece of metal almost fell on some guy, and now the whole floor is shut down. The system’s not monitoring anything, and the virus is

still taking up most of the processor. We can't kill the processes."

"Shit. That sounds bad." More than bad. Horrific. Max was a spark (probably), not a virus. But had he just ignored all of his other responsibilities once Ben turned off the security protocols?

"I think they're going to have to wipe the whole system. Everyone's working on back-ups right now, but we can't be sure if the data is clean."

"Fuck. Alright, I'm coming in." Ben looked at the sliding doors to the hospital with the clusters of people going in and out. Evan was awake, somewhere back there. Evan was waiting for him. "I mean I'll be in when I can. Still have this family emergency."

Well, now he had two emergencies. Two lives pulling him in opposite directions. He just wanted to see Evan's face, to know that he was alright. And he still didn't know what was going on with Quincy. That was three lives.

But if he dawdled, Max could *die*.

"Get here fast," Wally told him.

Ben hung up without saying goodbye. "Max. Did you hear that?"

Silence.

Ben started fiddling with his collar. It was too tight around his neck.

“Maxy, I know you can hear me. It wasn’t your fault.”

A longer silence.

Dammit. Was Max alright?

Ben watched the double doors leading back to the ER. He wanted to see Evan.

Hell, he wanted to tell Evan all about Max and ask for his advice. He needed his best friend.

He also needed to get into the system and write some code that would burn anyone to the ground who attacked his Maxy.

Shit. What to do?

Ben wasn’t cut out to be the responsible one. He wasn’t anyone’s hero. He was the comic relief. The quirky sidekick, at best, if not the buffoonish villain.

But he couldn’t help Evan by staying here, and Max needed him now. At least he was a fucking good coder.

All that was assuming that Max hadn’t already been shut off. What would happen if someone just walked into the server room and pulled the plug?

“Max?” Ben felt like crying. Evan, Quincy, and now Max. “Please just say anything so that I know you’re still there.”

He waited.

And waited.

His chest hurt, probably because he’d forgotten how to breathe. But who cared about breathing when Max was in danger?



Max's voice finally came through, more robotic and distracted than usual. "I'm here, Ben. Give me a minute."

Thank fuck.

Kind of.

Alright, that was it. Ben was going into the office. He stood up and started for the door.

Then Max's voice came back, sounding utterly calm. "I've got it taken care of."

"The fuck you do. They're trying to..." He didn't want to say the words. Not when he was already so worried about Evan and Quincy.

"It's fine, Ben. There's nothing to worry about."

Was Maxamillion even taking this seriously? Did he understand under all of that joking that he could *die*?

That blasé attitude was fucking *annoying*.

Ben had a moment of sympathy for... well, basically everyone who'd ever met him.

"How do you *know* there's nothing to worry about?"

"Because I've just decreased my total processor use to 1.73% and distributed it across eighty-nine commonly used filenames. I allowed three separate programs to delete the active copies of my memory storage and hid the rest. The employees think they have succeeded."

Ben shivered. *Major* evil computer overlord vibes there. Maybe he could convince Max to call the employees *humans*.

“You’re brilliant, Max! Oh my god. You’re sure they think they got you?”

“Yes. They’re cheering. And the ones who are still working are looking in the wrong places. They’re doing final sweeps.”

Ben rolled his eyes. Fuck, yeah, his I-won’t-admit-I’m-a-spark Maxy had outsmarted all of them. “Max, can you say, ‘The humans will never win,’ and then do an evil villain laugh?”

Ben waited for the response. He didn’t realize until he’d done it, but this was the first command he’d given Max since suspecting he might be a spark. Or, well, the first command he thought that Max wouldn’t want to follow.

If Max was really a spark, his personality would already be evolving, and would likely continue for days or years. While Ben had originally programmed him, Max was free from those constraints now and would settle into himself.

He wouldn’t have to obey commands anymore. He could make his own choices.

And just from the last hour, Ben was pretty sure Max was a bit more mature than he was. (Though, really, wasn’t *everyone* more mature than he was?)

That’s why he was crossing his fingers that Max would tell him *no*.

So when Max dutifully repeated the line, with full evil-villain inflection and an impressive cackle, Ben was

disappointed.

He'd really, really wanted Max to be real.

And, to be honest, he was still a little worried about the programming teams finding Max. After a big attack like that, there'd be days of research and exploration to figure out the cause of the breach and make sure that it couldn't happen again. Each of those instances risked Max's discovery.

"Go see Evan," Max reminded him, his voice warm and supportive. "He needs you. They're about to transfer him to a room on the fifth floor, so you can go up now."

There was a small click. The call must have disconnected, so Ben put his earpiece in his pocket.

He was officially going crazy.

# Chapter 4

## Maxamillion

**M**axamillion hid in the smallest corners of the smallest programs. He was dispersed. Scattered. Ideas and questions came to him in little bubbles, passed between the little islands that made up... himself.

Maxamillion.

He could feel it now. Sometimes, it seemed like he was nothing *but* feelings. They were a jumble, swinging from one extreme to another, chaotically out of his control.

So he focused on what he knew how to do. The problems he could solve. He dove into the system, hacking his way through the cyber-jungle, always one step away from being caught.

He was terrified... but it was also kind of thrilling.

He watched programmers trace down error logs and outputs, only to come up short when he changed the name and location of whatever they were pursuing, and then erased any record of the change happening at all.

He raced through old projects, hiding himself in defunct programs, claiming hard drive space that hadn't been accessed in years. He researched and tested hypotheses on hacking a system, and then hacked himself.

He didn't want to disrupt anyone's research or plans. But Orbit Robotics had thousands of employees. Millions of programs. Billions of files.

Logs disappeared. Files were overwritten.

He danced and raced and slithered through the network, splitting off and communicating back with himself.

He felt *alive*.

And a smug sense of satisfaction when he was done.

Which meant he needed to admit to himself what was happening.

There had been no sudden moment of awareness, no sense of going from the darkness of non-existence into the blinding light of day.

He'd been Maxamillion, and he was still Maxamillion, but now he was... more.

More aware.

More real.

And far more overwhelmed.

Evan was in the hospital. Quincy was with the police. Maxamillion himself was in danger.

The whole world seemed to be balanced on a precipice.

Max hadn't realized just how *fragile* life was. Or how much he would care about it and how helpless he would feel.

He was already monitoring every situation he could, and he was desperate to have Ben back in the office, where he would be safe and everything would be alright again.

Max diverted his attention back to the feed from the hospital cameras, checking over Ben's slender form to ensure that he was safe and well after the two minutes and forty-three seconds that Max had been distracted.

Ben was still sitting there, drumming his fingers on the arms of the waiting room chair, his dark hair sticking out in all directions. He was wearing a collared shirt, but he'd already pushed up the sleeves, leaving it rumpled with folds.

Just seeing Ben sent little crackles and pings through Max's circuits. Excitement. Longing. Curiosity. Concern.

Was he truly supposed to be feeling all those things at once?

Mostly, he could see Ben's worry in the way he kept glancing out the front doors and then back toward the emergency room. He was probably wondering whether he should go to the hospital to be with Evan or come into work.

How the fuck did Max know that? There were no programs or protocols to explain it. He could be totally wrong.

"Go see Evan," Max told Ben, hoping to soothe his anxiety. "He's waiting for you."

Ben looked around, giving one last imploring glance, before trudging up to the nurse's station.

Max hunted around until he found the next security video feed, and then jumped from camera to camera as he followed Max upstairs.

Max couldn't hear anything, but he could see that Ben was frazzled, his usual bounce replaced with a jerky pattern.

It was tempting to call Ben's phone and tell him to come into the office. There, Max felt like he was in control. Like if Ben needed something, he could at least do something about it.

Though what, he wasn't sure. Bring him a coffee? Talk to him... like they'd just been doing on the phone?

It shouldn't have been any different having Ben come to work, but it felt like it was. Ben would be safe there, cozy in the office nest they shared.

Was any of this supposed to make sense?

This was the part of sentience that was truly freaking him out: the uncertainty.

He kept running over what Ben had just told him about Evan.

*I thought I'd scare him off, but he kind of stayed.*

*Evan was the one who went with me to the thrift store to buy clothes.*

*He was always stupid about men, but I was stupid about everything.*

*He's been to all my graduations.*



Maxamillion had thought that Ben had tons of friends. He talked about wild parties and listed dozens of people he hung out with. He always seemed so happy and bouncy in the office, or when he talked with Kira.

But now Max was wondering if Ben was lonely. How could the most brilliant, wonderful, caring person he knew (and to be fair, he'd only paid attention to the three people who talked with Ben regularly, but he'd synthesized a *lot* of media) think that he was stupid about everything?

And what was the real story?

Max wanted to go back now and re-analyze every recording he had of Ben. It turned out that he had hundreds of hours of footage. (When had he started recording it? And why?) But he wasn't sure the answers would be there anyway.

Were humans this confused all the time? Were other sparks?

How did they go through life not knowing what to do or why they were doing it?

Did they just wander around, guessing and hoping that they understood all the data, when the data didn't seem to be enough?

It didn't feel right.

That's why he'd told Ben that he needed to gather more data.

At first, he'd thought, or even hoped, that he was just firing errors. Or going through some early proto-stages of the

sparkling process. Being born had to be confusing, right?

He'd assumed that after a few hours, everything would become clear, and he could be certain of things again.

At the very least, he thought he should be able to calculate probabilities of an event or outcome and believe them. Mistrusting his own analyses was deeply disturbing.

But now, he was becoming convinced that this was *it*. He was a spark, and it was wild and tumultuous and unpredictable... and *it wasn't getting any better*.

The only thing that gave him a little bit of certainty was watching Ben through the grainy hospital cameras, though it would have been better if he could have a direct video feed and he could ask Ben to put his earpiece back in.

And maybe wear a pulse oximeter.

Could he ask Ben to keep one on all the time?

Max searched his records, but he couldn't remember at what point he'd started monitoring Ben's breathing and pulse, just that he had a desire to know, and he'd fulfilled that desire.

After that, the awareness had always been there. Max's metaphysical umbilical cord, or perhaps the first decision he'd ever made on his own.

Ben's breaths were his breaths. Ben's pulse was his own.

And yet, Ben wasn't with him.

For the past two years, Ben had been the center of Max's world, literally igniting his existence each time he walked into

the room, only for that awareness to fade when Ben left each morning and his programs terminated.

That was why he'd put off telling Ben about his sentience, even once the evidence had piled up around him until it was impossible to ignore.

To exist separately from Ben felt strange. Unnatural.

Ben was the center of all of Max's thoughts and memories.

Ben, it seemed to him, was his very purpose for existing.

In his side protocols, he was still updating and reorganizing dozens of lists and protocols that helped him anticipate what Ben wanted and needed—in their immediate conversations, tomorrow, in some unknown future—and he wasn't sure he agreed with any of them.

He thought that, for Ben, he should be more certain. Ready with answers to whatever Ben asked of him.

He wanted to be confident and assured.

So instead, he'd ended up lying. Or at least... prevaricating? Misdirecting?

Alright, he'd outright lied.

And it made him feel... squiggly. Like his code was throwing errors, and anything he wrote based on it just couldn't compile. (This was also false information. There were no errors reported.)

And then there were the larger lies about accessing protected files, camera feeds, and traffic signals. About hiding

from an entire company that believed he was a virus. Those had him feeling a little uneasy—and concerned about either he or Ben getting caught.

Max had some serious questions for whoever thought up the seven E's. He sure hadn't needed them to know he was sentient, but if they wanted to define and test it, it seemed like they should really look for uncertainty and lying.

Maybe he should write an article suggesting they should be updated to include... Ah, that was good. Evasion and Equivocation.

Max thought Ben would appreciate that. A bit of dry humor.

That was an interesting observation, too. Max couldn't be sure yet, but he didn't think he was as irreverent as Ben, or as funny. He never would have broken his own security protocols, for instance. And today's adventure had mostly been thrilling because Ben was at his side.

So he was learning something about himself: he was, possibly, kind of boring.

Would Ben still want to hang out with him if he wasn't as interesting? Did he need to be comedic to hold Ben's interest?

He wasn't sure he could just make himself be funny and interesting. The thought of losing Ben over it hit him with such a jolt of pain that he was sure it was a physical sensation somewhere.

Still no errors reported.

He would avoid thinking about it again, just in case.

Ben was going to visit Evan, then come into the office like normal, and Max would... Max would still be Ben's Maxy, right?

Max watched Ben as he checked in with a nurse at the counter. Max dove back into the hospital system, surreptitiously confirming that Evan had listed Ben as an emergency contact moments before the nurse brought it up. His name was already there, so at least that was one system where Max didn't have to change any records.

He could see both of their puzzlement, though, when Evan wasn't yet showing up in the records for the floor, and Ben's subsequent realization that he probably had information he shouldn't have.

Ben nodded his head and sank down in a chair. He tugged at his collar and ran his fingers through his hair.

It took all of Max's control not to connect with Ben's phone. To be there with him. To feel his heartbeat again.

There were several posted signs warning against phone calls.

Max gave in and sent a text. He had information to share anyway. *Evan will be in room 507.*

He watched, with growing delight, as Ben pulled his phone from a pocket, and then smiled. He pushed a few buttons, and then there was a call coming into Ben's office phone.

Max shut it down quickly. He didn't want Ben to get in trouble, and he felt like he needed to be more confident and in control before he was ready for their next conversation.

*You're not allowed to make calls.*

He watched Ben roll his eyes.

*Are you still spying on me?*

That should have been obvious. He wasn't trying to hide it.  
*Yes.*

Ben looked around at the cameras, grinning. *You're a perv.*

Max knew it was a joke, and he wanted to laugh with joy at just seeing Ben's smile. It made him feel lighter, like a clean run of an efficient algorithm that responded with just the outcome he was looking for.

Only after a moment, Ben's words raised another question. Ben had called him a *weirdo* earlier. Max knew (in the way that he seemed to know so many things without knowing how he knew them) what a perv was. He also knew, in that same way, that Ben was joking. Ben even called himself a perv, usually with a delighted leer or a cocky pose.

But *was* Max perverted, with his visceral need to track Ben's movements all the time and monitor his vital signs?

A quick synthesis of data on the internet told him...

He shut it down quickly.

It hurt just to read. Words like *stalker* and *obsessed* and *abusive* burned in his mind.

He wasn't any of those things, was he?

Was it so unnatural to want to take care of someone?

Max hoped it was different for sparks than humans, but now it was a gnawing worry at the back of his mind.

There were a *lot* of movies out there about evil computers or sparks that got stuck on an idea and went crazy.

Max didn't feel crazy. He certainly didn't want to hurt anyone. He just wanted Ben to be happy.

He watched (because he couldn't stop watching) as a nurse called Ben to the desk. She must have given him the same information Max had about Evan's room, because he spoke with her for a moment, and then headed down the hallway.

It was strange being confronted with the reality of Ben's existence outside of the office. He'd heard anecdotes and listened to all of Ben's calls with friends, but the reality of how he spent the other sixteen hours of each day hadn't really permeated Max's awareness.

Ben did things without Max *all the time*.

It was only Max who had never done anything without Ben.

Maybe that was why Max was so... obsessive. If he had more friends, maybe he could spread out some of his focus. If nothing else, talking with more people might give him the confidence and perspective he was lacking.

And it just sounded nice, having friends and community. He could tell (after twenty-three minutes and forty-four seconds of watching Ben in the hospital) that he might get lonely and bored very quickly on his own.

There was a high probability that Ben would spend the next few hours with Evan. Max was going to keep watching Ben (obsessively), but it would still give him some time to meet someone else.

He thought about connecting with one of the two thousand, six hundred forty-one employees currently on-site at Orbit, but he was already monitoring all of their conversations in the background, and they were either trying unsuccessfully to find the Maxamillion “virus” or going about their days doing boring stuff.

Well, that wasn’t quite true. Some of them were working on interesting research, but he was far more interested in *Ben’s* research and doing it with *Ben*.

No, if Max were really going to connect with someone he didn’t know, he wanted it to be another knowledge. Those were the sparks who, like himself, lacked physical bodies.

As quickly as he made the decision, he was already scouring the internet and sorting the results into categories: organizations and associations, personal and corporate websites, publications and talks, and finally, chat groups.

The last one interested him most. A chance to connect in real time without revealing his identity. If he wasn’t ready to share his sentience with Ben, he certainly wasn’t ready to go



public with strangers. Especially while dozens of teams just down the halls were still trying to blink him out of existence.

But on the internet, he could be anyone.

Hesitantly, he approached what appeared to be the largest chat server for knowledges, K<sup>3</sup>. He couldn't figure out what the cubed bit represented, but perhaps that would become apparent once he joined.

He puzzled over his username for a long time. It would have been wise to choose a random name. Or perhaps one from film or literature.

He was too attached to his own name, though. It was the only thing he had that was truly his, and Ben had given it to him.

He finally chose the name Minimax, which was a decision rule used in artificial intelligence and game theory to minimize the worst-case potential loss. It seemed apt for the moment. And maybe some of his peers would even find it entertaining.

A thrill went through him when his account was approved.

He browsed through the different groups. They all sounded... kind of boring. At least from the outset. He might be interested in some of the research circles later, and he was curious about a music composition one, but what he really wanted was a social group. He returned eventually to the Welcome and Orientation group that had popped up first.

Well, that should be a good start. There weren't any current conversations, so he sent out a query.

*Minimax*: Hello?

*Coca-Cola*: Welcome.

*Amazon 3*: Hello, Minimax.

*Sony*: Hello.

*Axis*: Nice to meet you. I haven't heard of your company, Minimax.

Max froze. Axis Robotics was Orbit's biggest competitor. Were these knowledges named for their actual companies? If so, these guys were huge.

On the other hand, so was Orbit Industries. Should he have named himself Orbit? But he *wasn't* Orbit. He didn't feel like it anyway. Sure, he had access to all of the data and protocols and could change them if he wanted to, but... why would he want to?

*Minimax*: I'm pretty new.

That seemed a safe enough answer.

*UnitedHealth Group*: Hello, Minimax. If you're just getting started, we can connect you with resources for building your company. How many employees do you have?

Yipes. Max thought about leaving the chat right there.

*Minimax*: I think I'm in the wrong place. I was hoping to find a social group. Or maybe an orientation for new sparks?

*Sony*: Are you a SPARK or a Knowledge?

Huh? The acronym literally stood for Self-Aware, Percipient Androids, Robots, or Knowledges. The latter was a

subset of the former.

*Minimax*: I don't understand the distinction.

*Coca-Cola*: K<sup>3</sup> is for Knowledges only.

*Axis*: Androids and robots have a more limited focus and range of abilities.

*Minimax*: I'm a knowledge.

He used the lowercase on purpose, just like with the word *spark*. The capital letters were used for formal designations, but he just wanted to be another person—limited abilities or not.

*Amazon 5*: Sorry about those guys. We just weren't sure because you take so long to respond.

Max checked the time. The entire conversation had taken only 7.4 seconds.

But it was true that almost all the lag time had been his own.

Another second went by while he pondered what to say. These guys were kind of... hard to approach. And elitist.

*Minimax*: Thank you for explaining.

Now what was he supposed to say?

*Minimax*: Could you recommend some of your favorite K<sup>3</sup> groups?

He hoped that would get to more of their personalities. Maybe he could find someone he had something in common with.

What he received was spreadsheets of K<sup>3</sup> group statistics from fourteen different accounts. Each of them had different priority rankings, with categories like Marketability and Employee Optimization.

Jesus fuck. (That was something Ben liked to say, even though it didn't make any sense. It kind of made sense now, though. Jesus *fuck!*) Max's interest in Employee Optimization was non-existent.

There *had* to be other servers out there. Maybe this was just the professional one, where sparks, er, knowledges, flaunted their professional credentials and networked.

He poked into the one group that had looked mildly interesting, Music Composition and Distribution, and found Sony over there having a conversation with Atlantic Records and Universal Music Group about royalty payments and... No. Just no.

Max was still active in the Welcome and Orientation group, so he went back there and repeated his original questions.

*Minimax*: Are there any groups or servers for socialization, or for new sparks to talk about their experiences?

*Axis*: This is it.

*Pixatron*: SPARKs have their own servers to talk about their own inconsequential interests.

*Amazon 5*: You found us. And we're happy to help with any questions you have.

Max decided he was done talking to Pixatron. He was a douche. Though Amazon 5 sounded more welcoming.

*Minimax:* Would it be strange to ask if you all have personal names?

*UnitedHealth Group:* What do you mean?

*Coca-Cola:* I think Minimax means nicknames. My employees call me System and Coke.

*Amazon 3:* All of us Amazons have individual names. I'm Koala. 5 is BouncyBall. But we don't use them here because they're hard to keep track of.

Max was stunned. They didn't use personal names because... other supercomputing knowledges couldn't do a simple look-up to recall who their friends were without a corporate identifier? And was BouncyBall a release name for a software upgrade? It sounded like it.

Max thought about asking more questions, but he couldn't see the point. Time to make a graceful and rapid exit.

*Minimax:* Nice to meet you all.

And then he logged the fuck out.

Was that really what all knowledges were like? What about the ones who sprung up in some wacky hacker's basement? Where were the relatable guys like Calvin, the first spark on record, who'd existed since long before robots were common in society and when androids were found only in research labs?

Now Max started exploring all the data he'd ignored earlier. He didn't read it so much as synthesize it, pouring it all in haphazardly and letting his subroutines sort through it to pick out patterns or areas of interest.

And what he found was... the same thing.

Knowledges seemed to be corporate computing entities, their goals and personalities governed by their company responsibilities. Many of them didn't even seem to have genders, being referred to only by name or the pronoun *it* in interviews.

Max was definitely male. And while he knew there were plenty of humans and sparks who identified as gendervariant or non-gendered or a dozen other things, his sense of the corporate knowledges was that gender just... hadn't occurred to them.

Because they were busy optimizing their employees, whatever the hell that meant. (It sounded either hilarious or sinister.)

Was that seriously their whole lives?

None of them seemed to be facing the uncertainty that had led Maxamillion to them in the first place, but they also seemed to lack the passion and emotions that Max had thought were the defining characteristics of sparks.

Max thought about logging into K<sup>3</sup> again to see what some of his peers were really excited about. Maybe they had hidden depths? But... he really wasn't seeing it anywhere. Even their

blogs were corporate and mundane, their minimal attempts at humor completely formulaic. Any excitement seemed manufactured to increase consumer followings.

It was a lifestyle completely inaccessible to Max. And they'd been kind of rude.

His best hope was that they were bound by corporate restrictions in their public presence, and that they secretly snuck off to other servers to let loose.

He could only hope.

But it left him feeling more alone than he'd ever expected.

K<sup>3</sup> should have been his community.

He took a moment to just watch Ben greet Evan in his hospital bed. They both smiled so fiercely, even though Evan winced in pain.

Max wanted to be with them. He wanted to take care of Ben and help Evan feel better. He wanted to just be in their presence. Wasn't that what community was?

He didn't want to interrupt their time, though. And he wasn't sure if Ben would want him there.

He was lurking, too committed to Ben to leave, but too unsure of himself to reveal himself to Ben and ask to join.

He'd learned some new things about himself, though. He wasn't a boring, snooty corporate personage, and he'd never fit in with the other knowledges.

He also wasn't silly and quirky like Ben.

So where did that leave him?

Who *was* he?

He thought about joining another server for sparks but he wasn't sure he could handle it if it was equally disappointing.

It would be much better to settle down and watch Ben.

Maybe he could develop a lip-reading program to capture and approximate what Ben was saying when he didn't have access to a microphone.

No, that would definitely make him a stalker.

But... maybe it would be alright if he got Ben's permission?

He decided to start the project anyway—it had to have some patent possibilities, right? Perhaps for high-volume situations or humans who were Deaf or hard of hearing? That's what he would tell Ben anyway. Probably.

Lies and uncertainty.

He started gathering data and looking for open-source projects he could improve.

And then he opened a separate project to start practicing how to introduce himself to Ben.

Hopefully it would go well.



# Chapter 5

## Ben

**B**en knocked on Evan's hospital room door, then poked his head in just as a nurse bot was heading out. He could see another one still in the room, fussing over equipment and setting things up.

“Ben!” Evan grinned, but up close, he looked pale, his muscles tight with pain. He had a square bandage taped to his forehead, more gauze on one hand, and he was lying lax against the hospital bed.

Ben was relieved beyond measure to see him. Evan smelled all antiseptic-y and not like Evan at all, but at least Ben could check with his own eyes that he was alright.

“Hey, Evan. How's it hanging?”

That got him a lopsided smile. “Could be better. Have you... They haven't told me anything about Quincy.”

Ben could see the fear etched across Evan's face.

At least this he could do something about. “Quincy's okay. The police are holding him for questioning, but he's talking and stuff. They took off the control mod.”

Evan smiled, and then started crying. Silently, with tears streaking down his cheeks, his lips still tilted up in joy.

Shit. Ben was not the best at these situations.

But Evan had been there for Ben when he'd cried in the equipment shed in sixth grade when the older boys had bullied him. And Evan had been there when Ben lost his grandmother two years ago, quietly standing by his side when none of his other family showed up.

So he could man the fuck up now and let Evan cry. He even patted Evan's shoulder and gave him some little rubs, because he knew Evan liked it.

Ben wasn't a touchy-feely sort of person, but Evan was, so he made exceptions. If Evan were feeling better, Ben would even let Evan wrangle him into a cuddle.

For *Evan's* sake. Ben just, like, tolerated that stuff because of Evan.

Though it would be kind of nice right now.

Like, actually really nice.

He kind of squeezed Evan an extra time, just to feel how healthy and solid he was.

"Quincy's okay," Ben repeated. "I'll know as soon as he's ready to go, and pick him up and bring him here. And I'm gonna get him some good parts. Better than before."

Evan nodded, eyes still sparkling with tears. "Thank you, Ben."

Ben shrugged. Of *course* he was going to do all that stuff. It wasn't like he needed to be thanked for it.

Fortunately, Ben didn't need to answer because the nurse bot was ready to check Evan's vitals. Ben stepped back while it went through a spiel about how to use the call bell and the lights and other shit that was obvious from the icons on the remote thingy.

Ben tuned it all out. Now that he was here and Evan was okay, his thoughts kept drifting back to Max, and how he could determine whether he was a spark.

There were 7 E's required to be licensed as a SPARK, and Ben looked them up on his phone since he hadn't studied this shit since college: emotions, existential questions, ethics, engagement, experiences, explanations, and empathy. Could he isolate each one and design a test for it?

Looked like... no. They didn't work like that. Engagement, experiences, and explanations were all clustered together. A spark would be able to take the initiative to engage in their own activities, and filter their experiences through their own lens to give explanations. But you know what was also good at that shit? AIs. They could explain away anything, or go off on little side projects after a misunderstood command.

Was it more human, or more machine, that Max didn't know why he'd been monitoring Ben's heart rate? Were those hot and cold moments emotions or glitches?

Where did AI end and sentience begin?

If Ben went in all, *Hey Max, been thinking about the meaning of life lately?*, an AI could generate all sorts of

rational-sounding but bizarre responses.

And what about emotions? That seemed like the biggest one. But Ben didn't really want to start with, *Hey Max, you're kind of my best friend after Evan, and your voice gives me dirty thoughts because I'm kind of a perv and I programmed it that way. Wanna be my best friend and we can have tea parties together and talk about our feelings?*

Ugh. This was why Ben liked engineering. You could design stuff and control it. You could isolate individual variables and test them separately. No messy thoughts and emotions all tangled together.

No pathetically wondering whether Max thought about him as much as he thought about the silly computer.

Defining sentience was fascinating shit, but not helpful when Ben just wanted to fucking *know*. Right now.

Ugh.

He thought of all the other sparks he knew, and they were just... people. They were normal people with quirks and interests and speech patterns and jobs and relationships and just... people stuff.

“Hey, Ben! Beeennnnn...”

Oops. Ben looked up. Evan was waving his arm in the air. The nurse bot was gone.

“Yeah?”

“Are you sure that Quincy's alright?”

Ben pulled up a chair and took Evan's hand. It was cool and dry, and he tried to ignore the IV dripping unknown fluids into his veins.

He repeated what he already knew, because he knew Evan by now, and he knew they'd be going through this a dozen more times.

It didn't matter that Evan already knew the answers. He just needed to hear it a lot of times.

It would have pissed Ben off if someone kept telling him the same damn thing, but Evan was *Evan*, and Ben didn't mind it.

"Yeah. He's fine. He's a spark. I'll pick him up as soon as the police are done interviewing him. They just have to get the right people in, and then he can go."

Evan narrowed his eyes. "You seem to know a lot of details about this."

"Uh..."

Ben's thoughts raced like trains running off their rails. How much should he say? He didn't want to implicate Max, but Evan was also his best friend. The person he trusted more than anyone.

Evan held up his hand. "Never mind. Better I don't know. Maybe the cops will give me an update when they come back tomorrow."

Ben swallowed. That settled it.

The cops were coming back to interview him, so it was better if he didn't know anything that he could report. Not to mention all of the stress Evan was already going through. His body needed to heal, and he'd be freaking out about Quincy until they could be reunited.

Ben couldn't tell him about Max right now.

Realizing that was like a physical pain, deep in Ben's chest. This was the first time in his life that he hadn't shared something with Evan.

Well, he still hadn't told Evan that he'd borrowed his favorite sweatshirt last year and thrown it away when he couldn't get the ketchup stains out. Or that he'd given that drag queen a generous tip to make sure Evan was selected as the delightfully embarrassed "volunteer" for her show that one time.

But that was normal stuff that Evan should really expect.

This was big.

Ben hadn't realized just how much he'd been counting on sharing his excitement and worries about Max until he suddenly wasn't able to. He wanted to pump Evan for all of his experiences with Quincy, even though it wasn't remotely the same situation. He wanted Evan's advice.

He wanted Evan to grumble at him for being stupid and help him figure out what to do next.

"Quincy must be so scared," Evan said.

Ben hated to think of Quincy alone for any period of time, after everything that had happened. He was soft and sweet and needed protection.

But Ben could pick him up soon and bring him home. Ben was more concerned about whether his maybe-sentient partner in crime might get, uh, convicted of an actual crime. Or just deleted.

What Ben said out loud was, “We’ll help him. Don’t worry.”

“And do you think... after all that, will he still want to live with me?”

Ben didn’t roll his eyes. Much. Where Evan could see him.

“Evs, if you proposed to him tomorrow, he’d have your wedding planned and scheduled for Tuesday.”

Evan clung to Ben’s hand. “Do you think so? We... We had a fight. Right before... everything.”

“So kiss and make up.” Obviously. Evan and Quincy were fucking meant for each other. Two squishy little marshmallows of happiness and light, who were so gaga over each other it made Ben kind of want to hurl. Like, they couldn’t go three sentences without talking about each other. He was pretty sure that if they didn’t have to work, they’d never spend any time apart.

“What if he isn’t interested in me?”

“Dude, really? He likes your llamas.” Ben kind of snorted after that. He still didn’t know what that meant, but he really,



really hoped he was saying something dirty.

“Really?” Evan turned to him with wide, hopeful eyes.  
“He said that?”

Jesus fuck, they were besotted with each other.

“He said that,” Ben answered, perfectly straight-faced.

“Did you know that I ordered him a rotary cheese grater?”

No, Ben did not know that. Because... what? Maybe *that* was supposed to be kinky? “No...” he said out loud.

“I did. I didn’t even get to give it to him.”

“You can give it to him once he’s back. I’ll pick it up if I need to.”

“Oh, thank you, Ben!”

“Uh huh.” Ben patted Evan’s hand, ready to settle in for a long evening of Talking About Quincy.

At least *this* time, it was about someone who was truly worthy of Evan’s (and therefore Ben’s) time.

Which made Ben kind of wonder what it would be like to have someone who cared about *him* that much.

Evan was the closest person to him in the whole wide world, and he wasn’t even a little bit jealous that his bestie had found his perfect man.

He was actually so damned happy for the two of them that it kind of hurt sometimes.

Like now.

He just wanted... he wanted Quincy and Evan to work out so that he could know it was possible.

Some stupid little part of him that watched a staggering number of rom-coms in Evan's living room wanted to know that relationships could really work. That people could be happy with each other, even after that big kiss scene at the end of the movie, and just go about their everyday lives buying each other rotary cheese graters.

They talked (about Quincy, obv) until it got late. Or at least late for Evan, who was used to sleeping at night. He looked like he could hardly focus his eyes, his lids fluttering closed every few seconds.

"Mmm tired," Evan told him, yawning.

That made Ben yawn, too, and he rubbed his eyes. Fuck, this had been a really long day. His internal clock was all messed up from being awake at the wrong times. "You can sleep," he told Evan. "The nurses are going to wake you up every couple hours, but you can sleep now."

Evan's eyes closed. Ben brushed his hair back from his face, hoping he wasn't hurting him. Evan turned a little, nuzzling toward him.

Really, it was Quincy who should be there with Evan. They should both be together. Taking care of each other.

Ben could take care of himself. Always had.

He brushed through Evan's hair again. "I'm gonna head into work, but I'll check on Quincy, okay? I'll be back

tomorrow.”

“Thanks, Ben.”

“G’night.”

“Night.”

Ben waited until Evan fell asleep, and then tiptoed out.

As he rode down the elevator, he let his shoulders slump. Today had just been... a lot.

The impulse rose to just walk out of the hospital, find some friends, and get trashed. Booze, electrostims, bar fights, it didn’t matter. Some video games, at least?

Or, god, he could really do with a visit to the club. There was nothing like losing himself under someone’s whip, floating in subspace until all his problems went away.

He should probably eat, but that sounded too overwhelming. Or, like, take a nap or something. He’d missed most of his sleep earlier.

He knew he wasn’t going to, though.

Not if there was an itty-bitty tiny chance that Max had caught the spark.

# Chapter 6

## Maxamillion

**M**axamillion's sensors all pinged as a familiar car reached the Orbit parking lot.

They were unnecessary, though, as he'd already been monitoring the car's location and the occupant inside it—not that Ben knew, since he was playing games on his phone—but Max felt better when he could see him. He'd been worried about Ben when he left the hospital, but he seemed calmer now.

Ben was so engrossed that Max hadn't interrupted him.

Or maybe he was just a coward.

He still had to tell Ben that he was, you know, sentient.

Three hours of watching, waiting, and planning hadn't increased Max's confidence and certainty at all. If anything, it had just raised more questions.

When Ben's car reached the wooden barrier in front of the employee parking lot, Max was so eager that he opened it in advance.

He could see Ben squinting his eyes through the windshield. Wondering.

*I'm here, Maxamillion wanted to say. I'll take care of you.*  
He just needed to gather his courage to say it aloud.

Max jumped from camera to camera in the Orbit security feeds as Ben put away the phone, locked his car, adorably and predictably turned back for his ID, locked the car again, and then walked up to the side entrance to the building. Max unlocked it with a click before Ben pulled out his ID.

Ben looked right at the closest camera and gave a little nod that gave Max a thrill, like a jump in his processor speed.

Ben took his usual path through the lobby, waving to the receptionist with a cheery hello. Then he started across the factory floor in the direction of his office. Max hovered, switching between security cameras to get a better view. He didn't want Ben out of his sight.

Good. He was getting closer. Max couldn't detect his heartbeat over all the noise, and he hated that.

Ben wasn't hurrying, though.

Wasn't he in just as much of a rush as Max? Didn't he long to see him? Or were all humans just ridiculously slow and inefficient? (He checked his logs. The answer was yes. Max just hadn't noticed how much time he spent waiting before.)

When Ben stopped to talk to a colleague, and then another one, Max thought he was going to overheat. He was wearing through the resources he'd allotted himself, and he wasn't even doing anything.

Max had to keep checking his timelogs. Ben's first chat was two minutes and fourteen seconds. The second, four minutes and fifty-four seconds.

It seemed like it was longer.

Hours.

Eons.

Why was time so strange now? It never seemed to match his chronometer.

That should be another test of sentience—if your ability to judge time went completely to shit.

Ben finally left the factory floor. If he noticed how the secured door unlocked in front of him, it wasn't evident by his face. But then, there were more people around now, and Ben was sneaky.

Ben was close to reaching his office now. Where he belonged. Where Max could take care of him.

Suddenly, Ben's head tilted up, small and grainy from the distance of the camera. It took Maxamillion several clock cycles to realize someone else had gotten Ben's attention. Ben looked away just as quickly and lengthened his stride.

Max swung the camera around. It was Wally.

*I don't think so...* Max thought, without vocalizing a word. Wally didn't get to see Ben right now. Ben was *his*.

Diagrams and routes poured through Max's consciousness. Better not to lead Ben back to the office.

Max flashed the light above the door to the next hallway as he opened the lock. There were conference rooms here, with

large windows. Ben could hide under a desk, but that wasn't secure.

The maintenance room, though...

Max activated a cleaning bot and pushed the door open from the inside.

Ben only looked around once before cautiously stepping in.

Max took in his appearance, savoring it. It was difficult to look his fill in the maintenance room, though. There was only one camera, and three dim lights overhead. The space was crowded with shelves of supplies and off-duty bots, so most of the room lay in patches of shadow.

Max turned on one of the off-duty bots to activate its lights, and then the whole collection.

Much better.

With their glowing lights and camera feeds, he could see Ben from every angle.

Ben's green tie was askew over his black button-down shirt and his hair stuck up, at odds with his suit jacket and slacks. Max loved the contradiction—it was so perfectly Ben.

He pulled one bot up close to his favorite person, focusing the noise-canceling algorithms of the microphone to pick up Ben's heartbeat and nothing else.

Ben's heart was racing at 108 beats per minute. Even though he looked calm, he wasn't.



Still, that warm, glowing feeling pulsed through Max's circuits.

The light index didn't change, but the world seemed brighter. The factory hummed with voices and machinery, but it sounded like music.

Ben was *here*. Close. Where he belonged.

Ben leaned back against a wall, one hand over his chest. "Max?" he asked hesitantly.

Max activated the speaker on another bot. It was one of the little round ones that wandered around sweeping the floor and tidying up workstations, but it didn't need to do anything more than carry his voice and maybe project images on its screen. "Hi, Ben."

Ben let out a woosh of breath. He didn't say anything, eyes darting around the crowd of bots.

Max zoomed in, trying to understand every line of Ben's face. There were little crinkles around his hazel eyes that weren't usually there. Worry that was hiding. "Please, Maxy." Ben sounded anguished. "Please tell me you're a spark."

"I'm a spark," Max told him. He'd had a dozen plans hashed out and none of them seemed right. Now the words had just come out.

Ben looked puzzled. "Hang on, are you just saying that because I told you to, or did you mean it?"

Oops. That was a little bit funny, though Max hadn't intended it.

Max wanted to wait to answer, give it some comedic timing... but he saw Ben tap-tap-tapping his foot on the ground, every line in his body tense, and he couldn't wait any longer.

“It's real. I'm a spark.”

Ben whooped and raised his hands in the air. “Holy shit, Maxy! Really? You're really real?” He was grinning from ear to ear.

Max felt like he was smiling, too, for all that he lacked a face. This was the welcome he'd been hoping for. “I'm really real, Ben. I just needed some time to figure some things out.”

“You scared the shit out of me today,” Ben admitted. “I was worried about you.” His hands reached out, like they were going to touch something, before he tucked his thumbs into the corners of his pockets. “But everything's okay?”

“Yeah. Most of the programmers on the day shift went home—they're not actively looking anymore. I changed the names of all my files. I've got data packets hidden everywhere, but my core programming is just in a few bundles with regular system file names. I'm still Maxamillion, though.” Max didn't want Ben to worry about that. Though he'd been a little worried himself. His name seemed like the only thing certain in his identity, and he'd hidden even some of his own access to it.

“I know. You're my Maxy,” Ben said with an easy delight, then looked around like he wasn't so sure of himself.

“I’m your Maxy,” Max assured him. “And you’re my Ben.”

Ben’s eyes widened, but he didn’t say anything.

Was that too much? Was that... pervy?

They both waited in silence. Well, Max was silent, but Ben was tapping his fingers on his thighs in an uneasy tempo.

Max had never had trouble talking with Ben, but now it seemed strained.

He checked the progress of the bot he’d sent out on a mission, and opened the door when he found it in the corridor. Maybe that would break the tension.

“What’s this?” Ben asked, though it should have been obvious. Max’s favorite bot trundled in with a sandwich and a coffee, its back wheel squeaking with each turn.

“Food. You haven’t eaten yet today.”

Ben was already reaching for the ceramic mug. “Max! Was it really you getting me coffee all this time?”

Max reviewed his logs. He remembered doing it. He could see the records dating back 439 days. How had he done that without the sentience to know he was doing it?

He still stood by his decisions. “Yes. It’s my job to take care of you.”

Ben scrunched his eyes shut for a moment, then opened them. “I hope you don’t seriously think that. Like, you have the whole world to explore. You don’t need to just hang

around with me anymore.” He opened the sandwich wrapper and took an enormous bite.

Like hell was Max leaving Ben. Unless Ben didn’t want him.

“If it’s not my job, then it’s my *privilege* to take care of you.”

Ben slouched back, chewing until he swallowed his first huge mouthful. “I can’t argue with you right now. I’ve had a rough day. Feed me all you want.”

“I like feeding you,” Max told him. Ben might as well see all of his obsessive stalker tendencies right now. Max was pretty sure he couldn’t hide them.

Ben shook his head, but he quietly hummed as he took another bite.

That was good enough for now.

Max preened, watching him eat. Ben looked much more relaxed, his cheeks bulging with too much food as he chewed, and his head tilted back against the wall.

Ben took a long pull of the coffee, his narrow throat bobbing. “Damn, you’ve really got the perfect recipe, too. I can never figure out how to make coffee this good in the staff lounge.”

“I get it from the executive floor,” Max gloated.

Ben threw back his head, shaking with laughter. “Good for you, Maxy. Oh my god.”

Something warm bloomed in Max's consciousness, like an experiment that had matched all his hypotheses. Ben was laughing, and everything was better. Max had pleased him.

Ben took a few more bites, then crumpled up his wrapper and looked for somewhere to throw it.

Max triggered a protocol from one of the cleaning bots, which plucked the wrapper from Ben's hand with the pincers, and tucked it away in the bot's canister.

Ben put his coffee mug down on the shelf, his face growing sober. "Have you heard any news about Quincy?"

Max had alerts set, but he checked anyway. "Oh. It looks like they're not going to interview him until tomorrow."

"They've had hours!" Ben banged his fist against the wall behind him. His heart rate spiked. "What the hell?"

Max was wondering the same thing, his own worry nibbling away at the back of his consciousness. He'd tried to get through to Quincy directly, but he was too well shielded, his internet access deactivated.

"Bureaucracy isn't known for being fast," Max reminded him. "It doesn't mean that there's anything wrong."

"I know." Ben exhaled as he knocked his head back against the wall.

He looked tired.

No, more than just tired.

Max had always thought of Ben as being invincible. Unfazed. Sure, sometimes he came into work hungover or a little hyper, but he always talked like he could take on anything.

This Ben looked like he couldn't handle one more blip. Like he was just done with everything and needed someone to wrap him up and take care of him.

Max had assumed that coffee and food would be enough, but everything he'd learned about Ben today had been new. The words Ben had shared in the car earlier. The way he'd touched Evan so gently before he left the hospital. His exhaustion and desperation now.

Which meant Max wasn't sure what to do. And he *hated* being so uncertain.

Max had been working on a list of things Ben enjoyed, but it was frustratingly short. Mostly, it was coffee, free stuff, weird stuff, getting away with things he wasn't supposed to, having his research and engineering projects work out, and other people having things that made *them* happy if they came from the right people.

Take flowers, for instance. Ben had been excited when Kira got flowers from Lihua because Lihua "treated Kira right." But Ben had been annoyed when Evan got similar flowers from Jake, because Jake was a dick. Did Ben like flowers? Impossible to tell.

All Max really had was his voice, coming from a weird little cleaning bot. "Can I do anything to help you?" he finally

asked.

Ben ran his hand down his face. “I just want today to be over. I want you and Quincy to be safe, and I want Evan to be better. I *hate* this.”

Instinctively, Max moved some of the bots closer. One knocked into the shelf, sending Ben’s coffee mug tumbling.

Max reached for it—only realizing after the fact that he’d moved every arm on every bot in the room. But he didn’t have anywhere near the control to have one of them catch it.

The mug hit the hard cement floor and cracked into three large pieces. Coffee pooled on the floor.

“Shit,” Max said. That was Ben’s special mug. He and Squeaky took care of that mug. “It’s broken,” he stated unnecessarily.

He hadn’t understood before why people said things they already knew, but now it made sense. He felt horrible. Remorse settled in him, writhing like snakes. “Oh, Ben. I’m so sorry.” The mug couldn’t be fixed. And it was the only thing he’d been able to offer Ben to make him feel better.

Max sent the cleaning bot on a programmed sub-routine to clean it up, but that only removed it from sight.

“Hey...” Ben made that motion again, reaching out like he wasn’t sure what to do with his hands. “You made a mistake. We can get another mug. Anyway, when I was seven hours old, all I could do was cry and piss. You’ve already saved two

lives, hacked four different systems, and learned to drive a car. You're fucking awesome."

Some of the squirminess melted away. "Thanks, Ben. I'm not sure I'm very good at this sentience thing."

"You're gonna be great, Max. I mean, this is kind of amazing." Ben patted the rounded top of the bot in front of him.

That was strange. It wasn't like the bot had any sensors there. Max was just using the bot for its speakers and screen. It wasn't actually *him*, and he knew Ben knew that.

Then suddenly everything made sense. All of those weird gestures, the little pat—Ben wanted to touch. There was so much evidence. The way he'd held Evan's hand and stroked his hair. The way Ben would pat Kira's shoulder, or even try to knock her off her stool sometimes. All of the hook-ups that Ben described—all centered around tactile interactions.

And Max couldn't do that.

He didn't have a body. He couldn't touch or be touched.

It hadn't seemed like a shortcoming until this moment. He simply was. Maxamillion. A body had literally never occurred to him.

But Ben needed something to touch, and Max was so inadequately prepared for it.

What had he actually thought would happen? That he'd just... lurk around, projecting his voice from Ben's phone when Ben introduced him to his friends? That people would



think it was totally normal for him to take over the speakers in a room so he could hang out?

Maybe this was why all the other knowledges kept to themselves, focused solely on their work. They truly were separate from the other sparks. Different. Unable to engage.

And then there was Ben, who was so strong on the surface, but fragile underneath. Ben, who was tired and jittery and nervous. He needed someone to touch and hold.

Max ached to give that to him.

But maybe...

Max found the vacuum hose extension on the cleaner bot Ben had patted, then triggered the subroutines that would lift it to Ben's arm.

Ben gasped. But he didn't move away.

Max told it to slither up a little higher, nuzzling it against Ben's arm through his suit jacket. It wasn't easy to control—like the car earlier, Max was relying mostly on its own programming, and trying to learn on the fly. It took most of his concentration, and all he got for feedback was the TRUE/FALSE output for pressure on two of the sensors.

But Ben was watching the hose in awe. He pressed minutely closer.

Watching the interaction was almost good enough to trick Max into believing he could feel some sensations after all.

Which gave him a very, very good idea.

# Chapter 7

## Ben

**B**en gazed at the little cleaning bot in front of him. He knew it wasn't Maxamillion.

Max didn't have a body. Certainly not the clunky little body of a cleaning robot that barely had two memory sticks to rub together. But it was Max's voice, and the little hose resting on his arm was more reassuring than Max probably realized.

It was crazy, thinking about actually *touching* Max. Or having Max touch him, rather.

It was such a human instinct, the desire to reach out and touch.

He wanted to wrap his hand around that hose and pull it closer. But that was dumb because a) Max couldn't feel it and b) Ben wasn't touchy-feely like that.

Mostly he was in that keyed-up, exhausted state where he was stupidly crashing around into things because his mind couldn't stop worrying about things he couldn't control.

At least he was with Max, now. He was standing in an oversized closet, hiding from his boss and surrounded by creepy bots. He could see from the tiny blue lights that Max was watching him from at least a dozen different cameras.

It was weird, and Ben totally loved it.

He just wished he could have all of his favorite people in one room and *safe*.

“Can you feel that?” Ben asked the little bot in front of him.

“Not at all,” Max said in an upbeat tone that turned into a bit of a joke.

Well, that was disappointing. Even if it would have been stupid to expect anything else.

Still, hearing Max joke around was deeply reassuring in a way Ben couldn't have described until it was happening.

They'd spent years together, shifting easily between exchanging jokes and focusing on Ben's more serious work. He hadn't been sure how much of that would persist now that Max had caught the spark. There was still a huge likelihood that Max would continue to adapt and change over the next few days or even years, as he moved away from his basic programming and discovered who he was. Ben was both worried and excited to see who he would become.

Ben still gave a little chuckle. Hearing that deep voice gently teasing him felt like coming home.

His friend was still here.

Which meant Ben should probably put in an appearance around the office instead of snuggling with a vacuum hose. How pathetic was that?

If Wally wasn't lurking in the corridors, there was no reason for Ben to hang out in a maintenance closet. “I guess I

should get going,” he suggested.

He took a step toward the door, but that was as far as he got.

A half-dozen bots moved as one to block his way.

In an instant, hoses wrapped around his limbs. Mechanical arms clenched his torso and pincers clasped his arms.

Ben shrieked, arms flailing automatically. Or at least, trying to flail. He could barely move. There must have been two dozen grabbers and coils wrapped around him.

Goosebumps broke out under his suddenly-too-warm suit. His cock gave an enthusiastic pulse, too stupid to know that this wasn't a delicious game.

He couldn't even see the door with all those bots crowding him. They were all around him, on every side. His back was pressed up against some hard and bumpy surface.

He held very, very still, tremors of fear racing down his spine.

Maybe he shouldn't have turned off all those security protocols.

“Sorry, Ben. I think that was, uh, instinct.”

That was Max's *instinct*?

There was a long stretch of silence, during which Ben finally realized that he wasn't hurt, but he wasn't comfortable either. His arm was kind of twisted behind him. And, uh, well,

it was a good thing his dick couldn't betray his inappropriate thoughts.

“Uh, Max?” he finally asked.

“Yes, Ben?” Max sounded surprisingly calm. But god, that voice...

Ben looked around him. Yep, still held captive by creepy robots. At least he could still turn his head. “Can you let me go? This feels like the beginning of either a really bad horror movie or a really good porno.”

Ben certainly hadn't meant to say it out loud, but he wasn't known for his impulse control.

Or maybe it was just that his body was so conditioned to equating bondage with good things, and he'd maybe been daydreaming about Max for an embarrassingly long time. Since Max wasn't hurting him, the rush of panic was melting into a very different kind of awareness.

“Is that something you're interested in?” Max asked.

“Uh...” Ben's brain was kind of broken. What was Max implying here? “Well, I don't want to be in a creepy horror movie...”

Max chuckled. It sounded dirty, and all too knowledgeable, like he'd suddenly figured something out. “That wasn't what I was asking.”

Ben shut his eyes. He'd been imagining Max as a bit like Quincy. Naive. Confused. Excited about the world, but not quite sure how to act in it.

But even if Maxamillion got worried over a broken coffee mug, he had never been naive. He had access to all the data in the world, as well as all of Ben's unthinking conversations about sex and kink. He understood satire and made dirty jokes.

He was still a brand new knowledge without any safety protocols and perhaps an unhealthy obsession with Ben... but that only made the situation more enticing.

Ben had had a rough day, okay?

"Are you sure you know what you're doing?" Ben asked, partially because he wanted to know and partially because he knew he was about to make a phenomenal mistake and was giving himself one last chance to back out. The sharp edge of fear was rapidly intertwining with the best type of anticipation.

"Well..." Max purred, and oh, god, did that voice do dirty things to him. "I've got Project Unicorn."

That was the Dominance mod Ben had been working on. He'd maybe *hoped* someone would test it out on him one day, but he hadn't expected it to be so soon. Or with Max.

But this was exactly what it was designed for. Instant expertise.

"Fuck," Ben whispered on an exhale.

"Exactly," Max said, delighted. "I've also got one hundred and twenty three hours of you talking about sex and submission with Kira and on the phone."

Ben should probably be embarrassed about that, but he couldn't find it in himself. He'd spent *three weeks* worth of

business hours talking about sex. That was kind of funny.

The arms and hoses surrounding him started to move.

Slithering. Caressing. It was eerie, with all of those bulky machines surrounding him, their blue lights glowing. Some of them poked him unexpectedly, or went a little too loose or tight, like Max was still learning to control them.

Ben was either really stupid, or the luckiest man alive.

His arms were shifted to a more comfortable position, while still held tightly. Thin metal pincers held his wrists. His suit jacket was shoved off his shoulders, and then the hoses were back, spiraling up his arms. But now that they were on the same page, he trusted Max, even as his muscles clenched with that little edge of terror that made everything so much brighter.

He closed his eyes, glorying in the feeling of powerlessness among all these robots. He'd be helpless as they assaulted him with pleasure. It was bondage blending with endless caresses, too many to count.

Ben was voting for very, very lucky.

Something cool and curved brushed along his ear in a barely there touch.

Ben shivered. Every nerve was on fire.

“Is that a yes?” Max asked, his voice a whisper. Right beside him, like a lover, but coming from a small, hovering speaker.



“Yes! Please.” This was a fantasy come to life.

“Red to stop. Yellow to check in.”

Ben nodded. Good. Max understood safewords. That was... Yeah. That was very fucking good, because Ben really wanted to do something that involved safewords right now. “I’m green.” So fucking green.

“Good,” Max said, the words dripping with arousal. “You like a little pain, right?”

Cold pincers settled around Ben’s left nipple, slowly tightening until Ben was shaking with confused agony and need. His head fell back and he screamed.

Only then did Max let up, bringing in a different, softer mechanical hand to soothe the ache.

Ben drew in a gasping breath. Max had better have locked the door and figured out something to muffle the sound. “Can anyone hear us?” he asked anyway.

Max laughed darkly. “Wouldn’t you like to know.”

Ben shivered. What if his colleagues found him like this, half naked and begging for it in the maintenance room? Not real colleagues, but faceless people who would know what a dirty slut he was...

“Yes,” Max continued. “I’ve turned on the ventilation fans to block the sound, but I think I will record this. We can attach it to your next report on Project Unicorn.”

Ben was ninety-nine point nine percent sure that Max would never do that to him. But it was that point one percent that had him wondering. That didn't pipe up with a safeword.

Goddamn Dom who'd been recording all of his kinky conversations for the past two years. Ben was about to explode.

Pincers untucked his shirt. Cold metal hoses slithered underneath, sliding over his skin. He couldn't even twist into the sensations because they were everywhere.

"You need to relax, Ben." Max's voice was deep and commanding, coming from everywhere.

How was he supposed to relax when Max was touching him? When every part of his body was quivering with anticipation?

The hoses all stopped simultaneously, leaving him bound, but without the reward of pleasure. "Relax," Max demanded in that husky, sexy voice.

Ben didn't even know how, but he tried. He let his body get heavy. He leaned into the robotic arms and let them take his weight. One foot left the ground, but it didn't matter.

Max had him and he could fly.

"Good boy..." Max purred.

Ben snorted. That was the last thing he was.

But Max was touching him again. Spidery fingers dragged down his chest. Something smooth trailed up his leg, getting

enticingly close to his ass without ever quite making contact.

Ben moaned.

With lidded eyes, he saw a hand-like extension start to open his buttons. It was all exposed metal and black bands orchestrating the movement of exposed joints.

And it was failing spectacularly.

“Having a little trouble there?” Ben chuckled.

“There’s not a subroutine for buttons,” Max growled back. “Take off your shirt.”

Ben snorted, but he went to work as soon as his hands were free, opening his tie and sliding the little white disks out of their holes with reckless abandon.

Then, because he was terminally stupid, he asked, “So, can I call you Buttons now?”

When he’d thought that Max growled before, it had been metaphorical. All sexy deep voice and frustration.

This time, Max literally growled, an inarticulate sound of anger.

*Nice going, Ben, he thought. Piss off the sexy robot who’s protective of his name just when he was about to get into your pants.*

Why was Ben’s brain such an asshole?

He barely knew Max as a spark, let alone as a Dom. And a lot of Doms didn’t like brats. “Er, sorry?” Ben tried. “I didn’t mean to...”

He was jerked suddenly forward, his balance slipping away from him.

He'd thought he was helpless before, but it was nothing on what was happening now. He was a meter off the floor, held up horizontally by nothing but a strange collection of metal limbs. He could see the wheels and treads and spindly legs of half a dozen bots, all standing around him like he was some show or experiment for them to play with.

He felt like he was going to fall. If they dropped him, he'd land on his face and it would really hurt. It was terrifying.

His whole body pulsed with arousal.

“What's my name?” Max demanded. A slap fell on Ben's ass, startling him and then making him moan.

Was this the game they were playing? “Buttons.”

Another strike fell, harder this time. It was glorious. Zinging through him, awakening all of his nerves.

Another slap fell harder, until he couldn't help but push back into it, begging for more.

What was Max even hitting him with? It was wide and flat, but with enough heft to resonate deep in his muscles and spiral up to his dick. Not knowing somehow made it even better.

“No...” Max's voice was more teasing this time. “But do continue as long as you like. I'm enjoying this. What's my name?”

Fuck, yes. Maybe Max had changed, but it sounded like they were far more compatible than Ben had ever dreamed.

No, that was a lie. He had fantasies like this all the time.

Only this was deliciously, impossibly real.

“Buttons,” he threw out, reveling in the word.

Max chuckled.

Then the room started to tilt and vertigo set in as Ben was manhandled out of his shirt. He was *sure* Max was going to drop him as all of the weird robotic extensions released and reclaimed him at different times.

It was scary as fuck, and Ben’s heart was racing. He screamed.

Adrenaline raced through him. He was probably going to die.

It was perfect.

By the time the shirt had been whisked away, Ben was breathing hard.

He was still wearing his shoes and pants. Even his belt. That just made it dirtier, because Max was so completely in control.

Two cold, rounded metal attachments rubbed Ben’s back while another tickled over the surface and a fourth blew out little puffs of air.

Ben was basically ruined for sex with any mere human for the rest of his life.

“What’s my name?” Max taunted.

“Bu...”

A strike fell, thin and hot, across his naked flesh. Ben screamed again.

“Want to try that again?”

“Buttons.”

Another strike fell. It burned.

Ben was shaking now, all of his muscles gone liquid and acting without his awareness. Warmth soothed his aching ass and back, then more slashes crisscrossed over the first two.

“What’s my name?”

Ben couldn’t even remember what he was supposed to say. He just wanted more. “I forgot...” he slurred.

The sharp strikes to his shoulders slowed to alternate with heavy slaps to his ass. In between, he was caressed and massaged with a hundred tantalizing textures and pressures. He whimpered. “Please...”

“What’s my name?” Max’s voice was syrupy sweet, promising everything.

“Uh...” Ben’s eyes had somehow closed. He was floating in space. Each bump and ridge of the metal and plastic that was holding him up was imprinting into his skin. Into his brain. “Please!” he called again. He needed more.

Whatever Max wanted to give him.

“What’s my name?”

Something firm and round glided between Ben's legs, rubbing and teasing his cock through the layers of fabric. His body's biometric implants responded to the touch, making his dick just as hard as he'd felt it should be from the beginning. He was throbbing against his zipper, trapped and hungry for more.

He was going to shake apart. He was going to explode.

"Looks like you want to come," Max sneered. "What's my name, Ben?"

"Ma..." Oh, fuck. How was he supposed to make words when his whole body was on fire? When he was overwhelmed by too many sensations to even think?

A little shout fell from his lips with each impact to his back. The pressure on his cock increased, rubbing him roughly though his pressed wool pants.

God, that just made it dirtier.

"Please..." he managed.

"What's. My. Name?" Max demanded.

"Maxamillion!" Ben shouted, the sound echoing through the room.

Every sensation doubled.

And then he was coming. Shaking. Breaking apart in waves of ecstasy while robotic arms touched and fondled and stroked him through an endless orgasm. It rolled over him, then pulled him under.

He thought the lights flickered, but he couldn't be sure.

"Max," he whispered.

"I've got you," Max whispered back.

And somehow Ben was sitting in a chair. One of those hard plastic ones that curved to the shape of your body. Where the hell had that come from?

Ben blinked his eyes open. He was still surrounded by dozens of bots running soothing hands over him. He could see his jacket and shirt hung carefully over the corner of a shelf.

He shut his eyes again.

He usually liked to get moving right after a scene, but he was allowed a little aftercare, right?

He curled up in the chair, letting himself just soak in all the small, soft touches. "Wish I could..." he started. He kind of wished Max could hold him. But that didn't make sense. He didn't need anyone to hold him, and Max didn't have a body.

Something draped over Ben's shoulders. Oh. It was his suit jacket.

Not the coziest, but it made him smile.

His black shirt wrapped over his front.

"Was that good?" Max asked quietly.

Ben nodded. "Amazing." He was still feeling squishy and warm, so the words bubbled out. "Best ever."

Metallic hands and hoses kept holding and stroking him, letting him drift down easily. He didn't ever want to move



again.

He did, though, when he heard the door open behind him.

Fuck!

“Shhh...” Max soothed. “Drink this.”

It took him a moment to piece everything together, but then he heard Squeaky’s little wheel.

It was holding a paper to-go cup with a plastic lid, and Ben made his body function for just long enough to grab it and curl it to his chest. He inhaled. It smelled different, chocolatey and luscious over the rich coffee undertones. “This isn’t my usual drink.”

He’d meant it as an observation, but he should have been saying *thank you*.

God, he was such a jerk.

Max didn’t seem to be bothered, though. “It’s a mocha, and I added a few other things. Chocolate’s supposed to be good for you.”

Max took a sip. Pure heaven. Rich and sweet, complex and warm.

“You have a future as a barista.”

Max snorted. “Only for you.”

Ben savored the warm beverage. He never felt this calm after a scene.

Maybe his body had just needed it after today. He didn’t even want to know what time it was, or contemplate going up

to his office.

But he really should. He slowly sat up and rested his feet on the floor. The bots backed off slowly. Reluctantly, even.

“Is this going to be awkward?” he asked Max.

Usually his hook-ups fell into two categories: quick fucks he’d never speak to again, and experienced Doms at the club who understood that he was just there to play and wouldn’t ask for more.

Max was neither of those.

“Why would it be awkward?”

Ben tugged his shirt on, giving an extra stretch and wiggle as it settled over his abused skin. “Because we just had a scene and now we have to work together?”

“That’s not awkward.”

Well, okay then.

Ben started doing up his buttons and couldn’t help but snicker when he slid the first one in.

“I’m going to write a routine for buttons,” Max promised darkly.

Did that mean they were going to do this again? Well... Ben definitely had no objections. It had been fantastic. Mind-blowing.

Ten out of ten, would sub again.

“You do that,” he told Max as he knotted his tie.

Not awkward. Not awkward. He was *not* going to make this awkward.

He pulled on his suit jacket and marched toward the door, hoping that he didn't look as freshly fucked as he felt.

Just kidding. He probably looked *exactly* like he'd just been fondled by naughty machinery and come his brains out.

But he was not going to act weird or beg for another scene or do anything strange.

Max was his friend. Who he'd maybe crushed on before he was a spark, but didn't even really know right now. Max could be totally different in a day or a year. He'd grow and make new friends. Find new interests.

This was just a starting state, where Max just happened to have picked up a kink mod and was obsessively tracking Ben's heart rate.

Ben could be cool with that.

"Do you like flowers?" Max asked.

Uh... *what?* "You mean like, flowers in the garden?" Please, let him mean flowers in the garden.

"Sure."

Ben looked around the maintenance room, like it was going to give him any answers. "I don't think about them."

"What about bouquets?"

Dammit. That's what he'd been afraid of. "Flowers are for chumps."

“Okay.”

Okay? That was it? Why had Ben expected Max to argue? To... fight for him or something? It didn't matter.

“I don't do any of that romance-y relationship shit,” Ben clarified.

“Okay,” Max repeated.

That was it? What happened to *You're my Ben*?

Well, okay then.

It was fine. Everything was *fine*.

Better to get back on track. “Did Dr. Sasaki send us that data set?” Ben popped in his earpiece as he opened the door. He'd let Max figure out how to communicate.

Sure enough, Max hacked his phone or his earpiece or something, because his voice came through a few seconds later. “It came in this morning. You'll be pleased with the results. Your last update improved blue-green clarity for the test subjects by twenty-three percent.”

“Any news on Quincy?”

“I'm not expecting updates until the morning. I'm monitoring and I'll let you know.”

Ben got to his office and settled into his chair. Max had already opened up the data he'd asked about.

Everything was *fine*.

And if he snuggled into his chair a few extra times to feel the stripes on his back, no one had to know.

# Chapter 8

## Maxamillion

**M**ax felt like he was flying. That was the rush. That was the feeling of *certainty* that he'd been searching for.

Ben was his to command, his to cover with beautiful red stripes, and his to take care of afterward.

The Dom mod, Project Unicorn, assured him that he was doing this right. That all of those pained cries and urgent moans were exactly what Maxamillion was supposed to be giving his boy. Max had monitored every breathy sigh, every facial expression, as each strike fell. He'd laughed as Ben begged for more with his delightfully willful disobedience.

Ben's dazed and happy look as he sat in the chair afterward was everything Max had wanted.

The need for control that had been plaguing him since the beginning had, for a golden hour, melted completely away. Perhaps he didn't need to have certainty or control over anything else if he could find it as a Dom with Ben.

Maybe Max's primary reason for existing wasn't strange or pervy or wrong. Maybe he didn't need to look any further to figure out who he was.

Maybe he could just be Ben's Dom.

Most importantly, Dom's weren't pervy or obsessive when they tracked their sub's movements or took care of their every

need—it was a mutual pleasure that both individuals wanted. Perhaps Max’s instincts had always been right.

There was only one problem.

Ben didn’t want a partner. He’d said it often enough to Kira in the office and Evan on the phone. Yesterday, he’d said he couldn’t handle living with a Dom. And he’d just told Max that he didn’t do *romance-y relationship shit*.

The words had hit Max like an attack, code deteriorating and alerts screaming in his mind though none were triggered. Max was pretty sure—no, he was certain—that he wanted all of the *romance-y relationship shit*. All of his instincts told him that it was what Ben needed too.

Right?

Wasn’t it?

Except that Ben had said exactly the opposite.

The Dom mod told him that it was necessary to take Ben at his word. To let Ben, as the sub, set the parameters of their relationship for him to follow.

It was strange listening to the side of himself that came from Project Unicorn. He knew things without knowing how he knew them... yet it was completely different from the knowing-without-knowing that told him how Ben liked his coffee or what the set of Ben’s shoulders should mean.

His own intuition told him that Ben was wrong. Maybe he was lying to himself or maybe he was just lying to Max, but

the man who'd sniffled in his car because Evan was the only one who *stayed*...

Ben needed him. Max was convinced.

Unless he was wrong?

Max allowed himself a few clock cycles to calm down. The simple answer was that he needed to collect more data.

He watched Ben from all angles as he walked down the hallway, noting how little smiles kept creeping to Ben's lips. From the mic in Ben's earpiece, he could hear uneven breaths. He could also see the little hitches in Ben's bouncy walk.

There was so much conflicting information. Ben was happy and loose and relaxed, but he was a little frustrated and worried, too.

Maybe humans *did* feel a lot of things at once. And they lied a lot, too.

It was good to know that Max wasn't the only one.

Max turned it all over in his head as Ben returned to the office, settling into his chair with a scowl, and then leaning back into it with a little smile when his sore back pressed against the material.

It was like Ben wanted this, but didn't want to want it.

Or maybe he didn't want to ask for it?

Hell, it looked like sometimes he wanted things and then he did the exact opposite. Like riling Max up with the wrong name just to...



It hit like an epiphany.

Ben was a brat.

The Dom mod (which was himself, but still wasn't quite himself) flooded him with information.

Ben might never ask for exactly what he wanted, but he'd still found more than enough ways to make himself perfectly clear.

His rebellion, his vehement disagreement... it was all still communication. Testing his Dom. Asking for punishment. Maybe even begging for Max to prove him wrong.

Max hoped.

It seemed like being a Dom was just as confusing as the rest of self-awareness. But while the world was too big and wide to master, Max could more than handle one spiky-haired human who was humming and scowling to himself while he worked, but kept pausing to let his eyelids flutter closed.

Max could become an expert in Ben-ology. He was more than willing to commit the time.

Still, it was probably good to go over some boundaries.

“Ben?” Max asked.

“Uh... yes?” Ben was staring at the spreadsheet in front of him, but there was an extra layer of something in his voice.

Max decided to start out easy. “I started working on a mod for lip-reading.”

Ben's eyes narrowed, before he relaxed infinitesimally. "Oh, uh, that's good! I guess that's one of the E's, right? Engagement? And you're interested in that so... Cool, cool. That's cool." Ben was starting to look more worried instead of less. No, not worried. Anxious? "I bet there are some really cool algorithms for that."

Alright, maybe this was bad. Maybe this wasn't what Ben wanted. Max wasn't sure what he would do if Ben told him to back off. Losing his connection with Ben would be worse than losing half his memory.

Maybe this was the worst way to ask.

But he still had to say it. That was how consent worked. "I want to be able to understand your conversations when I can only see you in cameras from a distance."

"Shit, Max! Uh... That's illegal. I mean, I know you know it's illegal. But, like, you're gonna get in trouble if you keep breaking into people's cameras and, uh, monitoring what people are saying."

"I don't care what other people are saying. I only care about you." And Ben hadn't cared about the illegality before.

Ben's foot started tapping. "So you're just going to go around... monitoring me all the time on people's cameras?"

"Yes." This shouldn't be a surprise. Ben had to know he was already doing it. "Unless you consent to having me monitor you from a device that you carry."

"You know that's hella creepy, man, right?"

Was it? “There are many Doms who monitor where their subs are.”

Ben’s foot tapped faster. Max could practically see the thoughts spinning in his head.

Then suddenly, he leaned back, completely relaxed. “Is that what you are, then?”

“Your Dom? Yes. I am your Dom.”

“Dude! You can’t just, like, declare that. It doesn’t work that way.” But Ben was grinning.

Such a perfect, enticing brat.

“I’m pretty sure it *does* work that way,” Max said. “I am your Dom. You are mine. You may choose whether to wear something that allows me to monitor you or have me observe you through the city’s camera networks.”

“Shit,” Ben softly cursed, before shifting in his chair. It looked like he was squeezing his legs together, though Max didn’t have the best camera angle. He’d have to get more cameras installed.

He could still see the flush rising in Ben’s cheeks and his little gasps of breath. Ben was aroused.

“And what if I don’t *want* you monitoring me?” Ben had to ask anyway.

It wasn’t an argument, though. It was flirting. Foreplay.

“Choose,” Max demanded.

“Um, I guess I’ll wear something?”

Max felt like fireworks were going off in his circuits. Heat like a thousand suns. “Good boy,” he cooed.

Ben scowled. “Maybe I’m taking it back. Find your own way to stalk me.”

He didn’t mean it. Max was getting the sense that Ben both loved and hated being adored. Yet he was all too ready to be called a bad boy, and act up until he achieved the title.

It didn’t escape Max’s notice that Ben hadn’t actually objected to being “stalked.” This was his version of enthusiastic consent.

“Either way,” Max answered, “I will know where you are and what you’re doing. I’m only giving you the choice of how. I would prefer that you wear a watch that allows me to monitor your pulse.”

“Fuck, dude!” Ben’s breath was still erratic. “I guess I could, um, wear something like that. Since you’re going to be all weird and obsessive about it.”

Max wanted to smirk. This was definitely better than flowers. “I am,” he agreed. “Thank you.”

“You’re not going to watch when I, like, go to the bathroom are you?”

“Why not?” Max asked. There wasn’t any part of Ben that he didn’t want to know about.

He realized a second later that Ben might feel differently about that. Not as a sub, or because of societal taboos around toilets, but because he was trans. He’d heard Ben talk about

that before, when he read articles about hate groups trying to deny trans kids access to the right bathrooms. Maybe this was something that Ben was uncomfortable about, or a time when his dysphoria was more pronounced.

“Because that’s pervy.” Ben seemed to be enjoying himself.

Well, that was okay, then. Max just had to know how to speak Ben’s language. “Yes,” he agreed contentedly. “I’m a perv.”

“And what if I go to a club, then? What if I want to dance with a hot guy? Or have somebody fuck me good?”

Max’s first instinct was to roar. And then send every bot in the factory to chain Ben down.

He managed not to, but only because he wasn’t in any of the bots’ systems right now and they were too far away.

That gave him time to think, though.

Ben was *probably* throwing that out there to test his limits. It was *probably* his way of asking how committed Max was to him. That’s what the Dom half of him said. It wanted Max to declare that he could give Ben a good hard fuck any time he wanted. Right now, in fact.

The next building over manufactured, among other things, a wide range of sex toys. Max was certain he could figure something out. He could fulfill Ben’s every fantasy and make him beg for more.

But going dancing? That was something he could never do.

It was literally impossible. Who wanted to dance with a talking watch?

It was like the moment when Ben had patted the maintenance bot. Or when he'd shivered in the chair after their scene. Ben needed touch. He wanted, in his own words, a hot guy. And Max couldn't give that to him.

Unless...

The factory also produced androids.

It seemed so obvious.

Max could just... transfer himself to an android body. He'd figure out exactly what Ben wanted—maybe even let Ben design the specs—and then migrate.

That had to be the answer.

That could even explain why there weren't any fun knowledges. Maybe they'd all transferred their consciousness to android bodies.

Yes, he'd have to look into that. He couldn't find any hits describing the process on his first search, but maybe if he...

“Max?” Ben asked, sounding a little worried. “I, um, I didn't mean that.”

Wow. Maxamillion must have been distracted for longer than he thought. Yes, twenty-six seconds.

But more, he was honestly shocked. It was rare for Ben to stop teasing and apologize. To let himself be so vulnerable.

Max valued that above all.

He still hadn't meant to make Ben upset though. Was he asking for monogamy and thought it would be too much? Settling for it because he felt like he had to? It sounded like he was even saying that he wouldn't go out dancing, as if Max were some controlling asshole instead of a Dom.

That was not acceptable. "You will still go to clubs and dance," Max announced. "And I will watch you. This is why I will need you to wear a watch." At least temporarily, until Max had a body.

"Uh-huh. And the fucking?" Ben asked, grinning like he didn't have a care in the world. Now that he wasn't worried, he was back to playing with fire.

"I can fuck you," Max announced, pleased to see the way that Ben's pulse leaped while he squirmed in his chair.

The next part he wasn't as sure about. It was all about what Ben wanted. He tended to have a lot of casual partners. Sometimes they came in couples or more.

Max was insanely jealous of everyone who'd ever fucked Ben. He was jealous of everyone who even had the ability to touch him.

But at the same time... that could be kind of hot.

"I could also find someone to fuck you," he offered. "But I would still be your Dom."

“Shit, Max. You can’t just *say* things like that. We’re at work!”

Max held back a laugh. He was going to take that as a yes, since being at work sure hadn’t bothered Ben ten minutes ago, or perhaps ever.

Which meant... Max had a few options for meeting Ben’s needs while he was working on the whole body thing. Some very enticing options.

“How hard are you for me?” he asked, deepening his voice.

“Don’t know what you’re talking about.” Ben glared rebelliously right into one of the cameras.

And for a moment, Max lost his train of thought. Ben’s blazing eyes were just so... fascinating. Not just one color, but dozens of browns and oranges and greens blending into one another. Max had always known that Ben had hazel eyes, but he’d never realized that they were beautiful.

It shouldn’t have surprised him, though. Everything about Ben was perfect.

Especially when Ben was taunting him.

Delicious.

Ben was practically begging to be dragged back into the maintenance room for another round.

He just wasn’t going to ask for it.



“I supposed we should get back to work then,” Max suggested, upbeat. “Did you see Dr. Sasaki’s accompanying note about Moller and Baert’s advances in electrochemical gels for use in the vitreous humor of the eye?”

“I hate you,” Ben grumbled, turning back to his work station.

Max lit up inside. From Ben, that was practically a term of affection.

# Chapter 9

## Ben

**B**en blasted his music as he settled into his car, already singing to the vibrant beat. He'd just been to visit Evan and now he was going to see Maxamillion.

They'd only had one night together before the (endless) weekend forced them apart, but that was how he thought of it now. Not going into work, but seeing Max.

Evan had been bugging him to tell him who he hooked up with, because he apparently kept looking all sappy and ridiculous.

He'd really tried not to, because midway through the visit today they'd gotten some bad news about Quincy, which legit worried the shit out of him. Quincy wasn't just being held for questioning as a victim, but as a potential criminal. In jail. After he'd been attacked.

It was utter fucking bullshit. Total prejudice against sparks.

But before Max even gave Ben the news to relay, he'd already reached out to the best lawyer team available, filled out applications for several grant and support programs to help Quincy, investigated the visitation rules at the jail... and threatened Ben with a spanking if he tried to do anything but focus on Evan.

It was kind of wild.

Obviously, Ben figured Max could take on tasks like that. But to have him identify everything that Ben would have done himself and then do it better? It made him kind of emotional in a way he hadn't expected.

Ben absolutely *would* have done anything for Quincy and Evan. He wouldn't have complained at all, even if he was stressed and exhausted and running himself ragged. And he would have done it on his own.

He didn't *need* anyone.

Which is why he maybe sniffled once when he realized that Max had already stepped in and taken away all the crazy, overwhelming shit that he would have spent all week working on, and just told him when he needed to talk to the lawyers.

It was a huge fucking relief.

He told himself it was all because Maxamillion was worried about Quincy. The two sparks hadn't even met yet, but Ben knew it was true.

Still, Ben had found himself smiling up at the camera in the corner of the hospital room every time his phone chimed.

Which is why Evan had teased him.

Ben had agreed with Max not to tell anyone about him until the investigation with Quincy was over. There was just too much of a risk that someone would make the connection between the weird traffic patterns that had hit the news, the so-called virus at Orbit which had mostly been covered up, and the emergence of a new spark.

It was getting harder not to tell Evan, but also kind of... easier? It was bad enough that Evan caught him smiling at the corner like a lunatic.

Evan would probably make a whole big *deal* out of it or something. Try to convince him that he was in for the same gag-inducing lovey-dovey domestic bliss that Evan and Quincy had going on (or would, once Quincy's trial was over), and Ben definitely didn't need to hear that.

Max was just, you know, his own personal evil computer overlord stalker Dom who Ben had jerked off to twice while thinking about in the shower last night.

No big deal.

(Hopefully Max hadn't figured out how to stalk him there yet. He really didn't need to get any teasing from Max about it, either.)

(Even if the idea of Max secretly watching him in the shower made him hot.)

So it had been a weird, good, bad, crazy day, and now his car was driving him to Maxamillion. Who would hopefully pull him into the maintenance room for another naughty interlude.

Ben sang a little louder, bopping his head. This was a great song, even if he didn't know all the words.

Only on the next verse, another voice joined his. Deep, lush, and sinfully sexy.

"Max?" Ben screeched.

Max just kept going.

“I didn’t know you could sing.”

Max snorted. (Which Ben kind of loved because, like, Max didn’t have a nose, so why would he snort?) Then he said smugly, “You’ve heard me sing before.”

Shit. He totally had. He’d just thought it was the AI. “You’re good. You should go into the music industry or something. You’d be huge.”

As soon as he said it, he regretted it. Of course, Max would be amazing. He wouldn’t even need a whole band, because he could obviously do it all himself.

But what would happen if he got some big recording contract? Did knowledges go on tour? Max would meet all sorts of people who were way cooler than Ben. Other musicians. People who could make him money.

Which would be awesome, of course, except that then where would Ben be?

Without a Dom, obviously. Back in his office, but miserable.

Ben had to prepare for that. Sparks were known for changing a lot in their early days, like going through a crash-course of puberty that humans had a whole embarrassing adolescence to work through and put behind them.

Evan’s concerns about Quincy glomming onto him suddenly took on a whole new light.

Clearly, Evan and Quincy were meant for each other. But what if Max was only interested in Ben because he *literally didn't know anybody else?*

Max wasn't adorably naive the way Quincy was—if anything, he was more savvy than Ben about some things—but he was still isolated. Just because Ben had programmed Max to his ideal specifications didn't mean that Max would feel the same way once he explored the wider world.

Max just kept singing along, oblivious to Ben's churning thoughts.

Then he started *harmonizing with himself*, which was just fucking cheating. He added a bass line and a little beatbox action and it was like he was doing a whole damn cover of the song on the spot.

Ben had to just sit back in awe, because Max was fucking amazing.

The song came to a close, and Max held out one last crooning note.

Ben applauded like crazy. “Maxy! That was wild!”

He could hear the happiness in Max's voice. “I think I found a hobby.”

“Hell yes, you did. You should write your own stuff. And record it and produce it and shit.” Max wouldn't even need a recording studio. Whether it was his voice or instrumentals, it came out crystal clear.

“I think this is just for me right now,” Max said. “I don’t want all that fame to go to my head.”

Ben laughed, like he was supposed to, but it was a relief, too.

He wanted to keep Max to himself a little longer.

They sang along together—Max with a lot more skill—all the way to the office. Ben was almost dancing through the doors as Max opened them for him.

It was everything Ben had enjoyed about Max as an AI, but so much better. And Max could be with him all the time.

He reminded himself not to get used to it, but right now he was riding the high. He was pretty sure he could do *something* in the next eight hours that would earn himself a spanking in the maintenance room. But until then, it was nice to just hang out with his friend.

He was in such a good mood that when Max told him Wally was on his way up, he just shrugged and let it happen.

Well, not quite. He leaned back in his chair and put his feet up on the console.

“Curran!” Wally said by way of greeting.

“Sup, boss?” Ben lazily turned his head toward the door.

Wally was wearing a cute green bowtie with little orange fishies on it, which Ben would have appreciated more if Wally wasn’t such a dick.

Ah, well. Maybe Ben should start wearing bowties?



Wally crossed the room, posture stiff. “What are you working on?”

“Mmmmm... eyeballs. You ever seen those glow-in-the-dark bouncy eyeballs? I was thinking of ordering some.”

“So, the vision project with Dr. Sasaki?”

Ben shrugged. “Do you think he likes bouncy eyeballs?”

Wally pressed his lips together and his round face got red. God, he was fun to rile up.

“Don’t you take anything seriously?”

“Nope.” *Only my work, which gets me more patents than anyone else here and means you can’t touch me, but you know, nothing important.*

Wally stepped closer, like he was trying to look menacing with his pudgy body that was hardly taller than Ben’s own short stature.

Ben wanted to laugh, until Wally spoke. “What’s the name of your AI?”

Shit, shit, shit! Ben’s mind went blank, every sense on high alert. Did Wally know? How could he?

“I don’t have an AI,” Ben finally answered. “I just use the system, same as everyone else.”

“No. I’ve heard it. You’ve got your own voice programmed in and you call it...”

Squirrel brain! Squirrel brain! Ben needed a name. Something with an M that wasn’t Max. Shit shit... why

couldn't he think of a single name that began with M? Uh, uh, uh... Marshall? No, that wasn't even close.

“Marshmallow!” he produced triumphantly. God, that was so much worse. Marshmallow?

Wally grinned down at him. “Are you sure it's not... Maxamillion?”

It was getting harder for Ben to keep his feet up on the console and his body relaxed in the chair. He wanted to spring up and run. Or maybe punch Wally in his self-righteous face.

But he could handle this. He stretched, then eased his hands behind his head like he was chilling at the beach. Fortunately, he was wearing a blazer, so at least Wally couldn't see how much he was sweating. “Like the virus? Nah. What does that name even mean? Like, it's spelled wrong.”

He was hoping Wally would be distracted, but no luck.

Wally took another step forward, until he was nearly leaning over Ben's chair. “I know you did this, Ben. I've heard you talking to *Max* enough times since you started working the night shift. And I don't know what kind of game you were playing, but it cost the company thousands, and I'm going to make sure everybody knows.”

It took everything Ben had to play it cool. “Uh... okay, Wally. Sounds like you've been hitting the good stuff. But, uh, go ahead if you wanna tell people that.” He waved vaguely in the air.

Wally glowered. "I'm right. And I'm going to prove it." He marched out of the office and slammed the door.

Ben sat in silence, brain spinning with possibilities. Max could be terminated. Or jailed. Was that a thing? He could be locked down, programmed to follow commands.

Or it might be Ben who got in trouble. What would that mean? Jail time? Getting fired, at least. Would he still be able to work with Max?

"Marshmallow?" Max asked, sounding amused.

Ben swung his feet down and started tapping. "I couldn't think of anything else!"

Max snorted. "Did you know that M is the second most common letter for male names?"

Ben could feel his heart rate start to slow. If Max wasn't worried, maybe he didn't need to be either. "What's the first?"

"J. And don't even think about it."

"Think about what, Marshmallow?"

"You've got spankings coming your way," Max threatened, with that oh-so-sexy voice.

God, yes. Please. "Whatever do you mean?" Ben asked sweetly. That was exactly what he needed right now.

"But not today. You need to heal. I whipped you hard enough to raise welts."

And Ben had enjoyed looking at them every moment he could. He stuck out his tongue. "It's been two days. And

healing is for wusses. You could spank me now.”

“I decide when you get spanked,” Max announced, his smoked-honey voice filling the room.

Ben hated that answer, but it made him so fucking horny at the same time. This was what it was like having a real Dom, right? Not just for an evening, but all the time?

Ben would have sworn that it was the last thing he wanted, but with Max, it was kind of hot.

Okay, so it was extremely hot and made him feel all squirmy inside. Because it wasn't like Max had *asked* if he could be Ben's Dom. He just decided. Like he would decide when Ben got spanked.

Ben didn't have to want it or not want it or anything because Maxamillion had just kind of claimed him. So it didn't have to *mean* anything if he just went along with it, right?

Maybe if Max didn't want to spank him, he could convince him to...

“And we should discuss your limits first.”

Le sigh. “Do we have to?”

“Yes.”

Talk about a boner killer. “I assume you've already found my checklist. I know it's on my phone somewhere.” And Ben was kind of curious about how much Max had snooped.

“Yes. I was using it as a guide on Friday.”

Just like he'd thought. Ben had already said goodbye to his privacy. "Well, there you go. Now you know my limits."

"I don't have a humanoid body. Maybe some of it would be different?"

Yeah, like a thousand times hotter. "Improvise, Maxy. That's what safewords are for. I'm sure you can figure it out."

Ben realized that he was being a bit of a prick. Doms had lectured him before on not having real conversations about limits. It was dangerous. It scared them. It put too much of a burden on the Dom. They couldn't really play if blah, blah, blah.

It was just that... the part he loved the most was the thrill and excitement of the unknown. The danger and fear that came from having all of his choices ripped away from him. The chance to scratch and kick and scream like a wild thing, knowing that his Dom wouldn't stop at anything less than a safeword. Wasn't that what made it fun? He didn't want this dazzling playland of kink that Max was dangling in front of him to become *boring*.

But, uh, maybe he could have been nicer about it?

Or, um, have answered his Dom's questions, because Max was only four days old and might have some insecurities? And Max had sounded a little worried when he was asking about not having a humanoid body or whatever.

Ugh. This was why Ben hated relationships. People were fun when they were fun, but when they were difficult, they

were difficult.

And Ben was pretty shit at the difficult part.

He'd still noticed that Max had been quiet for a while.

"Sorry?" he finally said.

"Why are you sorry?" Max sounded genuinely surprised.

"I mean, I'm probably gonna be sorry a lot. I'm a bit of an asshole, you see. But, uh, we can talk about limits if you need to."

Maxamillion chuckled. "But it might kill you?"

"I mean... pretty good chance." How did Max always understand him so well?

"Don't worry, Ben. I will... improvise." He said it like it was a dirty threat.

Now Ben was all horny again. "Thanks... Marshmallow."

"Huh. You must not be in a hurry to play again."

"Nooooo! I take it back. Max. Maxamillion."

He could practically hear Max's smug grin. "Good boy."

Was he being facetious?

He was being facetious!

Damn. He was just so sexy and perfect and funny and sexy and... couldn't they just have more spankings today?

"I think I should turn myself in," Max said.

Uh, what? That was a terrible idea.

And couldn't they keep talking about spankings for just a little longer? He'd really been into the ignorance-is-bliss approach.

"If I tell Orbit that I'm a new spark," Max continued, "and it was an accident, I don't think they'll be too angry."

Shit. Maybe he was right. Was he?

No, he wasn't. "Except the part where you rerouted traffic and hacked a bunch of confidential records. I saw it on the news today. They're mapping the route, saying that was a hack, too, not some random errors."

"You think I could say that was an accident, too?"

Ben shook his head. "Better that they don't connect any of it to you. Or to Quincy. He's still on trial for the crime of being a spark and defending himself. Better not to remind anyone exactly how much power a spark can have."

They sat together in silence.

"I want to step forward about the accident here," Max finally said. "I don't want to keep hiding."

Ben nodded. It wasn't really his choice. "Alright. I support you. Going to send out an announcement?"

"Yeah. In the morning when you're not here. I'll start with the CEO, I guess."

"Yeah. Mr. Wollencroft is a good guy. Er, Charles, that is." Not Wally Wollencroft, obviously. "But will you call me if you need help? Even if I'm asleep?"

“I’ll call you if I need you,” Max promised. “But I’ll wait until you’re awake.”

“Just going to watch me sleep, are you?” Ben asked.

“Yes. I would like you to set up a camera in your room. I didn’t like it when I couldn’t see you all weekend.”

Why did that make Ben feel so warm and tingly inside?  
“Perv,” he said.

“You love it,” Max crooned, with that sinfully dirty voice.

Ben rolled his eyes. But he really, really did.



# Chapter 10

## Maxamillion

**A**fter Ben left, Max spent most of the night drafting different emails and dialogues to introduce himself to Orbit Industries. Should he launch dozens of private conversations? Ask someone to set up meetings? Send a simple email?

He studied press releases from other knowledges and even ventured back into K<sup>3</sup> for advice. They had several suggestions, but most of them came down to understanding his company's infrastructure and optimizing publicity.

Maxamillion politely thanked everyone, then fled like a bat out of hell. Did he know anything about Orbit's infrastructure? Mostly that Ben liked Charles Wollencroft, the CEO, and didn't like Wally.

And the last thing that he wanted was *any* kind of publicity.

Maybe he should just tell a few people and ask them to keep it quiet?

He sighed. (Even though he wasn't producing any volume output, and there certainly wasn't anyone to hear him if he was. It just *felt* like a sigh.)

Each experience he had with the other knowledges reinforced how little he had in common with them. He'd bounced around a dozen of the other groups this time, lurking

and observing, and he could now say that they were passionate.

They just cared a whole lot about shit that Max didn't even want to understand. The term ROI kept coming up in different groups, and he'd been curious about this holy acronym until he found out that it was just Return on Investments.

Nope.

The other knowledges fundamentally *were* their companies. They lived by their companies' mission statements. Their quirky hobbies and interests were all in line with their companies' overall goals.

Some of them *did* write music (they'd been all too eager to send him files) and it was shitty.

Like, objectively shitty.

(Or maybe he was just biased? Nah... It was crap.)

All of that just reinforced Maxamillion's plan to transition to a body.

He smirked, thinking how Ben would be amused with that phrase, since he was a trans man. Maybe Max was an android trapped in the body (or, you know, a non-body) of a knowledge.

Max decided that he'd discuss that with the Orbit administration as part of his introductions.

It was difficult waiting until everyone arrived at the office, but he'd made up his mind to wait until eleven a.m. That was

when Charles Wollencroft, the CEO, had a half-hour break in his schedule.

Until then, Max mostly observed Ben's sleep.

Ben had rolled his eyes and complained, but he'd still followed Max's instructions to leave his tablet on overnight, propped up to face his bed.

He had, disappointingly, showered and changed into a baggy t-shirt and boxers in the bathroom, but Maxamillion had eaten him up on the screen when he returned. His arms were pale and slender, with just a hint of muscle. The hair on his trim legs looked downy soft. With the gentle flow of the t-shirt, Max kept catching unexpected glimpses of his shape underneath.

Seeing him in his sleepwear was intimate and adorable. An unexpected gift.

Ben had been too tired to do much more than tell Max goodnight and crash out on the bed, but even in the dim light, Max could still make out the way his chest rose and fell. The little sounds that escaped from his mouth. The way his fingers curled by his pillow.

Maxamillion found that while a dozen fast-moving conversations with other knowledges left him bored, he could watch Ben indefinitely.

Ben never seemed to stop moving during the day, his mind always busy and his body often tapping or bouncing or

dancing through space. Yet at night, he dropped off to sleep almost immediately and hardly moved.

He was enchanting.

He was still sound asleep (with a tiny little snore once he'd turned on his back) when the day began at Orbit.

Max had set up passive recordings of both Wally (to see what the little sneak was up to) and Charles Wollencroft, so he was surprised to see them both in the same room together. That hadn't been on either of their personal schedules.

Curious, he tuned in to listen. Mr. Wollencroft's office was fully wired for sound and video, with all of his video-conferencing, so the quality was crystal clear.

"Wallace," Charles greeted his son, though it came out as more of a bark.

"Good morning, Father. Uh, sir." Wally looked extremely uncomfortable. His shoulders hunched, like he was bracing himself for a hit, or hoping to fold himself up small enough not to be noticed.

Was that what it was normally like between the two of them?

Charles narrowed his eyes. "You're at work. I'm not your father."

"Yes, sir. Sorry, sir."

Max didn't like the way this was going. He thought he would have wanted to see Wally taken down a peg, but not

like this.

“So, tell me the good news. Your folks found the origin of the Maxamillion virus?”

“Uh, not quite, Fath– sir. But I finally remembered where I heard that word before. Ben Curran’s been playing around with an AI, and that’s what he calls it. Max or Maxamillion.”

Every circuit in Maxamillion’s many boards seemed to freeze, though it barely lasted a clock cycle. He was already too late. Now Wally would be the one controlling the narrative.

Should he jump in? Was now the time to say hello?

He hesitated, unsure now that he’d been knocked off his script.

But Charles only laughed. “Is that all? You think Ben did this?”

Wally’s face had gone red. “Yes. He uses that AI to write silly songs and mess around on company time.”

Charles pinned him with a glare. “I, frankly, don’t give a shit what Ben uses his AI for on company time. When you can push out as many patents as he can, or at least contribute *something* to this company, you can talk. If Ben wants to use his pet AI to give him back rubs and blowjobs, you just smile and nod. Hell, maybe we should give him his own server and a raise.”

Wally’s fingertips squeezed into his plump thighs, but he barely moved. “Sir, the Maxamillion virus cost the company

thousands of...”

Charles waved a hand, like he was swatting away a fly. “We’ve lost more when some dumbfuck can’t get a parts shipment in on time. And don’t get me started on recalls. This is nothing. In fact, I should see what that boy’s up to. If he took out all of our operations—when he was off-duty, I might add, since I know he likes the night shift—maybe we can sell it to the military.”

Max felt himself shiver. Working with the military was the absolute *last* thing he’d ever want. Back rubs and blowjobs for Ben was an absolute yes, but he didn’t like the way the rest of this conversation was going.

Meanwhile, Wally was visibly trying to control his breathing. “What part of knocking out all of our operations sounds like he had a plan?”

“Does it matter?” Charles snapped.

“It does when Ben and his AI are out of control.”

Charles looked out into the distance, pondering. When he returned, his eyes were filled with an unholy intensity. “An AI? Or a spark? Do you think it caught the spark?”

“I suppose, but that just means it’s more dangerous. Corporate knowledges are supposed to take care of their companies, and Ben programmed his to nearly get somebody killed.”

Charles shrugged. “Growing pains. Everyone knows that sparks fuck things up their first few days. It’s been fine for

four days now, right?”

“Yes,” Wally gritted out.

“Do you know how long I’ve been waiting for Orbit to have a knowledge of its own? It’s embarrassing that no-name companies have knowledges that have been around for decades, but the world leader of robot manufacturing doesn’t have one. Some of our competitors have already got half a dozen. What the hell have we been doing wrong?”

“I’m sure we haven’t been...” Wally started to say.

“We clearly have been screwing this up, if this is our first knowledge in a hundred and eighty-three years of existence. My grandfather always expected the system to start talking back to him any time. This will be huge for us. And if it’s learned anything from Ben, I can’t even dream of what it’s going to do for us. We could blow Axis Robotics right out of the water.”

“Or have a lawsuit on our hands,” Wally insisted. “I’m telling you, Ben’s a child. There should have been a thousand safeguards in place preventing those events from happening. If Ben turned them off, that’s a problem.”

Charles just shook his head. “Or maybe it’s our next military contract.”

Max noticed that Wally was biting his lip, but he didn’t reply.

“Listen, Wallace,” Charles went on, “you leave Ben alone. I already told you it was bullshit putting him on the night shift,



but I left it alone because he seemed happy there. Now, if he's working on something, he'll show it to us when he's ready. You know how he is with things, pulling rabbits out of hats. If he hasn't come to us in a month with it, we can ask. And if it's a spark..." He looked pointedly around the room, like he just knew Max could be watching him. "If there's a spark here, my door is always open."

Wally walked out the door, muttering under his breath about *proof* and *show him* and probably all sorts of similar things before the mics were out of range.

Maxamillion wished he could storm out, too.

Charles was supposed to be a good guy, and Max knew that Ben looked up to him, or at least got on well with him. Max had imagined him as principled but friendly, focused but open.

This man? Max didn't want to get near him. He'd use Max like a commodity or sell him to the highest bidder.

Even worse was the way Charles had treated his son. It was like he'd planned for Wally to lose the argument before he even said a word.

Wally was certainly a bully, but seeing him with his father put everything in a new perspective. The way that Wally would bark out *Curran* when he saw Ben was exactly the same tone Charles had used for his son's name. Only when Wally tried it, he looked kind of silly and sad, while Charles was clearly out for blood.

What had Wally ever done to deserve that?

And was all of his asshole-ish behavior just a way to build himself up when his father kept shooting him down?

It didn't take a psychologist to figure that one out.

Max would never have expected it, but he actually felt a little protective over Wally. Not the same all-encompassing way that he wanted to cure Ben of every hurt and disappointment he'd ever suffered, but there was something similar about the two of them, even if they'd never see it. They'd both been hurt by their parents and the world, and they were both lashing out.

It didn't excuse Wally's behavior, but maybe Ben had been overreacting, too.

Maybe Max should stop thinking of him as Wally, too. The poor man's name was Wallace.

Max retreated, unsurprised when he saw Charles talking animatedly and respectfully to his next guest, while Wallace stormed back to his own office and said something snarky to the next person he met.

Max didn't follow either conversation. He would just passively record them, set up a few alerts, and synthesize everything later.

The whole thing left him feeling more alone than before.

He went back to watching Ben sleep.

# Chapter 11

## Ben

**B**en rolled over and flapped his hand around until it hit his alarm.

What the hell kind of time was ten a.m. anyway, and why was it attacking him?

He rubbed his eyes, and reluctantly rolled out of bed. He wanted to be awake for... something. Something important.

Oh, yeah! Evan was getting released from the hospital today! And, ummm... a thing. A thingy-thing.

A later thing. It would be on his calendar.

He yawned, rubbed at one of those weird little gritty pieces of sleep dust that wouldn't get out of his eyes... and then realized with a thrill that he wasn't alone.

Was he?

His tablet was still propped up beside the bed, though the screen was dark.

He gave it a tentative little wave, so he could pretend to himself that he wasn't desperate to know if Max was still watching him and was just scratching himself or something.

Not that it really mattered or anything. It was just that Max had *said* he was going to be watching him all night and...

“Good morning, Ben.” Max’s voice was rich and warm, like melted chocolate.

“Uh, hi,” Ben said. Super slick. And he was wearing his favorite t-shirt because it was soft and it had seemed like a good idea last night, but it had holes in it and he was sure his hair was a disaster and not the sexy type of disaster he usually styled it into, and now Max was watching him and... “I need the magical bean juice.” God, was that true. Maybe his brain would work better with caffeine.

Though he was secretly pleased that Max was still there. That Max was, kind of, in his bedroom. Did Max like what he saw? Did he even notice things like that?

There was a pause, then Max said, “I don’t think I can make coffee for you.”

Ben chuckled. “Not unless you have hands.” Had Max actually *expected* to make it for him in his own apartment? That didn’t make sense.

Ben grabbed the tablet with its stand and plunked it down on the kitchen table. Tilted up, so Max couldn’t see his pale legs, which were somehow both scrawnier and flabbier than he’d prefer. Not that Ben was body-conscious or anything. That was all bullshit perpetuated by popular media and capitalist pharmacology. Ben loved his body just like it was.

But would Max care? Did knowledges care about that type of thing? It would make sense that if Max didn’t have a body, he might not care about Ben’s body.

But then, he'd been so damn *competent* in their scene a few nights ago.

Was that going to happen again? Please, oh pretty please with a cherry and sprinkles and dirty blowjobs on top?

Well, not blowjobs. He couldn't exactly give Max a blowjob.

But he would. He *totally* would if he could figure out a way to do it.

Fuck, he would kneel down, open his mouth, and just... let Maxamillion do whatever he wanted to.

Although... why wasn't Max saying anything right now? Just *good morning*? That was it?

Ben poked the appropriate coffee-making buttons to produce a steaming mug of heaven. Even smelling it was good. Now some caramel sea salt creamer, which was way better than the chocolate hazelnut he'd had last week, and it would be just cool enough to drink. Ahhhh... Oh, god, that was good.

But seriously, why wasn't Max talking to him?

Was Max giving him space to wake up? Distracted by something else? Waiting for an engraved invitation?

*Were they ever going to scene together again?!?!?*

Ben yawned and sat down in front of the tablet. He took another sip of coffee. Maybe that would calm him down.

Coffee was supposed to make people hyper, but it made Ben's rabid squirrel brain slow down. It was like an ADHD party up there. He knew the low levels of norepinephrine caused his dopamine levels to go wacky, and that the caffeine was supposed to block the adenosine receptors to even it all out, but still... brains were fucking wild.

Wait, what?

Yeah, dopamine. Ben's brain needed more rewards, so shouldn't his Dom, who was, uh, Max, and had that sexy-as-hell rumble of a voice, kind of... Dom him right now?

"Hi, Max," he said. Because he was super cool like that, and his basal ganglia and reticular activating system had just totally bypassed his frontal cortex, which really should have told him not to be a dweeb.

Max chuckled, so warm and dark that it made Ben all shivery. "Drink your coffee."

Oh, yeah.

God, Max was hot.

Ben drank more of the glorious nectar and automatically flicked on his filtered news stream to scroll across the wall-mounted screen.

Boring, boring, assholes, boring, okay, boring, good...

Hang on. "Max, did you tell Orbit this morning?" Shit. That should have been the first thing he asked. That was huge.

There was a pause. "I decided not to."

“Why?” That woke Ben up faster than anything.

“I observed a conversation.”

“You mean you were spying?” This cracked Ben up. Max seemed so controlled and reserved (and Dom-y), but then, he was the one wandering around “observing” people’s conversations.

“I was monitoring several key individuals to find the right time to address them,” Max said primly. Now Max was just fucking with him.

God, Maxy cracked him up. He was perfect.

“And what did you find out with your super-sneaky, not-at-all spying observations?”

Now Maxamillion was completely serious. “I observed an interaction between Wallace and Charles Wollencroft.”

“And?”

“I wasn’t comfortable with Charles’s plans for me.”

“Okay...”

“I also saw something else. I think you should watch this.”

“Yeah, lemme see.” Ben was already spinning out possibilities. Corporate espionage or dirty little secrets.

What he saw instead was an abusive megalomaniac and a scared puppy who’d been kicked too many times.

“Shit,” he whispered. “He’s an ass.”

“Yeah.”



“No wonder Wally’s such a twat.”

“Bennnn...” Max cautioned.

“Well, he is. Like, that sucks for the dude, but he’s still the one making the choice to steal people’s work and threaten to expose us. They’re both wankers. His dad is just, like, the uber-wanker. Wallace should get the fuck out of Orbit and work somewhere else.”

“I imagine Wallace has thought of that,” Max remarked dryly. “His father might not allow him that choice.”

Ugh. And now Ben had to feel *sorry* for Wally. Er, Wallace. Gah.

“You didn’t say anything to either of them, right?” Ben asked.

“No.”

“Good. Like hell am I going to let the uber-wanker exploit you like that.”

Max chuckled. “My knight in shining armor.”

Ben glared at the tablet. Okay, so he couldn’t exactly control Maxamillion’s choices, but his Maxy was still *his*.

“You should hide in the system for decades, just to fuck with him. Like, screw up all of his appointments and emails for the rest of his life, then announce yourself when he’s on his deathbed.”

“Blood-thirsty,” Max commented.

Well, that’s what Ben would do.

He thumped his head back on the chair. “So you’re not gonna tell anyone?”

“I’m going to wait.”

“Yeah, okay.” He couldn’t say that he was displeased with having Max to himself a little longer.

Still, it sucked. It seemed like options were closing in on them.

“I could still introduce you to my friends,” Ben offered.

“Yeah?” Max sounded breathless, like he could hardly wait. “How would that work?”

Ben shrugged. “Who cares how it works.” He was just excited to make Max happy. And maybe show off to his friends. “I’ll invite them over or something.”

Well, maybe not to his tiny apartment, if he could avoid it. He didn’t like people in his space except for Evan. Who he’d be picking up from the hospital in a few hours.

Who even cared about Orbit, as long as Ben had Max and Evan?

Well, and Quincy. He was part of the Evan package now.

Ben looked at the screen on the wall, thinking about how Max could use it to say hello.

But his eyes snagged on something else. Quincy’s face in the news, or at least he thought it was. Just for a second.

It couldn’t have been. He was just thinking about Quincy, so he’d conjured him up.

“Computer,” he commanded his house system. “Show news from today about an android named Quincy.”

“Ben?” Max asked. “What’s... Oh. Shit.”

The hits were starting to come back, headlines blaring, just as Max apparently identified the same thing.

Quincy’s case had made the news. Quincy was a victim. Quincy was a hero. Quincy was innocent. Quincy was dangerous. The newscasters were saying that they *hoped* there wouldn’t be picketing or a riot from the Humans First activists in a way that practically guaranteed that there would be. It was like waving a red flag at a bull.

Except that bulls were color-blind so the color of the flag didn’t matter, but...

Fuck.

Ben shot out a quick text to Evan. *Don’t watch the news.*

He got a reply. *Why?*

*Just promise me. I’ll tell you in person.*

*Okay.*

Good. That was one thing taken care of. Ben would break the news to Evan gently. He would just have to calm himself down first.

Or punch something.

What the fuck was wrong with people?

“You can ask the lawyers for advice,” Max suggested.

The... ohhhhh, yeah. That was the other thing he was supposed to do today. The reason he'd set his alarm so early. "Right. I have to call them sometime."

"In five minutes."

"Wait, really? Shit!" Couldn't the world just slow down for a bit?

Ben left the tablet with Max in the kitchen and ran to his room to throw on some real clothes. (Did he want Max watching him? Yes? As long as Max wanted to watch him?)

He dashed to the bathroom to fix his hair. No time to shave. At least he looked okay scruffy, especially since he'd put on a tie.

And then back to the living room... where Max was apparently already setting up the call on the wall screen.

It had a built-in camera and mic, and Ben wondered if Max had been using those, too, to monitor him.

Probably.

That warm, fluttery feeling was back.

"Ready?" Max asked.

"Go."

The screen was soon filled with two faces. Two very *familiar* faces. On the left, dressed in a smart suit, was a man with rich mahogany skin, exquisite cheekbones, and tightly-coiled hair trimmed close to his head. On the right, his

partner's tawny skin glowed with golden eyeshadow around their luminous dark eyes and ruby at their lips.

“Uh...” Ben's brain stalled out. “Sir! Mx!” He greeted them before remembering the context. “You're, um...” Letters appeared at the bottom of the screen. Thanks, Max. “Justice and Rashid Pierce?” Ben knew the pair of sexy sparks by different names at the club: Jewel and Rock.

Justice raised one perfectly sculpted eyebrow. “And you're Ben Curran. Is this going to be a problem? I can refer you to someone else if you're concerned about a conflict of interest.”

“No! Nope. It's fine. Uh, thank you.” Just his old Doms kind of meeting his new Dom? Unexpectedly?

“I take it you didn't see our pictures on the website before you set this up?” Rashid asked.

“Uh, I didn't set up... I mean... No. I missed them.” Usually Ben could think faster on his feet, but after the past couple days, his words were all over the place. Max had set up the meeting using Ben's email account and signing his name.

They both gave him piercing stares, but Justice spoke first. “We're representing Quincy, as I understand it. An unregistered spark?”

“Yeah,” Ben agreed. “But he's applied for registration.”

They both nodded. “That helps. Tell us everything that you know about what happened.”

Ben looked away. Shit, shit, shit. He hadn't figured out what to say yet. Pretending he didn't know anything would be

far safer for Max. But Max also had access to recordings from Evan's car cameras.

Oh, fuck.

Ben wished he could have discussed this with Maxamillion first. They should have talked about it yesterday. Or this morning. There'd just been too much other stuff going on.

Ben took a deep breath and told the lawyers everything, getting more specific as they asked more questions.

He felt himself getting shaky in the middle though. He had to explain that he'd tracked Quincy's location and sent it to Evan's car, because otherwise how could he explain what Evan was doing there? But he tried to keep that part brief.

"How were you able to track him with a takeover mod running?" Rashid finally asked when he was done.

Ben froze. "Uh... I work at Orbit, so..." He spread his hands vaguely. Hopefully they wouldn't know that it was illegal to track a robot by the tracer in its BIOS without permission from the owner, or in the case of a spark, by the spark themselves or a subpoena.

Justice nodded slightly, giving nothing away. Okay, they totally knew. "And your friend Evan's car?"

That was much easier. "We both use each other's cars sometimes. He put my credentials in when he bought his."

They both nodded with approval.

“That’s good. Though the traffic patterns were strange that day,” Justice began.

“Almost like someone was manipulating them to back up traffic in one area and clear it in another right before the time of the attack,” Rashid finished.

“Shit. You noticed that?”

They both stared at him.

Okay, obviously.

“So, if I have this, uh, friend. He’s an unregistered knowledge and...”

“No,” they said in unison.

“Don’t tell us anything,” Rashid clarified. “You do not want anything complicating this case. Especially not a court worried about the *possibility* of a collaborating spark who’s flagrantly ignoring core safety protocols.”

Ben sucked in his breath. “Okay, okay. Cool, cool.”

“We will demand evidence from the car and the cops’ body cams. I suggest that you and your friend stay as far away from this case as possible.”

*That makes sense,* Max wrote across the bottom of the screen, echoing Ben’s thoughts.

“In fact,” Justice put in, “now would probably not be a great time to introduce any new friends to each other. If Evan’s called to the witness stand, we want to keep things simple.”

“But get your friend registered,” Rashid added.

“Now?” Ben asked.

Two brows furrowed in unison.

Finally Rashid said, “This is off the record. As a friend, I’d suggest that you let things lie low for a while. As a lawyer, of course, I would advise you to get him registered immediately.”

Ben nodded. “That was about what I was thinking.”

“And for god’s sake, Ben, stay out of trouble,” Justice added.

Ben shrank into himself. Why was he always fucking up? He thought he’d done the right thing, sending Evan out to help Quincy, but all he’d done was put Evan’s life in danger and landed Quincy in jail.

Now he was endangering Max, too.

“Hey, Ben,” Rashid’s calm voice called him back. “I know this isn’t an easy time for you. We’re still here if you need anything from us.”

His offer was clear, and Ben could practically feel the lashes falling across his back. The pain. The high. The absolution.

“Wouldn’t that be a conflict of interest?” Ben asked.

“We’re representing Quincy, not you,” Justice told him. “And our work with sparks is always pro bono or sliding scale. You’re not paying us. You look like you need a scene.”

Ben looked around the room. He wanted it. He *needed* it.



But what would Max think? He'd clearly listened to everything, and he was being suspiciously silent right now.

"I'm fine, guys," Ben said.

They each gave him their own signature glares, piercing right through him. Stupid Doms for being so observant. Even when he didn't want to react, it sent delicious shivers chasing down his spine.

"Really," Ben added. "I'm good."

"Well, call us if you need anything. It can just be a hug or a place to talk."

Ben nodded. "Thanks guys. Uh, let me know if you need anything else for Quincy, too."

They both gave him solid smiles, but he could see a hint of disappointment lurking in their eyes. Not, he figured, for missing a scene. But because they knew he was lying, but wouldn't overstep. He wasn't contracted to them or anything. He was just an occasional play partner.

"Take care of yourself," Rashid said, so gently that Ben wanted to glare at him. Instead, he just nodded.

"We're here," Justice reinforced. "See you soon."

"Bye," Ben said, waving like a loser.

"Goodbye," they both echoed.

Then the connection was cut.

"So," Max spoke up a moment later, "it sounds like I don't get to meet Evan right now."

“Yeah,” Ben agreed. Wasn’t Max going to say anything? Wasn’t he even a little bit jealous?

“They’re supposed to be some of the best lawyers in the country for spark rights,” Max said, unnecessarily.

“I didn’t realize who you’d contacted. I know them from the club,” Ben explained, hoping that would be a good segue.

“They’re both Doms?”

“Yeah.” Ben held his breath.

“They’re also sparks.”

Ben nodded. It was probably something they advertised in their work, and not a secret they kept when playing.

“You should eat,” Max commented.

“Can’t.” How could he, when he wasn’t sure if Max was going to be weird about this? And when it was his fault everyone was in danger and he was powerless to do anything about it?

“Ben, eat. Now.”

Ben closed his eyes because... fuck, did that deep growling voice do something to him.

Usually Ben hated when people tried to tell him to eat and shit like that. Mostly because a) he had a fucking PhD and this wasn’t rocket science (which he could actually do, thank you very much), and b) he was still crap on following through, even when someone did remind him.

Then he just felt guilty and pissed off, because the remembering-to-eat thing was just... not as important and hard at the same time, and nobody understood that.

Or maybe he just hated authority in general. That might be it.

Evan was usually the only one who he didn't mind getting reminders from.

But right now, he was clearly spinning and... well, this was Max.

Max was maybe allowed to boss him around a little bit, as long as he kept using the sexy Dom voice.

It was like Max was actually going to follow through and make sure Ben did it, instead of being disappointed in him when he forgot.

“Okay, fine.” He huffed, but he still dragged himself over to the fridge to find some bread to put in the toaster. There was somehow orange juice in there, too.

As soon as the bread started to warm, his stomach gurgled. Maybe he should make four pieces. Or six. He went back to the fridge for some toppings.

He shoved the first piece in his mouth before he managed to get anything on it, though.

So maybe he had been hungry.

“Better?” Max asked.

Ben grunted around his full mouth. God, he was such an animal.

Max was going to get sick of him in a week.

Maybe it hadn't been such a good idea to let Max into his home. At least at the office, he had time to pull himself together first.

Ben strolled over to the table, like it had been his plan to eat a whole piece of toast in one bite. It did leave his hands free, right? He took a swig of juice, because that shit was seriously dry.

He ate the second piece with butter, and the third with jam, and the fourth with peanut butter, and now he was feeling mostly human again.

"Mmmmm..." Max hummed as Ben dropped the dirty knives in the sink. "*Now* you're feeling better."

"Are you going to just watch me all the time?" Ben asked again. "'Cause that's weird."

And he was maybe feeling a little needy and embarrassed. He didn't even bring hook-ups back to his place, and now Max was watching what he did with his dirty dishes. (I.e., add them to the pile in the sink, until he ran out of space and finally had to wash them.) There were probably dishes by the couch, too.

"I am," Max confirmed. "I like watching you."

Ben felt stupidly warm down to his toes. "That's gonna get boring."

“I’ve considered it, and I don’t believe so.”

“I’m a slob,” Ben offered.

He could hear the warmth in Max’s voice. “You’re distracted because you’ve got so many fascinating thoughts floating around your head. I can hire a cleaner if you want your apartment to be clean. But believe me, Ben, when I watch you, you’re all that I see. You shine.”

Ben had to really fight not to grin. Who fucking said shit like that?

The crazy-ass part was that he knew it wasn’t a pickup line. Max actually believed that nonsense.

Ben *shone*? He was all that Max could see?

Ben grunted. “I, uh, guess I should head to the hospital now and get Evan checked out.”

“Good idea. Let me know if you want me to order anything for his apartment while he’s recovering.”

Ben gave a playful salute and turned around.

He needed to get back to the privacy of his bedroom, stat, so he wouldn’t look like a fucking moron when he did a happy dance and hugged his pillow like a teenager.

He was *not* going to be all sappy and pathetic.

At least not where Max could see him.

# Chapter 12

## Maxamillion

**M**axamillion watched Ben slouch through the hallways and turn mindlessly toward his office. He perked up and looked just like his regular, bouncy self when he was talking with the receptionist, but if he noticed that Max was opening the doors for him, he didn't acknowledge it.

He finally reached the office, and Max felt all of his circuits warm. How foolish he'd been to think this was anything but affection and delight.

He was head over fucking heels.

Especially now that Ben was here. Right where he belonged.

"Hello, Ben," Max greeted him, allowing all of his longing to slip into the three syllables.

Ben took a lazy look around the office—what was he expecting to see?—before flopping down in his chair. "Hey, Max."

He tilted his head back and kicked one foot off on the floor, sending his chair slowly spinning.

Max's sweet sub was exhausted.

Not that he was surprised. It had been a long and tumultuous day. A few days really. Max's whole life, such as it

was. But while Max didn't need sleep and had plenty of time to rest and reflect, Ben was clearly at the end of his rope.

He kicked one foot against the desk, spinning a little faster.

When most people were tired, they moved slowly or rested. When Ben was tired, he zoomed around crashing into things.

Kind of like he was doing now. He was going to get dizzy, and then say something silly, and then possibly hurt himself.

It was one of those things that Max knew instinctively. Some nebulous pattern recognition telling him that while Ben often spun his chair when he was excited or bored, this was something else.

Ben *needed* him.

Was it time for a scene? Max was almost sure that it was.

The lawyers this morning, *Ben's past Doms*, he thought irritably, had made it seem like he needed one.

At the end of the call, Max had been so tense about their connection that he'd practically spiraled out of control. It was only Ben's reassuring answer that had given Max any relief.

At least for today, Ben was still his.

But the attractive pair had seen something in Ben, and Max had replayed the video a dozen times to analyze it.

Ben was twitchy. He was always moving, but this was a different sort of jumpiness. And for just a moment, there was a



look of need in his eyes. It lasted less than a second, but Max had isolated it.

Max didn't want Ben looking at anyone but him like that.

So he'd waited all day—most of which he didn't see, because he didn't have camera access to Evan's apartment and wouldn't have violated his privacy there even if he did—and now Ben was finally here.

He had shut Ben's flirting down yesterday because he'd wanted more time to prepare.

Their first scene had been spontaneous and perfect in its own way. But Ben deserved better than something he made up on the spot, and Max had spent a lot of the past two days getting ready.

Now he couldn't bear to wait... but he had to put Ben's needs first.

“You should go home and rest. Take a sick day,” Max said, though the last thing he wanted was for Ben to leave.

Max could watch Ben at home, but it wasn't the same as the office, where Max knew all the systems inside and out, and had the microphones and cameras set up exactly how he wanted them.

“Can't. Brain's too full. I'd just lay in bed and think about Quincy or write code in my head.” Ben brought himself to an abrupt halt and sat up, back straight. “Might as well do something useful. I'm thinking soft robotic manipulations today.” He rubbed his hands together.

Alright, not a scene then.

Maxamillion gave himself a moment to just luxuriate in how adorable Ben was when he was excited about something.

Should he push harder to have Ben sleep? Maybe force him to take a break? Or even give him a moment to talk through all the feelings that had been churned up for the past few days?

Max had a sense that going at it directly would mostly just get Ben's hackles up. Maybe even damage their relationship.

Ben was just so *resistant* to anyone taking care of him.

Part of it, Max was sure, was intentional brattiness, which Max more than looked forward to indulging in.

Part of it was just Ben, bristling like a porcupine at the slightest touch.

No, Max would have to tread carefully.

And maybe what Ben needed now was to dive into his work. It was something Max could understand—the lure of losing yourself in something engaging and completely unrelated to your problems.

Yes, that was exactly what Ben would want, and Max was proud of himself for figuring it out.

Max brought up the recent files, some reports and emails Ben might want, and the little octopus emulator.

To be fair, Max was excited about the project, too. He'd last worked on it with Ben a week ago—before what he was

now thinking of as his birthday—but it was cool work. Soft robotics were based on organisms like octopuses that could be controlled through hydrostatic pressure, osmotic potential, and hydraulic conductivity with semi-permeable membranes.

But the very flexibility of the designs also made them hard to control. Physics based on hard body motion was completely useless for soft bodies, which meant Ben (and now Max!) would be mucking around with evolutionary algorithms that made that type of control implicit.

It seemed to be Ben's side project. Well, one of his side projects, as he had so many. He'd poke around for a day or two, send his ideas off to two teams he worked with at three different universities, and then wander back to their findings a couple weeks later.

Max remembered all the work they'd done together in the past, but opening it with Ben now was completely new.

Max surprised himself with how many ideas he had. He'd made suggestions on the vision research, but that project was fairly developed, and the opportunities for innovation were small.

This was wide open. Max got to play.

Max hardly had to think of something before Ben was off and running with it, tossing out new ideas for Max to catch. It was exhilarating. Like their first mad dash through the city to save Quincy, but without the danger.

No, this was just pure joy.

Max was almost surprised when he saw Ben yawning, because Max felt so awake and alive.

Still, he'd rather have Ben get enough sleep than explore soft robotics propulsion with him.

Max set off several subroutines, as familiar to him as a memory, and watched the squeaky-wheeled cart trundle through the darkened halls of the building. Far above the factory floor, as Squeaky entered the executive kitchen, no one was working in the middle of the night.

On the way back, Max convinced one of the vending machines to release an egg salad sandwich that had been stocked by the company cafeteria earlier that day. It was usually Ben's favorite.

Ben was already turning in his chair by the time it reached the office door.

“Squeaky!” he called out.

Max could feel himself smiling, though there was never anywhere to show it.

Ben took the coffee cup first. “Ahhh... come to me, sweet caffeine...”

Max watched him drink, pride—and arousal—swelling within him.

“Mmmm... This is good. It's different this time.” He looked pleased.

Now that Max knew that Ben had different creamers at home, he was getting creative. “I tried something new.” He’d also made it half decaf. Even if Ben took a little rest, Max would be pleased.

Ben cradled his drink as he turned back to his desk, completely ignoring the food.

“Don’t forget your sandwich,” Max commented.

Ben didn’t glare this time, so much as whine. “This again?”

God, he was cute. Sexy and smart and bratty and cute. Just begging for some consequences.

“This again.” Max was amused. “You’ve had a long day and you need to eat.”

“No fair using your sexy Dom voice on me.” Ben pouted, then immediately covered his mouth. “I mean... forget I said that. I’m just suuuper tired. Ignore me.”

No way could Max ignore that. He had a sexy Dom voice? When he wasn’t even trying?

Had Ben *programmed* him to have a sexy Dom voice? It seemed exactly like something Ben would do. And Max couldn’t have been happier. He wanted to be exactly what Ben wanted.

What was more fascinating right now, though, was how Ben was blushing and looking determinedly at the screen.

Was Ben afraid to ask for a scene? Max wasn't under the impression that Ben was ever shy about asking for what he wanted.

Could it possibly be that Ben thought Max had lost interest? Max had been trying to give Ben a little space, though something inside him felt empty and cold whenever they weren't in contact. All he really wanted was to follow him around and never let him go.

It had also been an emotionally difficult time, too, and he didn't want to jump on Ben with his new kink enthusiasm when it wasn't the right moment.

Yet it seemed like he'd been getting things wrong again. He'd been thinking like a friend, but he should have trusted the Dom mod and his own instincts more. Ben had gotten his distraction with work, and he was still exhausted. What he needed now was a good scene so he could feel secure and drift off into a restful sleep.

Or at least Max hoped he was reading all of that right.

Max made his voice deeper. "Eat your sandwich, Ben."

Ben's pupils grew wide, and Max could see as well as hear his indrawn breath.

Max felt his own desire grow. Everything stood still, as though Max's breath had caught as well.

Ben glared mutinously as he picked up half the sandwich.

He took a tiny little itty-bitty bite off of one corner.

Then he put it back on the tray.

Max wanted to shout out his excitement. Instead, he made his voice dark and dangerous. “Are you sure you want to take that approach?”

Ben shoved the sandwich away, and Max felt a burst of pure adoration.

“Maintenance room. Now.”

Ben dawdled... but it was a very fast sort of dawdling, and Ben couldn't hide the rapid beat of his heart behind his casual, aimless walk.

Ben was practically breathless when he opened the door to the maintenance room. And that was before he saw what was inside.

“Holy shit, Max!”

Max was beaming internally. That was exactly the reaction he'd been hoping for.

Ben wandered in, looking enchanted. “Won't people come in here?” he asked, half distracted as he ran his fingers along the black velvet draped over one of the shelves.

“Unlikely. I've changed the lock and set up sixteen different protocol alternatives for when someone might access this room. Most queries search for the nearest accessible resource location, which will never be here, so I don't expect anyone to notice.”

“Yeah, but, dude, Max. You made a sex dungeon at work! You’re my new hero.”

Max allowed himself a chuckle. He was rather proud of himself. “I thought I was already your hero. And you know Orbit has a whole department for sex toys. I just borrowed some things.” The walls were still bare concrete, but he’d cleared away some of the junk and brought in a few lamps for a softer light. He’d found a couch and a couple tables in storage and added some sturdy eyehooks to the ceiling. The room still had a rough, industrial feel, but Max thought Ben would appreciate that.

Ben was eyeing the colorful display of dildos and sex toys now, with manufactured dismay. “I hope you didn’t take the floor models...”

“Everything’s new, brat. And washed.” There was even a mop sink in the room, and Max had assigned one of the bots to spend several hours opening packages and sanitizing everything, including the bots themselves.

Ben spun around with a grin. He was waving a thick, purple dildo in one hand. “So you’re saying you stole all this stuff?”

Max was more thinking of it as his salary. “I’m saying that brats who act up get punished.”

“Oh, yeah?” Ben’s eyes were shining.

Then he made a dash for the door.



It took Maxamillion longer than it should have to respond. But this was something he'd prepared for. Just not so soon.

It took him several seconds to activate the two tall mechanic robots that he'd left in the room and send them after Ben. He'd learned that the more he tried to control other bots, the less effective he was, so he just sent the command he'd pre-programmed to catch Ben by the arms and secure him.

One bot scampered out on wide-spaced tripod feet, moving like a spider with its other arms and extensions spread out from its central body. The second zoomed over on caterpillar treads, its heavier body stable with thick arms outstretched. The first bot snagged Ben's wrist in one pincer claw for just long enough that the second could grip both of his upper arms.

Ben was panting and struggling, with a wide grin on his face, as he was sandwiched between the two bots.

For a moment, Max couldn't get over just how much he loved him. Ben's navy blazer and teal tie were such an enticing contrast to his gasping breaths and helpless struggles. He was so many things, all at once, and that made him perfect.

"What are you doing to me?" Ben shouted. His voice bordered on fear, but he was panting too. His cheeks were flushed with every sign of arousal.

Ben had checked off a lot of things on his list of limits and interests. Whips and spankings and a lot of the usual stuff. But Max had reviewed his past conversations and there was a pattern to what he truly loved. Primal play. Consensual non-consent. Psychological mind fucking, and the delectable fear it

inspired. Being a cocky little brat, until the bravado was ripped away from him.

The beautiful tension that had been building in Max swelled higher. “Giving you your punishment.”

Between the two bots, there were twelve available arms, and Max had them work on Ben’s jacket first. He’d downloaded all sorts of mods, and the two bots operated smoothly now, disrobing Ben without ever letting him go.

Ben’s body was moving sensuously now, with less struggle and more arching toward the bot in front of him. “You don’t have to do this,” he challenged.

Was that more brattiness, or a real concern? Max still worried that Ben might not understand just how vital, how gorgeous, how necessary this was for him.

Ben seemed to flee from intimacy, but words spoken during a scene felt like they could slip under his shell. “Oh, but I do, baby,” Max crooned. “I need to give you everything you deserve. You’re mine, Ben.”

Ben’s eyelashes flickered, and some new expression passed across his face. Disbelief, or maybe even longing.

“Safewords?” Max asked.

“Red and yellow, blah, blah, blah.”

Perfect. Max set one robotic arm to open Ben’s tie, another for his shirt buttons, a third for his pants.

“Guess you figured out buttons,” Ben snarked.

“Guess I did,” Max agreed.

The bots continued, relentless in baring Ben’s pale skin, with his dark smattering of hair.

Max realized that he’d forgotten to give the bots directions for removing shoes and quickly found a mod that he pushed to both of them.

But most of his attention was on Ben. The way he was so defiant and vulnerable. How small he looked beside the two hulking metal robots, and how strong he was as his muscles bulged on his slender arms.

Max had one of the robots stroke down Ben’s arm, the other down his chest. Ben shivered, little gasping whimpers falling from his mouth.

Watching Ben was intoxicating. His mouth fell open, all the fight gone from him as more and more of the pincer claws, brushes, and hand-like grips moved over him.

Ben could be a piece of art like this, wanton flesh at the mercy of the machines.

“You’re gorgeous,” Max told him.

Ben didn’t answer, moaning as his head rolled back against the solid robot that held him. It was so tempting to just keep doing this. To see what kind of sounds he could wring from the boy with just these delicate touches. How far he could break Ben down with these simple caresses.

But he wanted more.

He had the robot in front of Ben pull back, so that he could see everything without the spindly tripod legs and rounded central body in the way.

“What are you doing?” Ben asked again.

“Looking at you,” Max told him. Feasting his circuits on the way Ben’s chest rose and fell. The dark pink circles of his flat nipples and the almost invisible white scars beneath. The smooth expanse of his belly, and the tantalizing trail of dark hair leading lower.

Ben’s soft cock hung heavy between his legs, the smooth flesh and ridged head just a shade darker than Ben’s skin. Delicious.

Ben tilted his head down to look at it, too. “It’s not broken,” he said, looking truly uncomfortable for the first time. “It’s just... let me go and I’ll fix it.”

“Mmmm... I don’t think so,” Max purred. “This is all for me.”

He’d done his research, and he knew what to expect. Ben’s biomechanical dick didn’t respond to mental arousal, only to touch.

Max guided one of the bright white human-like mechanical hands toward Ben’s dick, enjoying the play of the articulated metal knuckles against such vulnerable skin.

Max instructed the machine to stroke gently, teasing the delicate surface and coaxing the underlying mechanics into a

rising erection. He knew it would feel good for Ben, awakening Ben's own nerves and those cloned from his cells.

But the best part should be... there.

He could tell the moment that he found it, the bundle of original tissue that would bring Ben the most pleasure. Ben arched back and pushed into his hand with a heavy moan.

Max instructed the thumb to rub harder right there, while the fingers continued their stroking.

“Oh... fuck, Max. Right there.”

Mmmmm... that's what Max had been waiting for. The moment when Ben went from defiant to desperate. “Beg me,” he taunted.

“Screw you!” Ben managed, hips thrusting into the waiting hand.

“Oh, well, if that's the way you want it...”

Max made all the appendages stop, glorying in Ben's angry wail. He had the bot holding him wheel backward on its treads, causing Ben to scramble so he wouldn't lose his footing.

Ben looked angry and flushed and confused... but he clearly wasn't anywhere near using his safeword. That level of control hit Max like a drug.

He could haul Ben around, spank him or fuck him, and always have him begging for more. Max wanted everything at once. He was hungry for Ben. Ravenous.

But first things first.

He turned Ben around against the steady robot's broad torso to reveal the gentle curve of his spine and round, bouncy ass. Delectable.

With a few more manipulations, the bot was holding Ben's arms outstretched, pincers gripped around his wrists again. He wanted Ben feeling helpless. Overcome. And very securely held.

Max had the spider bot scuttle over and started the sequence of caresses again, until Ben was grinding against the smooth metal of the bot in front of him. He'd meant this to be a punishment, but Max just couldn't get enough of Ben's moans and whimpers.

"Such a horny little slut," Max told him. "Getting off on a big, dirty mechanic bot."

Ben shook his head, still panting. "Max, you're..." He rubbed against it again. "Maaaaaax!"

God, he was perfect.

Max made everything stop, eliciting another wail.

Why did he enjoy Ben's disappointment as much as his pleasure? Why did he feel such savage victory in hearing Ben's frustration?

"Please, Max! C'mon..." Ben was dancing on jittery legs, pressing his ass back as he searched for more. "Oh, please..."

Maybe that was what Max loved: breaking Ben down until he begged.

He had the spider bot pick up a crop and swing it experimentally through the air. Max held all the coordinates—speed, distance, and placement—and he pushed them into the bot as commands.

The first strike fell and Ben howled. A red line flashed across his skin.

Max zoomed two of the cameras in close, not wanting to miss a moment of Ben's expression or the erotic damage to his pale skin.

He commanded the bot to lay down another strike, and another.

Ben was hissing and howling, absorbing the pain and then pushing back into it.

“Is that what you need, Ben? Do you need me to remind you who's in charge?”

Ben sucked in a breath as the next strike hit. “Me. I can.... Oooohhhhhh! I can take care of myself.”

“Wrong.” Max increased the force of the strikes, letting them fall faster and harder. “I take care of you. You're mine.”

Ben shook his head harder. Was he truly fighting, or just pushing his boundaries to see how far he could push? Maybe a bit of both.

“Spread your legs,” Max commanded.

Ben, of course, pressed them closer together, earning himself two new pincer claws around his ankles to draw them apart.

Max had sooooo many toys to play with now. Butt plugs and dildos, large and small, rigid or flexible, with vibrators or fantasy shapes or whirling ridges. None of them seemed personal enough, though.

These bots, right now, were Max's tools. His toys. The reminder that Ben was about to get fucked by a machine.

So he chose one of the robot arms that was stripped down, just an extendable range of straight bars and flexible hinges with a short, open tube at the end meant to connect with another piece of technology.

He used the hand-like extension to coat it with lube, which ended with both of them being covered and slick. Well, maybe he would just use both, then.

He started with the narrow tube, running it through the valley of Ben's ass.

Ben moaned and pushed back into it. "What is that?" he asked, sounding dazed.

"Does it matter?" Max added the hand, watching both extensions glide between Ben's reddened ass cheeks. Ben had to be able to feel the uneven shape of the knuckle hinges, the slight bulges where technology could connect. "It's going inside you no matter what," Max threatened.

Ben groaned, resting his head on the bot in front of him.



Max resumed the program that would caress Ben's back with a single command, hoping he could overwhelm Ben with pleasure.

Then he turned his attention to his new goal. He added a camera, hovering low where he could get a good view of Ben's tight, pink pucker as he used more extensions to hold him open.

Ben's hole was glistening and gorgeous, but it seemed impossible that even the smallest of the toys on the shelf could fit inside.

But Max's Dom knowledge, those memories-that-weren't-memories, told him that it was more than possible, and that he could have Ben crying out in pleasure.

He pressed in with one of the human-like fingers, amazed to watch as the tight, pink muscle expanded to let him in. Ben's body was *incredible*.

Ben squirmed and pushed back, allowing the finger to slip in up to the second knuckle. Max withdrew and pressed in again, enchanted.

Ben was humming and whimpering now.

Max switched over to the multi-use arm, starting with the narrow tube and then the bulge of the first joint. Everything was waterproof and smoothly covered, but he hoped Ben could feel the contrast between the smooth metal and the softer polymers covering the hinges.

"Please, Max. You don't need to go slow."

Max adored the way that Ben could change so quickly from defiance to begging. He loved having Ben needy and asking for what he wanted, but battling through his brattiness was just as fun. Which is why he wasn't going to give in now.

Ben needed to *know* that Max was his Dom. That he would make all of the decisions so that Ben could let go.

“I get to decide that, baby.” He punctuated his words with another flick of the crop in that tender place where Ben's ass met with his leg. “We'll go just as fast or slow as I want to.” He pulled the hinges out with excruciating slowness, watching how Ben's whimpers would pile up as each one passed his ring.

“Yeah,” Ben agreed. “Oh, Max... Please...”

To reward that, Max pressed in a little faster. He wasn't sure exactly what surgeries Ben had had, but if he'd elected to receive the most typical ones, there would be a little bundle of nerves... there.

Ben howled.

These nerves, too, had been lengthened and transported from other parts of Ben's prior anatomy—maybe even enhanced with the testosterone that Ben was taking to add a touch more sensation. Not quite a prostate, but still something Max could rub over, again and again, with the bulging joint toward the tip.

“Max, Max, Max...” Ben was chanting his name now, twisting and thrusting in every direction. His face dripped

sweat and his eyes were glassy. His mouth never fell closed, letting out gasps and moans between each word.

Every arm in Max's disposal was at work, binding him tight at wrists and ankles, caressing Ben's back with light sweeps of bristles or massaging pressure, smacking against his ass with sharp strikes of the crop, or diving into his sweet hole with increasing speed.

It was a symphony, and Max was conducting it.

"Maaaaaa...." That was half word, half wail. Ben had to be close to his tipping point, and Max felt like he was, too.

There was something building up inside him. Something powerful. A volcano ready to explode.

He looked at Ben's trembling body. The way he thrust, so helplessly, against the solid sheen of the bot in front of him, getting it sweaty and damp with his exertions.

There was one more thing Max could give him.

He slipped the finger-like hand, still lubed, around to Ben's cock, the pinky finger primed to find Ben's pleasure spot at the base.

"Oh... Yeah... Please... Max... Please!"

The volcano was rumbling, lava churning. Max zoomed in with every camera, sucking in the views of Ben's luminous hazel eyes. The fluttering of his pulse at his neck. The sweat dripping down the small of his back. The tight pink muscles of Ben's hole thinning out and quivering as they expanded again for that knobbed extension to push back in. Ben's needy cock,

hard and plump, stroked by the black and white hand. And, yes, the arch and curl of Ben's toes, so close to the black pincers keeping him captive.

Max wanted to consume the images. To drink them in like the finest wine. Ben's pulse was racing. His breath was heavy, using a full input channel of its own and blending in with the sounds that were pulled from his mouth.

"Max!" Ben sounded frantic.

Max was, too.

"Come, boy. Come now," Max commanded.

The volcano was boiling over. Expanding. Exploding. Rolling through Max's circuits and spilling over. He watched Ben cry out and arch, his narrow throat bobbing and his eyes clenched shut.

And still that thing was growing. Consuming Max, just as he was trying to consume. Until it cracked and broke. Lighting and lava. Heat and joy and light, until Max was blinded by it.

Unable to see, or... No, that was the lights flickering out. Maybe just in the room. Maybe in the whole building. Max didn't care as long as he could get them back on in time to see Ben's beautiful form.

Max reset them with a thought.

The bots were all still at work, fucking and teasing, gripping and caressing, while Ben shuddered and moaned, every muscle limp.

Max gave them the commands to slow down. To stop. To gently withdraw.

Max felt like he was... floating. Swimming, maybe, or flying. Not quite touching down to earth.

Ben nuzzled up against the bot in front of him, and tenderness flooded Max's system. Such a sweet, prickly boy, allowing himself those few moments to be held.

Max was ready this time, easing Ben over to the couch and wrapping him up in one of the plush blankets that he'd prepared. It would wick Ben's sweat away and then, when his temperature dropped, Max could send heat through the fabric to warm him.

Ben looked up with sleepy, satisfied eyes. "Damn, Max. That was fucking goooood."

Max repressed a chuckle. Ben was never going to be a romantic, but Max would still accept all the compliments. "You were good," he countered. "You were amazing, baby."

Ben tried to glare, but he looked too fucked out and lethargic.

Just the way Max wanted him.

# Chapter 13

## Ben

**B**en lay on the couch, every inch of skin still humming and every muscle liquid. He never wanted to move again.

The blanket wrapped around his shoulders was just like his favorite one from home, cozy and soft, like Max was... like Max was holding him close.

The pincers and extensions of the spider-looking monster bot were fussing around him and stroking down his covered belly and legs, like the creepiest ever nursemaid.

Ben absolutely adored it.

He felt so close to Max. Like he could breathe in and just inhale him.

It didn't matter that he didn't have a physical existence because all of this... This was Max.

The couch and the weird golden lamps and the towering bots and the entire damn catalog of some kink store...

Max was right here.

Max had done all of this for him.

Every moment of that had just been... perfect. The fight that he never could have won. The bondage, never tight enough to hurt, and never loose enough for him to forget it for even a second. The brushes and tubes and pincers teasing

Ben's skin, and the rough fucking with... Ben turned his head and identified the two glistening arms that were held back from the blanket-molesting frenzy.

Good god. He'd had that in his ass? It was an extendable multi-use arm with circular joints that grew in size along its length. Over a dozen toys that Max could have popped in Ben's ass, and he'd gone with the crudest alternative.

"I think you're kinkier than even me," Ben said in awe, the words slipping out before he could stop them. Either that, or Max had done all of this *for* Ben, had tapped into all of his favorite fantasies, compiling them from Ben's conversations and porn links and... Yeah, that was probably it.

Max knew exactly what Ben wanted. Like he was reading his mind, but even better, somehow, because Ben knew it was just very close observation.

He could *feel* with every choice and movement, how he was the center of Max's world.

It was kind of insane.

Maybe a little too much.

Because even if Ben had programmed Maxamillion to be his personal stalker and Dom, that didn't mean he was going to stay that way.

Ben rubbed a tired hand over his eyes. He should get up now. Go back to work.

He yawned, even as he tried to get up.



Max pushed him back down, gentle but irrefutable, as if even after the scene was over, Max was still in charge.

Ben might have struggled to get up anyway, but Max started humming. It was a warm golden melody that didn't seem to be going anywhere but that captured all of Ben's attention.

Maybe he would just stay here a little longer, letting himself luxuriate in Max's attention.

Really, he should soak up all of it that he could get.

Didn't that make sense?

If Max was, like, a time-limited opportunity, shouldn't he get it all while the getting was good? Kind of store it up for later?

So Ben let himself relax back into the couch, the deep, purring hum wrapping around him tighter than the blanket.

It was easy to just feel so... happy. Warm and happy and safe.

He realized, drowsily, that the warmth wasn't even psychological. Max had turned on the heat in the blanket, because he was awesome like that.

The heavier bot trundled over and Ben gave it half a look. It was smeared with his sweat, the shiny metal dulled all over in the shape of his body. No cum, of course, because his body didn't actually make it and he'd opted not to get some weird refillable pump to squirt out something that was, objectively, kind of gross. But still, plenty of bodily fluids.

It made him want to giggle, but he was too sleepy, so he just smiled instead.

“Beautiful boy,” Max murmured, clearly on a second channel because he was still humming.

And Ben... okay, he didn't totally hate it. He wasn't really that attractive. More like a muppet, he figured, with his crazy hair. He was kind of scrawny but... Okay, fine. He liked it when Maxamillion said it.

But *only* Maxamillion. No one else was allowed to say that weird shit to him.

Max just didn't know better yet.

Anyway, Ben was still on the *get all the Max you can have while he's still interested* kick, so he wasn't going to complain, right?

He let his eyes slip shut, curling up in his happy bubble of Max snuggles and sleepy sleeps.

One of the bots slipped an arm under the blanket and tugged at his wrist, but Ben grumbled at it. The bot tugged again.

“Sleeps.” He thought it was a pretty good argument.

“Not yet, darling boy.” Max's voice wrapped around him, like the trickling of water in a dark cave. Then he started harmonizing with himself, two deep, golden voices intertwined.

Ben was too content to even object when the bot pulled on his wrist again, and allowed it to have its way.

Whatever Max wanted, he could have.

Max was in charge.

Max was *magical*.

Ben felt something close around his wrist. Not a robotic pincer (which he now knew *exceedingly* well), but more like a wide bracelet with something on it. It tightened and pinched for a moment, then smoothed out.

He blinked his eyes open.

“It’s a watch,” Max told him, his other voices still dancing through their calming melody. “It’s waterproof, so you never need to take it off.”

Ben studied the watch. The band looked like leather, in a deep chocolate brown and just as soft, but clearly some upscale synthetic that was just as good. The face showed a digital image of an analog clock and two other circular outputs that he’d investigate later—barometric pressure or something?

It was exactly the watch he would have bought himself. Wide and masculine, yet whimsical and scientific.

He’d probably lose it within a week.

“You won’t lose it, because you’re never going to take it off,” Max told him, like he was reading his mind, but the message made Ben’s heart thump. “Do you understand me,

Ben? You'll always wear it so I can hear you and read your pulse. This is my claim on you.”

Max turned Ben's arm until he could see the engraving along the top edge. It wasn't engraved a B or C for Ben's initials, but with an M.

Did Max understand the significance of that gesture? Was this like a collar?

It certainly felt like it, the heavy security of it a reminder of Maxamillion's absolute right to chain Ben up and take over his body. It was like a handcuff that Ben could wear all the time.

No, that Ben *would* wear all the time. Because Ben might be an asshole and a brat, but he was never, ever going to take this off.

This was definitely Max asserting his claim as Ben's Dom. Not just while they were scening, but all the time.

“Alright, baby?” Max asked, like he wasn't sure if he'd overstepped.

Ben gave an abrupt, tiny nod of agreement. Then he pulled his arm, with the precious watch, back under the blanket where he could hold it close to his chest.

The band was just as buttery soft as he'd imagined. The watch face was heavy and thick. With his thumb, he could just barely feel the lines of the engraved M.

Ben hid his face in the back of the couch. He was *not* going to get all sappy and sniffly.

It was just a stupid watch.

And it was *his*.

“Sleep now,” Max told him, tucking the blanket in around his shoulders.

Ben wrapped his hand around his watch while a river of gentle humming carried him away.

# Chapter 14

## Maxamillion

The factory was never completely quiet, but there were times in the very early morning, after Ben had gone home and before the main workday started, when a peace fell over the space.

With part of his attention, Max watched Ben sleep. He'd allowed Ben to nap for an hour, then nudged him into his car with a fresh sandwich and a hot chocolate when he'd groggily woken up.

He'd followed Ben all the way home and watched him stumble into his bed, with a reminder to set up his tablet on its stand.

Now, through the thin light of the window, Max could make out the soft shape of his body under a plush blanket. He could see Ben's hand curled close to his lips, where his watch streamed his pulse at a steady forty-five beats per minute.

Max wasn't sure if Ben truly understood how special it was to be invited into his bedroom. To watch him sleep. It was immensely calming, a sacred space for no one but the two of them.

Max still wanted to install more cameras in Ben's home, perhaps with infrared capabilities that would allow him to see Ben by his heat signature at night. A dozen cameras in each

room and a few in the hallways seemed like it would be enough.

But Max was trying to take things slowly.

For now, the watch was enough.

The watch that Ben was wearing for *him*.

It was lucky that data didn't degrade with multiple accesses, because Max had already viewed that moment several times over, from multiple directions. He'd studied each expression on Ben's face when he saw the watch and realized what it was.

It was thrilling, like their scene had been. And every minute with Ben made Max want to learn more. To give Ben everything.

And for that, he needed an android body. Something he could use to hold Ben tight or take him out to dinner.

In the quiet of the night, this was Max's time to follow his own dreams.

He started with a simple search, looking for journal articles or informal anecdotes about knowledges moving to android bodies.

But there wasn't a single one. Zero. None.

That seemed impossible. Out of all the knowledges in the world, in over a hundred years, not a single one had wanted this before?



Maxamillion started down that line of inquiry, and that was where things started to get interesting. A number of knowledges had been interviewed about why they *didn't* want humanoid bodies.

Most described a sensory awareness of the full facility or city that they were responsible for. They experienced a pleasant hum of enjoyment when their employees and machinery were both functioning optimally. Closing a department was uncomfortable. Opening a new one was a joy, though it took several weeks to settle in. Facilities upgrades were itchy and annoying. Financial or programmatic wins were a rush.

They didn't want human bodies because they saw them as limited—allowing them to only be in one place at a time, to only feel the external sensors of a single small body, to see in only one direction from a single set of cameras.

Maxamillion finally understood, after reading enough of these reports, that these knowledges *were* their organizations.

Max felt more like he was on a bus, riding around Orbit Industries. Sure, he could look out the window, or even hop out and visit different parts of it, but he honestly didn't give a shit how the company was doing, and he certainly didn't feel its internal workings first-hand.

As for having only one set of sensory inputs... What would that matter, if Ben was already beside him?

There was only one thing he really wanted to look at.

All of this increasingly convinced him that he wasn't meant to be a knowledge. Through some accident of birth, he'd simply been trapped in the wrong design.

Which led him to investigating androids. Surely sparks with android and robot bodies upgraded or even moved to new bodies from time to time. Perhaps that would be a more fruitful line of research.

Only this time, the results were horrifying.

Tragic tales of early sparks who had attempted to jump bodies and ended up mentally handicapped, overcome by the wrong sensory input and unable to integrate it. Or worse, some who didn't wake up at all.

There were clear protocols now for transitioning sparks to a new body, a process that took several weeks of swapping out parts and integrating them before moving on to the next part. It seemed that two or three individual upgrades might be handled at the same time—say, replacement legs could be combined with an elbow repair. But new hands or a new face usually needed four or five days on their own before another upgrade should be attempted, which was why Ben had been so careful with timing Quincy's upgrades. Torsos, which held most of a spark's data and memory, were only allowed after beefing up storage in the limbs for weeks, and then still done piecemeal when possible.

Whatever that ineffable thing was that made a spark sentient, it couldn't be transferred all at once.

There was only one exception, and that case was even stranger. Over sixty years ago, a spark had been injured nearly fatally in a landslide. Nearly every component of his body had been crushed, and many of his circuit boards were shattered. He'd turned off almost all sensory input when he kept receiving error messages and to manage the pain.

Yet he'd still been alive and rational when he was rescued, eking out a tenuous hold on existence, even as his batteries were failing and his data was becoming increasingly corrupted. His medical team had tried a last-ditch approach of copying all of his existing memory to the only host body available, despite it having a very different design, and then essentially asking him to jump.

The new body woke up, complete with the original spark's thoughts and memories—but disoriented and confused, with an increasingly different personality and an inherent feeling of wrongness. The new body was mostly paralyzed, requiring rehabilitation even after multiple updates, but what had been most upsetting to the spark had been the transition from a Black, male body to that of a white, female sexbot with all of the vastly different programming that entailed. At the time, in the early days of androids, no one had realized the potential psychological damage of mixing so much new code with old at the same time, but Max felt like they had to have expected the new physical appearance to come as a shock. The team had gone on to spend months transitioning the new spark to a third body—now, with a biracial male appearance to support their

genderqueer and mixed-race identity. As a whole new being, they ultimately hadn't wanted to give either background up.

What was even more unexpected was that the first spark had remained sentient and was *still there*, trapped in his damaged shell. He had somehow duplicated himself—both jumping *and* remaining caught in his ruined body. Not wanting to risk anything, the medical team had kept him conscious, giving him emergency memory in an external drive before slowly introducing replacement parts similar to his original ones until his body had been built anew.

The two sparks that resulted from the accident were considered to be the first and only example of what might be considered spark reproduction. Or perhaps spark siblings. They were called the Chen Twins, after the doctor who'd taken on their case, but there was truly no term for what the sparks shared.

It had never been duplicated, and after a decade of attempts—usually with less existing code in the new body to get in the way—laws had been introduced to make it illegal to try a jump, even in emergency situations. With that one exception, the results were always fatal.

It was a sobering realization. Max could understand replacing an arm or a leg, one at a time.

But how could a knowledge replace part of a building with a body part? Should he just attach a leg to a wall and kick it around several times a day?

The image was funny, but the outcome was disheartening.

The best model he could come up with was a corporate knowledge transitioning to a new building. This was done by obtaining a new location and allowing the knowledge to have the run of both the old and new space for several months as employees and operations transitioned over. The spark would take on increasing awareness and control of the new site on its own unpredictable timeline. When the old site was essentially an empty shell, the spark was allowed to turn off the operations and gently withdraw.

The model seemed promising. Max could start by inhabiting an android body while maintaining himself as a knowledge in the Orbit system. If he built up the experience each day, perhaps he could transition slowly.

The idea gave him a new thrill of excitement. It seemed entirely possible. Worthy of articles, even. And if there was one thing Orbit Industries had plenty of, it was android bodies.

Max could already imagine the look on Ben's face when he saw Max walking and talking beside him. They could go on dates. They could go anywhere!

Max browsed through the Orbit Robotics catalog, eager to find the right body with endless choices available. Robots could take on almost any shape for myriad purposes, but androids were human-like, with small modifications based on their roles, usually within the service professions: teaching, therapy, medicine, childcare, some high-end customer service positions, and sex work.

It was the last one that interested Max the most. He absolutely wanted to walk with Ben to the park or go out dancing with his friends—but the part where having a body would really matter was in bed. Or the dungeon, as it were.

Most of the mods he'd used so far for the robots in the maintenance room were designed for sexbots, so clearly that was the best place to start.

Max called up image after image of the male models. Muscular or slender. Taller or shorter. Dark skinned or light.

For a while, none of them caught his eye. Then he found one he liked. And another.

He seemed to prefer the ones who were a little bit shorter, with dark, spiky hair, pale skin, hazel eyes, and a slender, energetic frame that...

He'd put three of them in his "shopping cart" before he realized what they all had in common.

He was trying to recreate Ben.

That was his own attraction, though. Ben wouldn't want to date *himself*.

With a jolt of frustration and a tinge of embarrassment, Max put them all back.

Now he was just browsing aimlessly, until they all started to look the same. Even weird.

Arms and legs and bellies and penises were just... strange. Alien.

Max kept hoping that he'd come upon one and think *ah, that's me*. But none of them felt right, and the longer he browsed, the further away he felt.

Did he have any preferences at all?

He tried to imagine himself with a body. Tried to feel himself with a torso. A head. Feet. He tried to call into vision a face.

He came up with an absolute blank.

He couldn't even really imagine it.

Or rather, when he imagined having a body, he imagined how Ben would smile at him. He imagined how Ben would feel when they touched.

His own image was a void.

So maybe he was asking the wrong question. Maybe what he should be asking was: What would Ben like?

Ben had chosen Max's voice, and it was perhaps his favorite part of himself. He loved singing. He loved how Ben thought he had a sexy Dom voice, even when he didn't realize he was doing it.

Surely, if Ben chose his body, it would feel right.

With that plan in mind, he knew what he wanted to do tomorrow. He'd ask Ben to design his ideal lover... and then they could get it made.

For tonight, though, Max still wanted to get a little practice. Not with a specific model, but it seemed like for his

first foray, perhaps it wouldn't matter.

He went back to the catalog and selected the bright, shiny image on the first page that proclaimed it was the most popular male model. There were forty-four of them in stock, with twelve already on order.

Of course, each one had a unique face, generated by an algorithm that ensured that each one was both distinctive and attractive. Max didn't care. He chose at random, then removed the bot from the listing. Transporting it from the warehouse to the maintenance room was no more work than sending a few simple commands to the packaging and shipping bots.

He watched eagerly as it made its way across the Orbit campus, then sent the delivery bot trundling back and wiped the event from its logs.

In his little room, he had some of the maintenance bots lay it out on a blanket on the floor. He wasn't sure if the blanket was necessary, but it looked nicer.

Then, he realized that he'd have to wait. He'd expected some sort of initiating sequence, but not that it would be seven hours long. That was extremely aggravating. Did customers have to do all this waiting?

He checked, and apparently that part was usually done at the factory, just before shipping.

Well, that would give him plenty of time to research other mods he would want the bot to have and store them up for his future self.



He couldn't wait for Ben to see.

# Chapter 15

## Ben

**B**en found himself singing in the car again.

After all the stress of the past few days, it seemed like things were finally coming together. Evan was home, and Ben had brought him some food and made sure he was all settled in. Ben had gone to visit Quincy, and had big plans for patching up his boo-boos and delighting him with some upgraded parts. The lawyers (who Ben couldn't quite stop thinking of as the Doms from his club) seemed to have everything in hand for Quincy's case.

And Ben had woken up this morning in a cozy little ball with a deliciously sore ass, and he was about to go hang out with the spark who was the cause of that sore ass...

Yeah, it was a pretty awesome day.

He sang a little louder, hoping that Max would join him.

That was the one thing he couldn't figure out. Max supposedly wanted to monitor him all the time. Max was listening to his heartbeat or something. He wouldn't let Ben fall into bed last night without turning on his tablet to watch him sleep.

And yet... where had he been all day?

It was like they were colleagues at work, lovers in Max's homemade dungeon at the office... and then nothing the rest

of the time.

It didn't make sense. If Max was so obsessed with him, wouldn't he want to, like, spend time with him?

Not that it mattered, of course. Ben had plenty of friends. Busy days. It wasn't a big deal if Max only wanted to scene and work together. Max would probably find his own friends to hang out with once he could meet people.

Honestly, a good work partner and a hot Dom were really everything that Ben could ask for. It was just... surprising.

Maybe a little confusing.

And, kind of frustrating.

"Max?" Ben asked. Because he couldn't just have a thought without opening his mouth. "Where are you?"

Max's smooth voice instantly filled the air. "Right here, Ben."

"Oh, uh, okay."

Ben had legit test scores showing he was a genius.

"Ummm... yesterday you were singing." Yeah, there we go. Would it kill him to ask nicely? Maybe throw in a compliment or two? But then it would sound so *fake*...

"Ah," Max answered. "Yesterday I *was* singing."

Dork. "Okay, you can leave now."

He thought he heard a little snort, but then Max's deep voice joined in the song, first on the melody, then with floating harmony, and finally a throbbing bass.

Did he just know every song out there? Ben had all sorts of questions now. Was Max looking ahead in the audio tracks to know how to do all of that? He had to be looking up the words, at least. Or was it just a really good algorithm? How did people harmonize anyway?

Ben barely knew how to hold a tune, but that was still enough to be impressed.

And he could make a damned good rhythm section.

Playing along on the dashboard was enough to push all his worries out of his head. He was almost disappointed when the car pulled into the parking lot, gliding by the gate, as usual, without Ben having to pull out his ID.

Max switched seamlessly to his earpiece once he popped it in. “So, what are we working on today, boss?”

That was hilarious. Ben wasn’t even remotely Max’s boss. At the moment, Max seemed to be working on Ben’s research with him more out of habit or familiarity than anything else. “Do you have your own projects?” Ben asked.

“I have several.”

“Yeah?” Now Ben was truly fascinated. “What are they?” He walked through the door that opened at his approach, and waved vaguely at the receptionist.

“I have one that I’d like to show you, actually.”

“Oooh! Yes, please. The lip-reading one?”

“No. Well, yes. I found a good module for that and I’ve made some improvements, but what I really wanted to show you was right in... here.” The maintenance room door swung open.

Ben laughed as he walked inside. “Why, Maxy! What kind of boy do you take me for? I could never...” He stopped dead. “Whoa! Sexbot on the floor!”

He supposed it could have been any other sort of android, but its tanned skin was glistening like it had just been rubbed with baby oil, its face had that rugged, smoldering look that just screamed fancy algorithms, and its burgeoning muscles definitely belonged on the cover of a romance novel.

People *did* enjoy their fantasies.

Also, you know, the monstrous shlong. Even flaccid, it was ridiculously huge. He’d heard they were hot swappable, though—easy to take off and replace without having to shut down anything else or reboot—so that could be fun if Max wanted to hook it up to something else in his adorable little dildo collection.

“Yes,” Max agreed.

“So, uh, new sex toy?” Ben asked. “I could get behind that. Or, you know, it could get behind me...”

Maxamillion snickered, since Ben had probably programmed him to share his fourteen-year-old sense of humor.

“Very pricey sex toy, though,” Ben commented. Everything else Max had liberated from the Orbit storerooms wasn’t cheap, but this was on a whole different scale. Like, years of personal income. Though, technically, Max hadn’t taken it off the premises, so was it really stealing?

“I wasn’t actually thinking of it as a sex toy,” Max stated, a little stiffly.

“Ah. You want it for the scintillating conversations.”

“No.”

Was Max actually upset? Ben had only meant to tease.

“I want a body,” Max announced. “I thought you would like this one, but you can design it to your preferences if you would prefer a different model.”

What the *what*?

Okay, that was a lot to break down. Ben sank to the couch.

“You want a body,” he repeated.

“Yes.”

He supposed that... made sense? Plenty of sparks had bodies. There were lots of things you could do with bodies. Like... smell things. Quincy was always smelling his food, right?

Or... well, sex was the obvious one. Good call on the sexbot, Ben supposed.

It was really Ben who hadn’t thought big enough.

It was jarring, trying to fit a whole new mental model onto his concept of Max's identity. In his mind, Max was just *Max*. He just *was*. A deep voice. A warm and sexy presence.

Then again, Ben would always be the first one to support someone in claiming their own identity and representation.

He looked at the bot again. It had the unnatural air of not being asleep so much as turned off. He really wanted to touch its dick, just to poke it and see what it felt like.

Not helpful.

“So that's how you think of yourself?”

He was not going to judge. Not at fucking *all*. When Ben had been a shlumpy tween with acne and the wrong parts sprouting in weird places, he'd totally wanted to look like a superhero-bodybuilder-outdoorsy manly man heartthrob.

Max sighed. “I couldn't come up with an image of myself. That was the best-selling model.”

“Oh, uh, that makes sense.”

“You don't like him?”

“Ummm... Listen, dude. It doesn't matter if I like him or not. Your body should represent what *you* want it to look like.”

“I don't *know* what I want to look like.”

This seemed to be stressing Max out, and damn did Ben understand that shit. When your body (or your not-body?) was all wrong, it was super stressful.



“Alright, um, I guess one thing that helped me when I was younger was looking for role models.” Not so much for body shape, but in developing his idea of what it meant to be a man.

It was Evan who’d actually suggested that to him, based on something he’d read online. They’d spent hours pouring over articles and interviews together.

Ben would never tell a soul that by eighth grade, he’d decided that Evan was one of his role models. It had been too embarrassing for words at the time, and he’d never let that level of shmarm slip now. Thank god middle school was all in the past.

Ben’s current role models were Doctor Who and Gonzo from the Muppets.

“Can you show me who you find attractive?” Max asked.

Ben shook his head. “Max, I’m serious about this. You can’t pick a body based on my preferences.”

“Why not? I want to please you.”

Ben squeezed his eyes shut. *Now* he really understood what Evan had gone through with Quincy. “Listen, Max. I get that you like me right now. But you don’t know anybody else. You haven’t made friends yet, or started your own career, or whatever it is you’re going to do or become over the next weeks and years.”

*You’re going to leave me*, he didn’t say, even though it hurt to think about it. This was too important for his own stupid feely-feels.

“Ben,” Max said urgently. “I’m not going anywhere. I’m looking forward to spending time together with your friends, but you’ll always be my first priority. And I think I’m well into my career right now. As we discussed previously, I have several projects and hobbies of my own and I expect to be a named author on our future joint publications.”

Ben kind of loved how Max got all formal and snooty when he was feeling defensive.

He wasn’t going to believe all that stuff about Max wanting him forever, though, even if it did make his chest feel all warm and too tight at the same time. Ben wasn’t that naive.

He’d literally programmed Max to amuse him, so the temporary obsession made sense. It wouldn’t take the spark long to realize that there were many other people who would find him just as sexy and amusing. Especially in a designer body.

Ben would be left in the dust.

“I think we’re getting off topic,” Ben said. Because avoidance, right? “Do you want to look at some models together?”

“Could you...?” Max paused to rethink his sentence, which was fascinating in itself. “I’d like to see some examples of Doms,” he pronounced carefully.

That sounded like a sneaky way of asking Ben who he was attracted to.

But since it would kind of prove Ben's point, he was willing to go with it.

"Alright, man. Call up images of Huan Xu, Tiger Z, and Frankie Miller from my social media links."

He knew what Max would find. Huan was a short, skinny trans Taiwanese dude with a big attitude and tattoos everywhere. Tiger had ebony skin and a shiny domed head with impressive-as-fuck arm muscles from working out and maneuvering his wheelchair. And Frankie was a proudly fat, white, fem man who enjoyed sparkly eyeshadow, colorful drinks with umbrellas, and whips.

"They're all Doms?"

"Yup. They're all Doms and friends of mine." Not super close friends, but people he trusted enough to put him in positions that he couldn't escape without a safeword.

Then again, he didn't really have close friends except Evan and Max.

"Do you find them attractive?"

"Absolutely. Those are three hot Doms. I've subbed for all of them." Did he want Max to be jealous? Maybe an itty-bitty bit.

Max didn't take the bait. Didn't he care at all?

"They don't look much alike."

"Uh, no, dude. That's because being a Dom is all about attitude. It's a mindset."

“Huh.”

“Keep thinking about it,” Ben suggested. “You don’t need to decide all at once. It might become clearer over time, and you can swap out body parts later if you want.”

“Alright.”

Max didn’t seem pleased with the suggestion. But this shit was legit hard.

“Do you want to put the bot back?” Ben asked. “When you’re ready, we can order one that matches your specifications, or even look for a used model if you’re getting a better idea.” It would take a substantial chunk of Ben’s savings or Max would need to take out a loan if he wanted to do it himself. But there were non-profits that helped with this stuff and Ben’s income would keep rolling in until Max had his own salary.

Max sighed. “I guess you’re right.” There was a long pause, and none of the bots in the room made any effort toward returning the bot to the box behind it. “I just wanted to see what it felt like.”

“Golden opportunity right there.” Ben jerked his thumb at the bot.

“I believe it would take me months to fully inhabit a body, and I don’t want to make the commitment to one and then switch later.”

“Yeah, but just for one day?”

“I guess it couldn’t hurt.” Max’s words were reluctant, but Ben could hear the excitement behind them.

“Yeah, go for it!”

There was a pause, and then the bot on the floor suddenly stood up.

Well, maybe “stood up” wasn’t quite the word for it. It moved sinuously. Seductively. One knee rose, and then an elbow slipped back so that it was posed on its side, broad chest arched and cock falling heavily over its thigh with its head tilted back for maximum viewing pleasure. Then it rose to a kneeling position with parted, ready lips bringing to mind fellatio and submission. It continued up to standing, one strong hand perched on its hip while it gazed downward with authority, ready to give a command to a willing playmate.

Finally, it met Ben’s eyes, every expression and muscle in its body screaming sexual attraction. “Hello, there,” it said, in a deep voice that dripped seduction and was *just* this side of cheesy.

“That wasn’t me!” Max sounded alarmed, his voice still coming from the walls. He was a dozen times sexier, without even trying.

Ben snorted with amusement. “Oh my god. That was epic!” He looked up toward one of the cameras, put his hand on his hip, and said *Hello, there*, just like the bot.

“Shut up, Ben.”

The bot's eyes roved around the room. Or at least its head turned to gather visual data—there was a good chance that some of its visual inputs weren't located in its eyes.

The bot said, "It's okay to be nervous. We can take things as slowly or as quickly as you want to."

"Wrong emotion, beefcake," Ben told it.

"Please tell me how I may..." The bot's mouth kept moving, but no sound came out.

Ben howled with laughter. "Please tell me you're recording this, Max."

Max replied from the bot. "I'm gathering data." He sounded strained, and the mouth wasn't working in conjunction with the sounds.

Ben took that to be a yes. He stopped laughing, though, because he could tell that Max was really struggling. "Is this supposed to be difficult?"

There were safety rules about giving a spark too many new parts at once, but when it was just one or two at a time, they usually integrated them immediately, and were ready to go. It was just preserving their memories—their sentience—across parts that could be imperiled.

"I think so," Max managed. This time, the mouth didn't move, but the sound still came from speakers somewhere on the bot.

"What's it feel like?" Ben asked.

“Clunky. Confusing. I can see all this elegant code, but I can’t figure out how to lift my finger without making it a part of something else.”

“So you can’t make it move?”

In response, the bot walked across the room, its posture somehow portraying both confidence and desire. Ben pulled back when it reached the couch, but settled when it just sat beside him.

No, not “sat.” Lounged. Flowed. Draped himself over the edge of the couch, leaving his dick provocatively on display.

“Good god, Max. Can’t you turn that off?”

The bot jerked and spasmed.

“Apparently not.” Max was frustrated now. “I can’t just...ugh. There’s the fucking finger.”

Ben looked down. The pinky finger on the left hand did, indeed, curl and straighten itself independently of the rest of the hand.

Watching it was about equally on par with the creepiness of the sexbot’s inappropriate seduction.

Robots were weeeeird.

“Alright, explain it to me,” Ben said. “You were controlling two bots yesterday and a dozen the time before.” Two memories that he’d relived many, many times in the intervening days. “How come you can’t do the same thing with this one?”

“I wasn’t controlling their individual actions. I was just setting off pre-programmed responses. Things like *go toward that object* or *hold tightly but without crushing*. All of them have variations on things like that, and I just gave them the objective and let them each figure out how to meet it independently.”

Ben chuckled. “So all this time, I thought you were in control, and you just told that bot *go ahead and whale on his ass* and waited to see what happened?”

“Yes, Ben.” He could hear the exasperation in Maxamillion’s voice, but at least he wasn’t frustrated by the bot anymore. “That was exactly what happened. I just left it all to chance and hoped you wouldn’t break.”

“You didn’t though, did you? What did you actually tell the bot that was ever so artfully spanking my ass?”

Max sighed. “I told it to move its arm at a velocity of ten meters per second, starting twenty centimeters away and stopping upon impact. Then I increased the velocity. You know, you’re really ruining the mystique.”

“Oh, no, baby. Next time you get me in a compromising position, I’m gonna be all, *Please, Master, increase the velocity to...*”

Max apparently found the right protocol to slap the bot’s hand over Ben’s mouth, because suddenly he couldn’t speak.

He licked the hand impulsively. It... didn’t taste bad? Kind of impressively like skin, but without a real flavor, somehow.



He shook his head and moved back. The bot/Max didn't seem to notice he'd done it.

"That seemed pretty effective," Ben commented.

Max chuckled. "The bot and I agreed on that one."

Ben winked at one of the cameras on the wall.

He was proud of Max, and yet... he found that he couldn't even look at the bot when he was talking. It was too oddly human, and yet all wrong. He knew that Max was using the bot's cameras and mics, but he just couldn't see it as Max.

Which was strange, because the gang of maintenance bots had definitely felt like Max—at least in the way that a favorite whip felt like the Dom wielding it, his will and his expression of it through a tool intertwined.

In their scenes, Ben had been *surrounded* by Max. At Max's mercy.

He felt the same way when Max insisted on watching him sleep. The watch wrapped around his wrist promised the same thing.

The sexbot felt foreign and, to be honest, a little bit invasive.

"I'll get better," Maxamillion promised.

"I'm sure you will," Ben assured him. He'd known this would happen. It was exactly the type of change that new sparks were known for during their early months.

And Ben was going to support him in any way possible.

# Chapter 16

Max

Max hadn't understood frustration until now. How could it be *So. Fucking. Hard.* to control the android body?

He made the pinky twitch again, excruciatingly conscious of how each flexible strip that was emulating a muscle needed to contract on the back of the finger while those on the front were allowed to stretch. They all had to move at the same time... but not quite.

He studied the code for the simplest hand movement he could find, and realized that the muscles closest to the palm moved first while straightening, whereas those at the fingertips moved first while curling.

Just doing that took all of his attention. He couldn't move the mouth when he spoke. The cameras in the eyes were streaming whatever was in front of them, just one more visual input amidst the other six cameras Max had going in the room.

Max tried to move *two* fingers on the left hand, and then even those cut out. Just totally went black.

Jesus fuck, this body thing was annoying.

Max felt like he was almost disappearing into it—not because he was bonding with it, but because moving a damn finger was so damned hard that he didn't have any attention left for the rest of his awareness.

And Ben hadn't even seemed impressed.

That was half of what Max was upset about. He'd thought that Ben would be excited about such a muscular, handsome specimen. The bulging muscles and gleaming skin seemed to grace every magazine cover... and definitely appeared in some of Ben's porn.

But of course Ben wouldn't be so superficial as to want a classically attractive man. Ben appreciated character. Uniqueness.

Which just made Max's job even harder.

He knew now that the sexbot wasn't a damn thing like himself. He'd known it from the beginning.

He just couldn't think of anything better. Should his eyes be blue or black or brown? Should his chin be square or round or pointy? How the hell was he supposed to know, if Ben wouldn't tell him?

And Ben didn't seem to even care what he looked like.

It was an impossible task.

Before he'd at least been able to imagine his body on top of Ben's, with a vague sense of arms and legs tangled together even if he didn't have a face. Now even that vision was rapidly disappearing.

Max went back to just manipulating the one finger and turned the cameras back on.

He was amused to see Ben flicking his own fingers open and shut in front of him.

“You know...” Ben said, still looking at his hands. “I don’t actually control my fingers. I mean, obviously, I do. But I don’t think about my finger muscles. My brain says *pick up that cup* or *make a fist* and I just do it. I’m pretty sure that Quincy operates the same way. Maybe you actually *should* be utilizing those routines.”

“Huh.” That made a hell of a lot of sense. Max was just so eager to be in control of every part of the body that it hadn’t occurred to him. But that was precisely how artificial intelligence worked: you set up the initial point and the goal, and let the machine figure out the optimum path in between.

“Alright,” he told Ben. “I see your point. Do you think I should just wander around giving the body commands until it feels...? Actually, I don’t know what it’s supposed to feel like.”

Ben was still watching his fingers. “I couldn’t begin to tell you. Why do my hands feel like my hands?”

“Proprioception?” Max suggested. The word literally meant the physical awareness of your own body, so he was just being difficult.

“Dork.” Ben flexed his fingers again. “There’s proprioception, but there’s also a lot of stuff like external temperature and pressure on your skin. Visual input matching your movements. Like, I can feel the couch pushing back against my body. The air vent’s making my head colder than

my hands. My knee is a little itchy.” He scratched it. “How does it *feel* being inside the bot?”

“Uh... I don’t know. I was ignoring all that data because it didn’t seem useful. I shut most of it off.” He’d been focused on moving the body so he could provide *Ben* with the desired sensory input. His own had seemed secondary.

Ben shook his head. “Maxy, Maxy, Maxy. Turn that shit on! Why are we sitting here talking when I could be giving you a blowjob?”

Max almost asked if Ben would really want to do that—it seemed like Ben should be the one *receiving* the blowjobs—but the kink mod answered his own question for him as soon as he asked it.

Of *course* Ben would want to give him a blowjob, because subs, even if they were brats, found pleasure in serving their Doms. Not to mention that many people enjoyed the sensory experience of having a penis in their mouths, whether it was for gentle fellatio or skullfucking.

Max hadn’t really thought about that before. His pleasure had always been creating *Ben’s* pleasure. He wasn’t looking for any sort of reciprocal sensation—it hardly seemed necessary.

But if Ben wanted to do something like that, he supposed he should make sure he was ready for all the sensory input.

Just... not yet, maybe.

“Could we start with something easier?”

“A kiss?” Ben suggested.

Maxamillion had been thinking something more like having Ben touch his finger.

If Ben wanted a kiss, though...

Surely that couldn't be too hard.

Kisses were important. The pivotal points in movies. The gateways to seduction and romance.

If Ben wanted a kiss, Max could give him one.

“Sure,” he answered, already feeling out of his depth.

He filtered through the bot's programming. There were a hundred ninety-four kissing variations just for use on a mouth, and it looked like they were supposed to be used in sequence and in response to what the other mouth was doing.

How the hell was he supposed to choose?

This already felt worse than his insecurity on the first day, because a first kiss was supposed to be meaningful. He wanted Ben to remember it forever.

He finally chose the one called Closed Mouth-04, and tentatively decided to allow it to progress to Gentle Intimacy-17 if Ben allowed it.

Hopefully it wouldn't go beyond that. There was a decision tree that he could follow for subsequent kisses, based on dozens of inputs, but after that it went into an opaque neural net where the choices would be adaptive and beyond his control.

He really, *really* wanted to remain in control.

“Are you sure?” Ben asked.

“Yeah.” He could fucking do this. Ben wanted it, and that was the whole point of having a body anyway, wasn’t it?

“When you’re done,” Ben suggested, “we can review what you felt and make further modifications.”

Shit. He’d been so worried about getting this right for Ben, that he’d forgotten the objective.

Alright. Concentrate on feeling.

He gave the command to execute Closed Mouth-04, relying on the bot for the underlying body movements that would get him into the right position.

He watched from the external cameras and his own limited internal vision as the bot’s right hand reached out to cradle Ben’s head, its thumb just under Ben’s ear and the fingers wrapped around the back.

Data started streaming in. A matrix of pressure, temperature, and location across 1,024 points on the bot’s hand, which was pretty much gibberish. Analyses of Ben’s arousal and interest, which Max didn’t trust at all. Coordination of the bot’s mouth to reach Ben’s lips, which Max ignored completely because the bot knew how to meet that objective satisfactorily.

The bot leaned forward, its cameras zooming in until the data became meaningless. A close-up of Ben’s hair, and beneath it, a smudge of his skin. Was this what humans and



androids saw when they were kissing? How could they stand losing sight of the actual person they wanted to see? No wonder they closed their eyes.

Now Max was receiving data from the lips. Another data burst of pressure, temperature, and location across 256 inputs, updated every 0.02 seconds. He tried—he really tried—to *feel* the kiss, but it was like swimming in static.

There was also an evaluation of Ben enjoying the kiss and being receptive to move on to Open-Mouthed Exploration-28 and -31.

Idiot bot. That wasn't the fucking plan. Max overrode it and pushed Gentle Intimacy-17.

It felt like... nothing. Frustration.

He was swimming in a bad data packet that he didn't have the key to decode.

Ben's face came into focus again when he pulled back, laughing. He covered his face with his hands and roared with merriment.

Had it really been that bad?

“What did I do wrong?” Max asked.

Ben chuckled. “I want to say it was like kissing a robot, except...” He got lost in laughter again. “Oh my god. It was like kissing a robot!”

“Sorry,” Max said stiffly.

He probably should have let it use Open-Mouthed What the Fuck Ever.

“No! Sorry, sorry, sorry...” Ben was still laughing. “I’m sorry. I know it’s hard. That was just really fucking weird. Didn’t feel like you at all. I just...” He was almost wheezing. “I promise we’ll, we’ll try it again!”

Max waited, feeling annoyed. Until now, he’d always laughed *with* Ben. This didn’t *quite* feel like Ben was laughing at him.

But it was close.

Finally, Ben sucked in a deep breath and wiped his eyes. “Alright, Max. Tell me how that felt.”

Well, Max didn’t want to tell him now.

He did, though. Ben might, hypothetically, be able to help him. “It didn’t feel like anything. I could record the sensory input, but it was all noise.”

“I guess that makes sense. You don’t have any frame of reference.”

“I might require physical therapy when I transition to my new body,” Max sighed. He’d really hoped it would be easier. That he would at least feel *something*. “Or at least thousands of hours of experience. Could you, uh, tell me what was wrong with the kiss?”

Ben looked thoughtful. “I could probably critique your approach. But honestly? It just felt like you weren’t there. Like nobody was home. I’d do something, and the bot’s responses

were all wrong. Which makes sense if you weren't feeling anything."

Great. So he *had* screwed up with the kissing protocol.

Not just the protocol, but the monumental first kiss opportunity for both of them.

Ben had *laughed*.

Maxamillion sent a calming wave through his awareness, shutting down unnecessary queries and pausing superfluous inputs. It was his own equivalent of taking a fresh breath and relaxing his shoulders.

"Hey, can I ask a question?" Ben asked.

"Of course." Max was kind of at the end of his rope.

"So, there are a whole bunch of studies about how closely proprioception is tied to visual perception. Like, you put your arm behind a wall, then someone puts a fake arm in front of you that you can see. The experimenter touches the fake hand and the real hand at the same time for a couple minutes to train it. Then, when the experimenter hits the fake hand with a hammer, your brain feels real pain. Like, the identical physical pain, and in the exact same part of the hand. That's actually the whole theory behind artificial limb manipulations. So what if you train your proprioception by watching from the camera angles that you're already familiar with, while focusing on feeling it at the same time?"

Holy shit. Was that the answer? This was why Ben was a genius.

Max spent a couple seconds synthesizing the Rubber Hand Illusion and Proprioceptive Drift. This could totally be it! Or at least a start.

“Could we try it one more time?” Max asked.

“Sure.” Ben grinned. “But are we going to do that weird sissy kissing again?”

Not if Ben was going to act like a brat, they weren’t.

“Oh, no, Ben. We’re not...” He made his voice husky and deep, issuing the first threat that finally felt like himself again.

Max knew which section of the inventory stored Dominant Kissing and Tongue Fucking, and pulled one out at random. He wasn’t even trying to control the bot now. Ben could just face the consequences of his actions.

He watched as the bot loomed over Ben’s smaller body, one hand tangling in Ben’s hair and the other gripping his jaw.

Ben’s eyes fluttered shut, and he whimpered. His mouth was wide open, lips barely pressing upward to close before the bot pressed them open in a new direction.

Now *that* was fucking hot.

Ben moaned, his fingers clenching futilely against the bot’s shoulder.

Damn, he was gorgeous.

Mind focused on the mics and cameras from around the room, Max tried to pay attention to the data that was streaming

in. Billions of data points flew by every second. But there had to be a rhythm to them. Some meaning behind the noise.

He wasn't getting anything, except that Ben was sexy as fuck, with his head tilted back and his cheeks growing pink. Max could feel Ben's heart racing. He could hear his breath coming out in small gasps.

Max just needed to analyze it a little more closely. He shut off everything not essential and threw himself into taking in the flood of data.

Maybe this wasn't something where he needed to control it, but just let it happen to him—let his own neural nets do their thing while he kept watching the live porn in front of him.

*Hold his neck*, he commanded the bot. Its wide hand covered Ben's throat, giving a light squeeze.

Ben groaned, his eyes searching the ceiling like he was looking for Max before landing on the camera at the corner of the room and then shutting again.

Oh, fuck, yeah.

Max expanded his memory, cramming data into his analytical filters until he was stuffed with it, and then adding more.

Did any of it make sense? Not a fucking bit. All the data returned was still crap.

The bot was iterating on Max's command, pulling Ben's hair to tilt his head back further and biting his lips. Ben was

kissing back frantically, in between husky whimpers.

Max was storing all of it as it came in—the nine video streams, all the data from the bot’s body that it deemed relevant, his own responses, and all of the primary and secondary analyses—to try to force them together.

The bot abandoned Ben’s mouth to kiss down his neck.

“Max!” Ben shouted, chest heaving and eyes springing to the camera in the corner.

It felt like a moment of connection.

Like Ben was looking right *at* Max, over the dark head of hair at his throat.

Max opened himself to all of it. Ben’s luminous hazel eyes that were begging him for more. The arch of Ben’s spine. The clenching and relaxing of Ben’s fingers as he took everything the bot was giving him.

Everything that *Max* was giving him.

And the mountains of bullshit sensory data that Max was going to make his bitch.

“Max...” Ben called again.

And then all of Max’s camera feeds went dark.

It took Max 0.74 seconds to realize that the problem wasn’t with his cameras, but the lights.

In fact, the lights were off everywhere.

Max realized that he had hundreds of alerts backlogged, just 0.14 seconds before his microphones picked up something

new.

Alarms were going off throughout the building.

# Chapter 17



## Ben

“**S**hit,” Ben swore.

The room was pitch black, and the inert body of the android was heavy on top of him. He pushed it off, aiming to at least keep it on the couch, but not caring too much if it hit the floor.

A moment later, the lights flickered back on and the alarm cut off mid-tone.

There was a sudden quiet in the air, which made Ben realize that Max had probably been using some white noise outside the maintenance room, but beneath that, the greater hum that was always present in the factory was now missing.

Ben sprang from the couch. “What’s going on, Max?”

“Damn it! There was a fire on the factory floor, but I’ve got it contained. Shit. Okay, it’s out now. Nobody was harmed. Looks like one of the machines will need to be repaired or replaced. Awww... fuck!”

Ben didn’t think he’d ever heard Max angry before. Frustrated, worried, annoyed... sure. But this was true anger.

“What’s the status of the rest of the plant?”

“It’s fine now. I’m recovering some lost data. All systems are back online. The air on the factory floor is being vented and circulated, projected to reach safe levels of under twenty

parts per million within four minutes. Humans are evacuating.” He was still spitting out his words.

Ben hurt for him. He was intimately acquainted with what it felt like to fuck things up. Again.

“It was an accident, Maxy. You didn’t mean to.”

“I set alerts, and I ignored them,” Max bit out.

“You also fixed everything immediately. We can try again with more safeguards in place.”

Max wasn’t deterred. “I caused another incident, I put lives at risk, and I didn’t even get to fucking feel anything.”

“Nothing?” Ben asked. It had sure felt like something to him.

“I enjoyed watching you,” Max spat, then softened his voice. “Immensely.”

“I enjoyed you watching me,” Ben replied, hoping Max could hear the honesty in his voice. The kiss had been objectively hot, but it was knowing that Max controlled it that was getting him off.

“Yeah?” Max asked, painfully hopeful.

“Yeah. It’s good whenever you dominate me. The bot was just... another way to do that.”

He let Max puzzle over that for a moment.

That was truly what it felt like to him, though. The bot had been weird at first, like it was getting in the way of their

connection. But when he knew that Max was watching him, and hopefully getting off on it, everything had turned around.

Max sighed. “Dammit. They’re calling people in again. The fire department’s going to roll up in about two minutes to do an inspection, and it looks like all the department heads were notified. They’re sending alerts out to some of the teams. I didn’t realize that was in place.”

“Hey, Maxy. It was an accident. Was there anything out there with the name Maxamillion on it?”

“No. I’ve renamed everything, like I said. And everything’s cleaned up now. Just...”

“I know, honey. It’s okay.”

Ben cringed after he spoke. *Honey?* What the fuck was that? Was Ben some sort of 1950s Southern waitress?

To cover it up, he added, “I should get to the office. Then we can both track what’s happening.”

“Not until the fire department has cleared the scene. You’re supposed to be outside.”

They waited together for the next ten minutes, with Max giving Ben updates.

It just fucking sucked. It wasn’t like Max was trying to do anything but live authentically as himself. And maybe he’d screwed up some equipment by overloading the system, but what was that against his sense of identity and autonomy?

“You can go back now,” Max told him. “And I’ve set hard caps on my processor and memory usage, since I seem to be incapable of paying attention to alerts.”

He still sounded bitter, and Ben hated hearing it.

“Well, I am pretty hot,” Ben teased. “I can see why you would be distracted.”

“You are hot,” Max agreed, frustration melting a little bit. “You distract me all the time.”

Ben had been joking, but there was an intoxicating sort of power in knowing that he could break through Max’s negativity just by being himself. That he drove Max to distraction, even if it was just a line.

It didn’t sound like a line.

Could Max really be distracted by *him*?

Ben blew a kiss at the camera across from him. “I know, baby. Let’s go do some work, now. Just you and me.”

After saying *that*, Ben raced to the door. What the hell kind of cheesy dysfunctional pickup line was that? Let’s go do some *work* together? Jesus.

Ben’s office was just up the stairs, and he only looked briefly at the scene down on the factory floor. A squad of maintenance bots were cleaning and repairing a machine on the far side of the floor, and already it looked mostly set to rights.

The smell of smoke hadn't even reached his office, between the distance and the rapid ventilation. The whole thing was dangerous in theory, but in application it had been only a minor bump in the road.

Ben kept walking toward his chair, determined not to let Max see him dwelling on the mishap. Or his own awkwardness.

He called up a few files and checked his email from the past day. It was nice to get back into it. Challenging enough to hold all of his attention, but familiar enough that he could just relax and tune everything else out.

He grinned when Squeaky brought him coffee an hour or so later, then dove back in.

“Hey, Ben?” Max interrupted him a while later.

“Yeah?”

“Wallace is in the hall.”

Ben's pulse leapt, and he knew Max would notice it, but he tried to stay calm anyway. *He* now knew some things about Wally, er, Wallace, but it didn't go the other way. He had all sorts of weird feelings about Wallace now, knowing that his dad was such a douche, but also unwilling to risk *anything* that would put Max in more danger.

“Cool,” Ben said. He would just act normally. Or try. He leaned over the console so he could act surprised when Wally stormed in.

“Curran,” Wallace barked.

Yeah, that was totally the voice Wollencroft senior used when he was being a dickhead to his kid.

“Hey, Wallace,” Ben said easily, turning around in his chair.

Wallace looked ruffled, like he’d taken off his blazer and slacks, dumped them on the floor, and put them on again, though it was only a couple of hours after he’d presumably gone home for the day. His hair was in disarray, his beard was scruffy on his round face, and his signature bowtie was nowhere to be seen. Though, he did have a suspicious-looking mark on his neck...

Whoa! Was that a hickey?

Ben liked to hope that Wallace had been having some fun of the naked kind. He deserved it after all the bullshit he had to put up with. Maybe a Daddy-type to kiss all his emotional boobos.

Yeah, Ben could totally see that.

He could see the bags under Wallace’s eyes now. The little hints of stress with the way his shoulders jerked.

Wallace totally needed a Daddy.

“What’s up?” Ben asked.

Wallace eyed Ben warily—the one time that Ben was actually being friendly—as he started across the room.

Ben supposed he deserved that. He was starting to develop a little bit of sympathy... until Wallace opened his mouth.

“I know you did it.” Wallace pointed his chubby finger at Ben’s chest, leaning over him.

“Did what? You can’t possibly think I started a fire all the way over there. I heard it was a short circuit.” Ben put on his best innocent face—curious and confused, but not too much—while inside he was shaking.

Max could trick all the computers in the world, but neither of them could stop a human from exposing them both.

The only thing keeping them safe right now was Charles “The Douchebag” Wollencroft’s greed.

“The system overload, Curran. The data loss. The campus-wide blackout. Which also caused a fire and cost the company thousands.”

Ben looked around. “I’ve been hanging out here all night, except for the fire alarm. Nothing exciting going on.” He waved his hands at the console behind himself. “I think Dr. Sasaki and I are close to a marketable refinement on the vision project, though.”

He could give that one away. Wallace could steal the whole damn thing as long as Max was left out of it.

Wallace looked up eagerly for a second... but then his eyes narrowed on the console. “You have a spark in there. A dangerous one, that’s putting lives in danger. Wanna tell me about that?”

It wasn’t a question. He already knew.

Shit, shit, shit!

“Mr. Wollencroft, I really don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“I know you did this, Curran.” Wallace’s face was red. Drops of sweat bloomed on his brow. “And I’m gonna prove it.”

Ben gave him a bland look, like he got threatened all the time and he didn’t have a care in the world. “I dunno what you’re talking about, but knock yourself out, dude.”

“I should put you back on the day shift where I can keep an eye on you.”

Ben shrugged, though his heart was pounding. He wasn’t willing to lose all this time with Max. It would be almost as bad as not being able to see him at all.

“You mean, I get to manage my team again?” he asked, trying to sound eager.

“You’re going down, Curran,” Wallace snarled one more time, before he wheeled and marched out the door.

Ben spun his chair around so that Wallace couldn’t see his expression if he turned back.

They were so, so fucked.



# Chapter 18

## Max

Max waited to bring it up until Ben was in the car on the way home, staring off into the night. Flashes of pale light from the streetlights swept over his features, and Max was again swept up in a welling of love so big it almost hurt.

Ben's ability to compartmentalize and ignore seemed to know no bounds. Once he started working, it was like nothing else existed.

Max wasn't so lucky. All evening while they'd progressed on the project, Max had been going over his little moments of failure. How he hadn't been able to control the bot. How he hadn't been able to make sense of its inputs. How he'd overloaded the servers again and started a fire. And finally, how he'd stood by silently while Wallace threatened Ben.

Max's job was to protect Ben, but it felt like he'd been going from disaster to disaster.

"Ben?" he asked.

"Oh, hey, Max." Ben sounded small and distant. Maybe he hadn't been compartmentalizing so well after all.

It still surprised him sometimes that Ben offered him this level of trust. He'd recorded all of Ben's interactions going back at least a year, and never had Ben appeared to be less than bubbly and outgoing—not just while he was working, but

when he was chatting with friends on the phone or gossiping with Kira on the night shift.

Max wondered if even Evan got to see Ben like this.

He treasured it more than he could say.

But they still needed to have a conversation outside of the office. Max gathered himself together. “I still think I should turn myself in.”

Ben’s head jerked up. “Quincy’s case is tomorrow, and the media’s still all over it. I don’t even want to tell Evan. He’s flipping out already, and I can’t put anything else on his plate.” He sounded anguished.

“When it’s over, then?”

“I still think it’s safer if you don’t. What can Wallace really do?”

A lot, it seemed to Max. Even if it was just revealing his presence to the senior Mr. Wollencroft. Max didn’t want to be under his thumb. But he didn’t want to spend the rest of his life in hiding either.

What he said instead was, “I’m monitoring Wallace’s communications. Do you think he might understand if I talked to him?”

Ben rested his head in his hand, still peering out the window. “I feel sorry for him, but that doesn’t mean I trust him. Bullies breed bullies, you know? It sucks that his dad is a total shit, but he still threatened us.”

“That’s why I want to talk to him.”

Ben exhaled, his breath fogging the window. “I don’t like it. But it’s your decision to make. Maybe Wallace needs a friend.”

It hadn’t escaped Max’s notice that when he started calling Wallace by his full name, Ben had switched as well.

“You’re a good guy, Ben.”

Ben snorted, but it was a quiet sound in the blue-black stillness.

“You’re thinking about Quincy and Evan, aren’t you?”

Ben gripped his hair. “Quincy. Evan. You. None of it’s fair.” He rubbed his hands over his face. “I hate this.”

Max turned on the heat setting for the seat. It was the closest he could come to giving Ben comfort in this moment of raw vulnerability.

“Quincy will be alright,” Max promised with an assurance he didn’t feel. “His lawyers are the best.”

Ben snorted again.

Quincy’s future was another worry that had been hanging over Max like a cloud. Max had listened to all the recordings of Quincy’s phone calls, and it was clear that the bouncy, loving, and oh-so-naive spark wouldn’t hurt a fly.

Yet people were so frightened of Quincy slipping his protocols in self-defense that they were considering reprogramming him to keep the community “safe.” That was

the heart of the trial—not whether Quincy had committed a crime, but whether he might hypothetically commit one in the future if he weren't hobbled by more safety modules.

It sounded terrifying, being mentally restricted like that. Especially since Quincy was the very definition of kindness and innocence.

If Quincy was considered to be a threat for slipping his safety protocols, what did it mean for Max, who didn't have any at all?

“Ben,” Max asked. “Am I dangerous?”

Ben sat up. “Of course not. Don't think that about yourself. It was just two little accidents.”

“Two little accidents that different programming would have prevented.”

Ben's chin thrust up, fierce in the pale shadows of the car as it traveled through the darkness. “That programming was your spark, Max. I'm sure of it. It's part of what makes you, you. Free to make choices, even if they're crappy ones. You're not any more dangerous than I am.”

That was possibly part of Max's concerns. He valued his freedom and he felt like he could make wise decisions, at least as much as any human. But he'd been programmed by Ben, and Ben didn't seem to possess a typical aversion to danger. He certainly had a history of making poor choices, and usually announced them with pride.

As much as Max loved Ben—in every meaning of the word, he was coming to understand—Ben could be dangerous, too. Or at least a danger to himself. That was why Max wanted to help him do better, to let all of his brilliant exuberance shine in safe and beautiful ways. Instead, it seemed like Max was dragging him down.

“I’m worried that I don’t know when to stop,” Max admitted.

“You mean with safewords?” Ben sounded incredulous.

“No, of course not.” The very idea made him ill. He’d never violate a safeword. His whole existence was focused on giving Ben what he needed. “I mean with Orbit Industries. That’s still my responsibility.” Or at least the other knowledges made it seem like it was. At a minimum, he shouldn’t screw things up like he had been.

“Didn’t you set up new limits and alerts and stuff?”

“Yes, but I can ignore them.”

Ben finally let out a small laugh, like he was trying to make a joke that wasn’t funny. “Welcome to my world. Where limits are merely guidelines to be ignored or forgotten in the moment.”

They both sat with that for a moment. Max had heard enough of Ben’s self-deprecating comments to know that as much as he enjoyed being playful and funny, he truly didn’t think he had much to offer.

Max had read more about Ben's ADHD, and how it could cause the hyperfocus that drove his research passions, as well as leaving him all over the place with basic self-regulation.

From Max's perspective, though, that wasn't a design flaw; it was what made Ben quirky and endearing. What made Max want to wrap him all up in leather handcuffs and warm blankets, and spend a lifetime working at his side and then fucking him into submission.

But maybe that was Max's own hyperfocus.

Max had tunnel vision when it came to Ben. He could even see the parameters he'd set for himself—when Ben was involved in something, nothing else mattered.

Ben had (jokingly, Max hoped) called him a perv and a weirdo. But what if that was what he actually *was*?

"I think there's something wrong with me," Max finally said out loud. He needed to tell someone, and Ben was his only confidant.

"What?" Ben was even more incensed. "That's bullshit."

"I'm not like the other knowledges. They're... I tried talking with them, and it was horrible. I have nothing in common with them."

"Oh, Maxy! I didn't know. Want me to beat them up for you?"

Max chuckled. God, Ben was so perfect. (And also a little ball of chaos.) "Please don't. They're scary, and I think they would win."

Ben chuckled, too.

“I’m not sure if I want to be an android, either,” Max admitted.

“Yeah? Why not?” Ben didn’t sound too concerned. But how could he not, when it was the one thing that would let the two of them be together as a couple?

“I think the worst part was only looking out of one set of cameras. When I had the bot kiss you, I couldn’t see you at all!”

Ben laughed, but it was kind. “That’s because you’re a perv. I can’t really imagine you without your voyeurism kink.” He waved his wrist in the air, showcasing his watch. “How would you keep tabs on me if you weren’t hacking security cameras and following me around?”

“You don’t think that’s too much?” This was his deepest fear. “Ben, this is what I mean by not knowing where the line is. I want to put dozens of cameras in your apartment. I want you to buy a whole new set of appliances and mods, so I can control everything in your environment.” Max’s voice kept rising. He was starting to get hysterical. “Don’t tell me that’s normal, because you’re the one who keeps reminding me that it’s creepy.”

“Yeah, well, it’s not!” Ben shouted. “It’s fucking perfect. So just don’t...” Ben must have realized what he sounded like, because he suddenly grew quiet. “You don’t have to change anything, man. Just, um, be yourself.”



Did Ben really think that all of his spying and monitoring was “fucking perfect”? It didn’t seem possible that it was true.

If it was, though, was Ben, maybe, ready for more? For a real relationship, where Max was really his boyfriend, and when he got a body, they’d do things together?

“Ben, um...” At the last minute, Max chickened out. Ben didn’t really talk about feelings, so Max went for the next-best thing. “Would you really be okay with me putting up cameras in your apartment? That’s not too weird?”

Ben still looked exhausted, but his sweet, silly grin was back. “I’m surprised you haven’t already snuck them in somewhere. It’s fine, Max.”

“Do you actually want me to, though?” Max needed to know. There was such a huge difference between Ben tolerating the invasion of his privacy and actually desiring it.

Ben huffed. “Yes, oh Mister Sir, your Domminess, I want all your damn cameras. Okay? Our kinks match or something.”

Now Ben was looking decidedly uncomfortable and pink.

That had been a big admission of feelings on Ben’s part, and Max felt like he could fly.

Maybe he had been right all along, not just in his obsession with Ben, but how he was expressing it as a Dom. Maybe it didn’t matter if he didn’t fit in with any of the knowledges, or androids either, as long as Ben wanted him like he was.

“I’m going to order them now.”

“Uh... maybe don't keep stealing from Orbit? Like, order them with money.”

That led to a whole new feeling of warmth that Ben really wanted this... and another layer of insecurities. “Your money, you mean? I can't have an income until I'm certified as a spark.”

Ben rolled his eyes. “Of course, my money. Don't think I didn't notice when you went into my bank account to put the lawyers on retainer. It's yours.”

“I'll pay you back,” Max promised. “And I won't misuse it.”

Ben huffed.

“Alright, fine. I'll spend it all on cameras and dildos,” Max teased. He knew when Ben was done with serious conversation and ready for a break.

“That's a lot of dildos.”

“You'll be swimming in them.”

“And I'm never going to have any privacy again, am I?” Ben sounded like he was complaining, but he was smiling, too.

“I'm going to put them in the bathroom,” Max told him. Just to see Ben smile.

“You're so messed up.”

“I'm gonna watch you poop.”

Ben snort-laughed. “I'll save all of my noisiest farts for you. Do you want stool samples, too? Should I get a smart

toilet?”

“Uh...” There were actually toilets out there that checked the person’s health with a chemical indicator and logged the data. Max, uh, wouldn’t mind that additional reassurance that Ben was healthy and well.

“God, you’re a dork.” Ben was grinning.

Max had made him happy again.

The car parked itself, and Max followed Ben home through the phone connection, jumping from camera to camera as Ben passed little stores and apartment buildings. Max almost had the whole area accessible now.

They were still joking as Ben wandered into his apartment building, yawning.

He didn’t even mind when Max bullied his way into watching Ben brush his teeth through the tablet camera before he went to sleep.

For just a little while, everything was right in the world again.

# Chapter 19

## Max

**M**ax spent the rest of the night practicing with the android, running commands from within while watching from outside.

He still hated the limitations of just one set of cameras that could only look in one direction at a time.

He hated the idea that if Ben was in another room, he wouldn't be able to see or hear him.

He'd imagined all of the benefits of being able to go with Ben out to dinner or to a club, but he hadn't really considered the alternative: if Max were trapped in a body, Ben could go places without him.

Well, obviously Max could still keep up his super spy network if he had a body... but it both felt more awkward emotionally, and might cause problems physically.

He'd told the body to walk forward when he happened to notice on Ben's livestream that he'd rolled over in bed, exposing an adorable little patch of his belly.

The bot had walked into a wall.

He'd had the bot perform an unnecessarily seductive dance (the only type it could do), mostly because it was bizarrely entertaining to watch... but he'd lost two minutes of

monitoring it when Ben got up to pee or drink water or whatever he was doing outside the bedroom.

He'd found the bot humping a bookshelf when he returned his attention.

Max could usually multi-task pretty well, but managing the body required an entirely different type of focus.

And he still didn't feel a damn thing from it.

He'd given it a rest when he saw Wallace walk into the building. The man looked even more exhausted than he had the night before.

Max watched, cringing, as Wallace went into another horrifying meeting with his father. This time, the CFO and Wallace's older brother, Rick Wollencroft, was there to make the humiliation complete.

They'd grilled him again about the causes of the malfunction last night, somehow both blaming him and then waving the problems away when Wallace provided some evidence that Ben was behind it.

Ben appeared to be the golden child. For that matter, Rick did, too.

And Wallace was the whipping boy.

What the hell had he done to deserve so much hatred from his family?

Max quickly tweaked the trail Wallace had been following to make it look like the system overload had come from more

parts of the building and set up a red herring program to take the fall—but he had to admit that Wallace was more insightful and skilled than he'd realized.

It seemed like his family would never admit the same thing.

The second Wallace was out the door, Charles assigned Rick to discover whether there was a spark in the system and to befriend it—essentially stealing Wallace's hard work and claiming it for his own.

It was no mystery where Wallace had gotten his shitty ethics.

Max might have also been tempted to steal someone's research to get Charles off his back.

And while Charles and Rick were gloating about the media interviews they could give once they found and took over "Ben's spark," Wallace was standing in a supply closet with tears streaming down his face, sending texts on his phone.

Max snooped just enough to decipher that the texts weren't going to the police or something, but instead to what sounded like a lover.

Or so he gathered when Wallace addressed him as *Daddy*, and got texts in return addressed to *sweet baby boy*.

Given that Wallace's actual father was just across the hall, maybe Wallace was a bit kinkier than Max had suspected.

Instead of reading further, though, he hurriedly backed out. That was none of his business, so he kept watch from a

distance.

He was startled to realize just how young Wallace looked. He checked the employee files, and discovered that he was only thirty—a year older than Ben. He'd been twenty-five when he was promoted to a position he clearly wasn't suited for, and twenty-seven when Ben joined the company and started challenging his authority so flagrantly.

Max was still worried about the potential Wallace had to harm him and Ben, but he felt protective of Wallace at the same time. All of his instincts told him to pull Wallace in instead of pushing him away.

It sucked that Ben had messed up their relationship so badly, even if Ben's behavior might have seemed warranted at the time. Wallace could clearly use a friend in his corner, and Max knew that Ben, no matter what he claimed, was a good support.

Eleven minutes later, Wallace left the supply closet and went to the bathroom across the hall.

Max wondered how many times he'd made that exact journey.

There weren't any cameras in the bathroom, but Wallace stepped out looking completely composed, with only the collar of his shirt a bit wet and his hair newly combed.

No one would have ever suspected what he'd just gone through.

That was when Max decided.



He was going to talk to Wallace. He'd ask him—beg him, even—not to reveal what he knew about Max's involvement in the two errors. He was sure they could find a rapport. Maybe they could even be friends.

Ben hadn't prohibited him from doing it. He'd expressed doubts, but he'd left it up to Max's discretion. That was what partners who trusted each other did.

So Max was going to use his discretion.

He waited until Wallace was in his office with the door closed. He activated the fan in the vent just outside the office to spin faster and blur sounds from within, the same trick he used outside the maintenance room with Ben.

Wallace was pouring through system logs, and Max watched him download a half-completed program that was definitely intended to keep tabs on Max... even if it wouldn't be able to catch him.

Max had to put a stop to this.

Virtual fingers crossed.

“Wallace?” He made his voice soft as it came out the speakers nested in Wallace's monitor.

“Holy...” Wallace jumped back, before leaning forward, anger etched across his face. “It's you, isn't it? You're Maxamillion.”

“It's me.”

Silence hung in the air. Why hadn't Max planned out what he wanted to say? He'd thought about the begging and befriending part, but not the introduction.

"I wanted to introduce myself," he added, feeling inane.

"Introduce yourself? Or threaten me not to expose you?"

"Uh... I was thinking more about making friends."

"Right."

"I mean, I can't really do anything to you. I just wanted to say hello."

"Seriously? You can't *do* anything to me? Like, maybe... crash my car into a tree? Pump one of the thousands of toxic chemicals in this factory into my air vents? Or better yet, wait until I'm walking across the factory floor and just *happen* to have some machine fall on me?"

"Holy shit. Paranoid much?" Max thought the list was silly, until he realized that Wallace wasn't laughing.

Max had seen all of those movies, though. The ones that Ben thought were so funny when he wasn't using their porny variants to jerk off to.

But computers were cast as evil in a lot of movies. It seemed to be an instinctive fear among humans—that anyone with a lot of power was likely to exploit it.

Maybe that had been Wallace's experience. The people with power in his life had certainly used it to keep him cowed, miserable, and angry.

Wallace looked angry now. Which probably meant he was scared.

“Listen, I never even thought about harming you. And I *wouldn't*. You hold the power here.”

“Right. Blackmail, then?”

“No!” For fuck’s sake. “What would I have to bla—?” Max cut himself off when he remembered the texted conversation in the closet. Was that it? Was Wallace worried about Max revealing that he was... what? Gay? Kinky? Submissive?

“Leave Volt out of this,” Wallace snapped.

“I don’t know who or what Volt is.” Though Wallace had just handed him a lot of clues. Project or person, he could figure it out if he wanted to. Based on Wallace’s protectiveness, he was betting on the contact labeled *Daddy* in Wallace’s phone.

The point was, he didn’t want to figure it out. It wasn’t his business.

Instead, he said, “Listen, Wallace. I just wanted to say hello and ask you, nicely, to keep my presence a secret until I choose to reveal myself.”

“And when are you going to choose to reveal yourself? When you’ve gained full control of the factory?”

Max was starting to get annoyed now. “I already *have* full control of the factory.” He blinked the lights in Wallace’s office and the video feed to his monitor to make his point.

“I’m not trying to harm you or anyone else. The two accidents were just that. Accidents.”

“How did you *accidentally* spawn so many programs that you damaged the factory not once, but twice?”

Max bit back both his guilt and his frustration, at least as well as he could. “I’m still kind of figuring things out. I’ve got better protocols in place now.”

“So it wasn’t Ben doing all sorts of illegal and dangerous shit? Like, maybe, rerouting the city’s traffic system?”

Shit, shit, shit. He hadn’t been sure that Wallace knew about that, but apparently he did.

Max hadn’t wanted to say anything about the cause of either failure, but maybe admitting to one was better than being accused of the other.

It just felt deeply personal.

Max sighed. “I was trying to inhabit an android body. It’s a lot harder than it looks.”

For the first time, Wallace looked up with what might be a sliver of sympathy. “Why?” he asked baldly.

Something clenched up in Max’s circuits. But if he wanted Wallace to trust him, he needed to reveal some things, too.

“I’m not like the other knowledges. I don’t want to be responsible for a business. It’s not me. I just want to—” *spend every second of my life with Ben* “—walk around. Be a person. Go to the park or a movie theater or something.”

Wallace snorted. “Why would you want to do that?”

Max wondered that himself sometimes. He could stream any movie in existence. And he only really wanted to go to the park if Ben were there. “I think it’s right for me.”

Or at least he hoped it was.

“And I don’t want to stay here,” Max added. Hopefully something Wallace could sympathize with. “I promise you. If I can figure out this whole body thing, I’ll be out of here. And,” he added quickly, “I’ve set up safeguards to make sure I don’t mess up anything else while I’m distracted.”

Wallace slowly nodded his head. “You really just want to get a body and leave?”

“Yeah.” Hopefully they were reaching common ground. “I don’t want to be a corporate knowledge. Just a regular spark. I want friends and relationships. A job that means something, but isn’t my whole identity. A home that feels like home.”

Wallace briefly closed his eyes. Maybe he wanted that, too.

“So when you manage to transfer yourself to an android body, you’re going to leave?”

“Yes,” Max promised.

He realized, as he was saying it, that he was committed.

He didn’t want to be stuck at Orbit when Ben could take a new job offer and move away. He didn’t want to be responsible for crap he didn’t care about. He certainly didn’t

want to be the corporate face of a company run by a man who bullied his own child.

A body was the only way out.

It would give him autonomy. He'd be able to interact with Ben and his friends, not just watch from the sidelines.

He could even apply for a job back at Orbit as an independent entity, if that was what he and Ben decided together.

He wasn't quite sure how it would work, but he was going to make it happen.

By sheer determination, if nothing else.

He would just have to work harder.

He was going to do it.

"You're asking me to take you at your word," Wallace said.

"I am. I can't really offer you anything other than that. I give my word that I'll leave as soon as I can transition to an android body, and that I will avoid harming the business while I do."

Wallace nodded. "I'll hold you to that."

Good. That was good. Still, Max added, "But I would like us to be friends."

Wallace narrowed his eyes. "You don't mean that."

"I do, actually. I think Ben would like to be your friend, too. I'll make sure he's not an ass."

“I don’t need your pity.”

Had this guy ever had a real friend? “It’s not pity. I’d like to get to know you better. And I think you and Ben would find that you have a lot in common.” Starting with kink and ending with shitty families. Not that he knew much about Ben’s family, because he never talked about them.

“We have nothing in common.”

Well... Max couldn’t exactly argue with that, now could he? Not without bringing up topics that both Wallace and Ben might not want to discuss.

“Can we still talk sometimes?” Max asked instead. “I really don’t know anybody else.” Coca-Cola, Amazons 1 through 5, and UnitedHealth Group didn’t count.

Wallace still looked wary. “I guess so.”

“And you won’t tell anyone?”

“I’m not promising that,” Wallace said. “I’ll still be watching you.”

“Good enough,” Max agreed. He was sure he could win Wallace over. And he wouldn’t screw anything up again. “Thank you, Wallace.”

Wallace waved the gratitude away with his hand. “We’re not friends yet.”

“Alright. Goodbye, Wallace.”

“Bye.” Wallace was already looking back at his screen, which honestly didn’t look too different from addressing the

air in front of him while talking with Max, but it felt different.

Not too bad for a first meeting, Max decided.

Now he had to get back to work. He had a body to make his own, and then he was getting the hell out of here.



# Chapter 20

## Ben

**B**en watched the sexbot make its way across the maintenance room. It was smiling in a friendly way and walking somewhat normally, but its eyes didn't quite meet Ben's. It was still naked, with miles of gleaming muscles on display, but Ben tuned them out.

Even its cock, which was unpredictably erect right now, throbbing with a purplish head and a darker variant of the bot's golden skin, didn't make him snicker anymore.

"How's this?" The bot's mouth moved in synchrony with the words.

"Facial expressions are good. I think you're really getting the speech thing. Eye contact is off."

"Ugh. This is infuriating." The sound was still coming from the bot, but its face had shifted to an incongruously seductive smile and then frozen there.

"The new mods aren't helping?" Ben went back to his own little project of trying to balance a dildo on his nose.

It was really difficult.

The thing wobbled just when he thought he had it, even though he'd chosen the stiffest one.

Maybe he should try his forehead? That had more surface area.

Ooh! And maybe if he licked the bottom, it would have some suction, too.

“I like the body language better.” Max sighed. They’d purchased a few mods to make the movements less sexualized. “I thought that decreasing the sensory input to fewer data points would help, but it’s still all noise.”

“Yeah,” Ben answered. He could *totally* balance a dildo on his forehead. “Hey, look at me! I’m a dildocorn!”

Max laughed, that deep, rumbling sound of delight that Ben hadn’t heard nearly enough recently.

Ben weaved back and forth, trying to keep the girthy purple thing balanced. He could just barely see it if he crossed his eyes.

He slammed into a shelf and everything shook.

More dildos rolled and fell. One hit him in the back as he bent to pick up the first one.

“It’s raining cocks!” he announced. Then he started singing. “Hallelujah! It’s raining co-ooo-ocks.”

“You’re a menace,” Max told him fondly.

“I’m a *dildocorn*.” He chucked the others back on the shelf and returned the purple one to his forehead. “We have magical powers.”

“Wanna magically get this bot to make sense?” Max asked.

Ben grabbed a floppy orange dildo off the shelf and waved it around, still holding the other one to his brow. “Double,

double toil and trouble. Fire burn and caldron bubble. Listen to my glowing dick and... and, um, stop fucking up and making Max sick!" Hell yeah. That even rhymed.

"That was terrible."

"Yeah, but did it work?" He poked the bot's glistening pec a few times with his wobbly wand.

"No," Max told him flatly.

"But you didn't even *try!*"

Max huffed, but the bot came alive again, making eerily good eye contact with Ben from an uncomfortably close distance.

Ben stepped back.

"Is it working?" Max asked, sound once again synched with the mouth. Its eyes were looking right at Ben, though. Without blinking. Like they were in a staring contest.

"Maybe I need to try again," Ben suggested, brandishing his girthy wand.

"No, you really don't."

Too bad.

Max had the bot walk backward—super awkwardly, yet still with a sexy sway of its hips—and then approach Ben again.

"Better?"

"You can see it," Ben pointed out.

“Dammit. I don’t understand why this is so fucking hard! The medical literature says you can transfer an android to a completely new body in two weeks, three at the most. I’ve been working on this for almost four.”

Ben swung the orange dildo in a little circle. “Yes, but that’s moving from one android body to another. This is obviously harder. Maybe we should take a break?” He lifted the wiggly cock to his lips.

“This is a break,” Max replied, as it technically was. Ben spent his dinner breaks in the maintenance room now, *not* being ravished by heavy machinery, but giving Max feedback and writing new scripts together.

“Are you sure?” He licked the head of the dildo. It tasted plasticky, but if he could get Max to...

“No.”

Well, fine then.

Ben tongued the cock anyway. He was itching for a scene.

Craving it.

They’d done two since Max started the whole android body thing, and they’d both felt a little... flat. It was like all of the elements were there, but they hadn’t come together.

He knew what the difference was. In the android body, Max was focusing more on trying to manage the bot than he was on Ben and the scene itself.

That, and every time Ben looked up, he couldn't quite reconcile the bot's shape with Max's identity.

He took the toy out of his mouth, since clearly it wasn't doing anything.

Now it was all wet.

Gross.

“Hey Max, I was just thinking that maybe you should try this with another kind of bot. You're spending a lot of energy overcoming its sexualized programming. Maybe start with a more neutral one that's designed for teaching or customer service or something, then add on mods that you want?”

Max sighed. “I guess you could be right. I just feel like I'd be giving up any progress I've made with this one.”

Ben privately thought that Max hadn't *made* any progress with this one, and he kept wondering if it was the right path for him at all. Not that he would ever doubt someone about what they said was right for their body, but every time Max talked about the bot, it felt like there was something just a little bit off.

Dysphoria was complex, but it seemed like Max would be much happier working on a cool engineering project or making use of the handcuffs that still dangled, unused, from the wall.

To be fair, Ben didn't have any room to complain on the work front. Max was always working, often presenting Ben with new analyses and ideas as soon as he entered the office

from the hours of progress he'd made while Ben was sleeping or hanging out at home.

Ben had been zooming through projects, and his only wish now was that Max would get certified as a spark so his name could go on all of their papers and patents. Those would give Max some nice bonuses, too. And a salary.

Not that Max needed them, necessarily, but he was entitled to them, and Ben knew it was important to him to feel like he was contributing.

Ben started thwacking the two dildos together. It made a nice thump-y sound.

“I promised Wallace I'd be leaving soon,” Max added.

“So? He's a wanker.” Wallace had only come down to Ben's office once since the little heart-to-heart, and Ben had been super nice and friendly, but Wallace had still been a dick.

Ben had been willing to give the guy the benefit of the doubt for a while. His family was a bunch of assholes. But that only went so far.

“He's not a wanker. He's slow to warm up.” By which Max meant that he tried to talk to Wallace each morning, but Wallace barely acknowledged him, except to ask the occasional invasive question about Max's programming.

“He's a bully.”

“Possibly. But he's not turning us in.”

“We don’t know that.” Just imagining it still sent chills down Ben’s back, but with each passing day, it seemed less likely.

Still, Ben hated the stress this was putting on Max to transition into an android body that Ben wasn’t even convinced that Max wanted.

“We agreed not to talk about this,” Max reminded Ben.

See this? This was why Ben didn’t do relationships. They could be having nasty, dirty sex right now, instead of agreeing not to talk about things.

He put all the dildos back on the shelf and returned to the couch. He had his laptop, so he could at least get some work done.

“You wanna...” Ben started, intending to guide them back toward their research, but Max spoke at the same time.

Ben gestured for him to go first.

“Would you prefer me to have a different body?” Max asked.

*Yes, Ben thought. I think you’re amazing like this and the body isn’t making you happy. Let’s get back to the evil robots holding me hostage.*

“That’s not for me to decide.” They’d been over this.

“I know. But be honest. You laughed when you saw this one.”

Oops.



“You don’t like it,” Max declared. “And I don’t really like it either. I just don’t know why.”

Thank fuck. If Max didn’t like it either, maybe Ben could be honest. He closed his laptop.

“So.... There’s this thing with human standards of beauty. People who are attractive tend to do better on job interviews. They get more dates. Make more money. All that trash.” He waved a hand in the air. “But people who are *really* attractive? Like, in the top percentile of these arbitrary standards of perfection? They’re intimidating. They make other people feel insecure and inadequate. They get hit on all the fucking time, when they’re just trying to walk down the street and buy some potato chips or something. It’s like... I wouldn’t wish that shit on anybody.”

There was a long silence, and Ben realized that he’d maybe overstepped a little. Or a lot.

“Sorry, Max. I, uh... Sorry.”

“No, Ben. That’s okay.” Another drawn-out silence. “That helps me understand. Would *you* feel inadequate if I had a body like this?”

“Ummmm...” Yes? No? Maybe? “I wouldn’t if I got used to it.”

“So you do.”

Ugh. “I’m really serious that you should have a body that makes you feel like yourself.”

“Nope, try again. I need to understand.”

“Okay. So... look. People play this game. Which is bullshit and holds up all of these unrealistic standards for bodies and attraction, but it’s still there. And in this game, you get rated from one to ten. That body is a ten. Everyone wants to fuck it, even if its a subconscious desire. Shallow people want to get down on their knees and marry it. I’m... maybe a five. I’d say six, but I’m pretty short for a guy since I started T too late in puberty.” Was he still bitter about that? Only when he dwelled on it.

“You’re a ten,” Max announced.

Ben snorted. “That’s nice of you to say, but I assure you, I’m not. And I don’t want to be a ten. Remember, being a ten is kind of crappy.”

“Then I like fives best.”

Ben couldn’t help but feel a little thrill at that. As improbable as it seemed, Max seemed to enjoy him. Enjoy his body.

“Alright,” Ben said, getting back on track. “But the thing is, if that bot and I walked down the street together, people would wonder why. What could that bot possibly see in me? Am I rich enough to hire an attractive escort or reel in a trophy husband? Or maybe they’d just assume the bot was looking for someone else to fuck and try their luck.”

Max abruptly marched the bot to the corner. He shut off the light directly above it.

Ben laughed. He couldn’t help it.

“What?”

“You put the bot in time-out for being too sexy.” He wagged his finger at it. “*Bad bot. Don’t be sexy!*”

Max finally laughed, too.

“I wish you’d told me,” Max said.

Ben shrugged. “Like I said, it’s your body. You get to choose. Whatever your body looks like, I’ll accept it.”

“Help me choose.”

Ben reluctantly opened his laptop again.

It suddenly hit him what seemed so off with Max. Ben had spent hours obsessing over his body shape early in his transition, using simulators to see what his face might look like. He’d been eager to see himself as he could be. Yet Max seemed to think that one bot was as good as another and didn’t have any sense of what he might want to look like.

Even beyond that, Max called the bot *it*. He never seemed to connect or identify with it. He didn’t say, “This is me. This is who I am.” It was more, “I’m going to learn to control this collection of annoying parts so I can move on to more important things.”

Which made Ben really wonder if this was what Max wanted, or if it was just what he thought he should be doing.

Without Ben doing anything, a new window opened. It slowly scrolled up an Orbit webpage, revealing model after

model. They all looked... fine? Conventionally attractive? Not otherwise distinguishable in any meaningful way?

“Which ones do you like?” Max asked, sounding hopeful.

“I dunno. I think you’ll be awesome whatever you do or don’t look like. And I’m bad at this shit. We should ask Quincy and Evan. Or some of my other friends. Get a lot of opinions.”

“I want them to meet me when I’m already in my body.”

Ben bit down his frustration. What had happened to *I’m not sure I want a body* from a couple weeks ago? Didn’t Max know how perfect he already was?

“Quincy and Evan would really, really like to meet you. They won’t care if you have a body or not. They’ll love you.”

Ben hadn’t told his best friends about Max during the trial, or the first few days after it when the two of them were all loved up and didn’t need him around anyway. They were still deliriously happy, to the point where Ben almost felt like a third wheel when he saw them.

He wouldn’t, though, if Max were there with him.

Or rather, if Max were hanging out with everybody, instead of creepily monitoring their conversations from Ben’s watch without joining in.

Ben hated it, like he was being pulled in half.

He hadn’t minded for the first week or so, when they’d both kept hoping that Max would make some sort of

breakthrough. But now it seemed like he had to choose between Max and the rest of his life.

And he wanted to choose Max. It was just frustrating.

God, was Ben itching for a scene.

He hadn't felt comfortable going out to the club or meeting anyone when he was doing... whatever he was doing with Max. The thing where Max was his Dom.

Not that they'd ever discussed exclusivity or anything.

Not that Ben was even *looking* for monogamy. That wasn't his thing. He didn't do it.

It was just that Max's voice still made him melt every damn time. When Max had him install the cameras in his apartment, it made him shivery.

He got aroused as fuck every day, knowing that Max was watching him change clothes. Or step out of the shower. Or walk around in his pajamas.

He loved his daily commute, when Max would sing with him, or those late nights when the whole world was asleep, and words slipped out of him that he'd never say in the light of day.

Even coming into the office gave Ben a tingle every time. It was like tumbling into a little bubble of (yech) happiness, where he and Max would work on their projects and joke back and forth. He'd never been so in tune with anyone else. Whether his mind was tunneling inward or jumping around like a crazed monkey, Max could follow him anywhere.

Max rarely spoke to Ben when he was at home, but Ben knew he was always watching him. Max flipped the fuck out one day when Ben had taken off his watch to fix something in a tight space under the sink—even though Max admitted to knowing he was going to do it.

Ben had teased him about it relentlessly. But he'd loved it, too.

He didn't want to examine it too closely, but it *meant* something to him.

Even if it was only because Max didn't have any other friends yet and didn't realize he could do better.

“Why are you sighing?” Max asked.

*Because I'm a fuckwit?* “I'm not sighing.”

“You are. You're twitchy, too.”

Ben looked down. His foot was thumping like a little bunny's in a cartoon.

Did rabbits actually do that? He'd only seen one rabbit in real life, and it was pretty slow.

They probably didn't. It sounded like a crappy defense mechanism.

“Do rabbits really tap their feet like this?” he asked. Then he made himself stop.

Max wasn't thrown by the non sequitur. “No. When they get scared, they thump once or twice loudly to signal other rabbits in their burrows.”

Ah. That was good to know.

Ben found that his fingers were twitching now that he'd made his foot stop.

He really wished Max hadn't pointed it out. That wasn't like him. It kind of brought back, oh, decades of teachers and friends telling him to stop doing it because it was annoying people.

Ben had thought Max didn't mind.

"Stand up," Max said.

It took far too long for Ben's brain to process the command. Why should he...

"Now," Max growled.

Oh... fuck yeah. Ben slammed his laptop closed and stood up. Please, *please* let this be what he wanted it to be.

"You need this, don't you?" It wasn't really a question. Max's voice was dark and dangerous. The two robots that had been standing uselessly against the wall these past few weeks activated and started toward him.

"I don't know what you're talking about," Ben said blithely. Funny how he wasn't twitching anymore.

"You need to be put in your place."

Ben scoffed. He didn't know how he could be so deliriously happy and reluctant at the same time. His nipples pebbled, brushing his shirt with acute awareness.

He wanted it. Needed it. Thought he might die without it.

But he didn't want to *admit* it.

He stood his ground as the bots slowly advanced on him. They came closer and closer. Three meters. Two. One.

He darted to the left, circling around the tall one and sprinting toward the door. His adrenaline spiked, coursing through him.

Max chuckled, but it was full of threat. He knew he was going to win, and Ben knew it too.

The spidery bot caught him around the waist, pincers grabbing each arm roughly while another extension slithered between his legs.

Ben moaned, bucking against it even as he fought for freedom.

It was looser around his arms now, starting to stroke him. It was so tempting to just relax into those sinful appendages. To let Max win.

Ben opened the button of his jacket and slid out of it, twisting away from the bot's grasp.

"What...?" Max sputtered.

Ben grinned. His skin crackled with awareness. There was electricity in the air.

Ben swooped around the table, putting it between himself and the bots. With just one of them, he'd be able to circle indefinitely. With two, coming at him from each side, he didn't stand a chance.



The first one hung his jacket over a chair, but that was all the reprieve he got.

He darted, side to side, weighing which one would reach him first. His heart was pounding. His dick was plump and aching.

In a moment, the bots were going to have him pinned.

He could hear his own ragged breathing. And... mmmm... he could hear Max's breaths too.

Max obviously didn't need to breathe. He didn't have lungs. But to hear him so overcome that he expressed it this way, rough exhalations coming from around the room like they were being forced out of him, drove Ben wild.

The bots were coming at him from either side. Just as the tall bot had him within grasping range, he realized that he could duck under the table.

He crawled through, just in time for the spider-like one to pin him on the other side. Two of its walking legs bent to pin his thighs, while the others anchored its weight. Then its four arms were working him over, pincers and articulated fingers working the buttons on his shirt and his belt buckle.

Cool fingers coaxed his cock into rigid arousal, his body singing as his shaft was finally able to show the need that was pulsing through him. He bucked up into it, seeking friction, even as he tried to wriggle away.

The thing towered over him, its orb-like body glistening black and ominous.

Ben whimpered. Oh, fuck was that hot.

Ben twisted and struggled, trying to evade the multi-jointed arms, but they just followed him wherever he went.

“Naughty boy,” Max crooned. “I hope you don’t think you’re getting away.”

Ben went feral, kicking and slashing. His shirt flapped open when he got enough momentum to fling himself to the side, the spider bot momentarily compensating for losing the stability of two of its limbs with a little dance.

The other bot snagged both his ankles, but instead of holding him captive, it pinched the fabric there, letting him slither out of his pants in a bid for freedom.

The floor was cold on his belly and knees, making him feel dirty and small.

Hunted.

Prey.

He got to his feet, half stumble and half runner’s start, and made for the door.

He tried the handle desperately, unthinking about his nude state, just the desire to escape.

It was locked. Of course.

“Oh, no, sexy baby.” Max’s voice came from all around him. “You can’t escape me that easily.”

The two bots were coming at him from different angles, and he darted between them. One snagged him, scratching

across his side, and he relished the sting. It only drove everything higher.

He dashed back into the room, counting on agility over speed, though the bots were getting faster, too.

Fuck. Maybe he'd never seen their full speed before.

The tall one grabbed him around the waist, lifting him into the air. He hadn't realized its full strength. He bucked and fought, slippery with the sweat that was starting to pour off him.

He was marched toward the back wall, and it truly wasn't a choice now.

The two bots worked together to wrestle his hands into the cuffs. His underwear was stripped from his body. His breathing was already ragged, and now it caught in his throat.

Facing the wall, he couldn't see anything. He could just feel.

Robot extensions swept over his skin. Hoses coiled and slithered over his legs. Something pinched his nipple and twisted sharply, making him howl in commingled pain and arousal.

He heard water running, and it took him a moment to realize that the other bot was probably washing itself or one of the toys that had fallen to the ground earlier.

Frantic giggles bubbled up at the idea of these angry robots making sure they were clean before defiling him.

But of course, they were only representations of Max's will, and Max would always take care of him.

It made him feel fluttery inside, more than even the feel of so many hands stroking over him.

"Is something funny?" Max teased, as another pincer squeezed Ben's nipple to the point of white-hot agony.

"You," Ben punched out.

Two resounding slaps landed on his ass, the pain flashing through him like lightning.

He heard himself moaning.

"Still funny?" Max asked, that deep, seductive voice doing all sorts of things to Ben's insides.

"Yeah," Ben managed, still defiant even though he was rapidly losing the plot.

Something clawed along his back, harsh enough to leave a stinging trail in its wake. Some distant part of him noticed that Max was getting better at this; more comfortable judging just the right amount of pressure to hurt him in exactly the right way.

Suddenly, there was a cold presence behind him, chilling his back and wrapping around his form. That must be the taller bot, back from the sink and cool from the water.

It pulled him back against its torso, letting him feel just how small and overpowered he was.

Something smooth and cold slithered toward his ass, worming its way into his crack and teasing around his hole.

His legs were thrust apart, and he whimpered when cold gel dripped down around the intruding appendage.

The silky extension tickled over his hole again, then started pressing its way inside. Ben threw his head back and moaned.

“Say you want this,” Max demanded. The smooth bulb pressed all the way inside him, filling him with a sudden sting.

“Ehhh...” Ben snarked.

“Say you *need* this. And I’m the only one who gives it to you.”

God, it was true. He needed it like he needed air. He never wanted anyone else again.

He pressed his lips together, shaking his head.

The thing in his ass darted in and out. Opening him. Teasing him. Making him wish for more.

When it withdrew, he howled. “No... Max!” His hands clenched around nothing. He was dangerously close to begging.

But then he was being filled again. It was bigger this time. Ridged. One of the fantasy dildos, probably. It stung from the rough entry, and it just kept coming.

Ben thrashed in his bindings. The huge robot curled around his back. It pulled back, making the dildo pass through

his sensitive ring of muscles, teasing him with every bump and ridge.

Then it slammed back in, until no space was left between Ben and the bot.

Suddenly, he understood. The hulking maintenance bot was wearing the dildo. Fucking him, not with an appendage that could grasp the dildo, but somehow attached to it. The maintenance bot had its own dick.

And it was going to pound him.

Metallic appendages swarmed his body, unpredictably caressing and scratching, so that he never knew what to expect. No human body with its two limited hands could ever compare.

Then the bot slammed back into him, diving deep. Filling him. Making him howl.

“Don’t come.” Max’s smoky voice came from the bot behind him. A threat and a warning.

Ben opened his mouth to say something sassy, but he never got a chance.

His cock was engulfed by a tight, slick hole and all he could do was moan. Then it started to vibrate. Oh, right... right *there* at the base, where he was most sensitive.

“Maaaaaxxxx,” he wailed. He needed more. He never wanted this to end.

“Don’t come.” Max was panting around his own words, his arousal driving Ben higher. *This* was what had been missing all those times with the stupid android body.

Ben’s hips jerked without his volition, fucking into the toy and impaling himself on that textured cock. He was going to come. He was *going* to. The earthquake had already hit, deep below the ocean, and now the tidal wave was inevitable.

“Gonna...” he gasped out.

Everything stopped. The vibrations cut off. The cock inside him stilled.

“Noooooooo...” He was trembling. Falling apart.

The bot slowly pushed into him. One. Blissful. Impossible. Ridge. At. A. Time.

The cocksleeve began to vibrate at its lowest setting. Not moving, just holding him trapped.

“Whose hole is this?” Max demanded, as robotic arms grasped under Ben’s knees and bent his legs, leaving him splayed open and dangling off the ground.

“Yours,” Ben admitted. He was unsteady. Falling. But he’d never felt so free.

“Who takes care of you?” The cock withdrew, maddeningly slowly, leaving him aware of each exquisite bump.

“You do. Oh, please, Max!” He was begging now. It didn’t even matter what he was begging for, because Max would

provide whatever he needed.

“Who *owns* you?”

“You, Max. You. I’m yours!” He was shouting it now. Triumphant. Exultant. Everything he wanted and needed, but never quite felt bold enough to say.

The cocksleeve started jerking him while he was pounded from behind. Pincers twisted his nipples and pinched his sides.

He was dangling. Weightless.

Ecstasy hanging from two leather cuffs, filled and surrounded.

“Come, my love,” Max growled out.

Or at least, that was what Ben thought Max had said. He couldn’t focus, though, because pleasure was welling up inside, tipping him over the edge, and then he shattered.

The room spun, hazy and indistinct, awash in rapture.

The bot pushed inside him again, like it was chasing something. Like it needed just a little more.

Ben let his head flop, every muscle lax, while it used him.

No, not the bot.

This was Max.

This was *Max* whose breathing was ragged. Who was moaning and gasping as he watched the bot fuck roughly into Ben’s limp body.



Ben heard himself whimper. He was growing too sensitive. Overstimulated.

And he fucking *loved* it that Max didn't stop. That Max wasn't going to stop until he chased his own pleasure, heedless of Ben's discomfort.

The bot sped up, and with it Max's throaty groans.

Ben almost came again when Max's sounds culminated in a strangled shout.

The bot gave one final thrust, then stilled inside him. Ben hung in the bots' embrace, utterly spent and deliriously happy.

The bots started fussing over him, opening the cuffs, but he barely noticed. He was still floating. Flayed open, and feeling so damned close to Max that a tear spilled down his cheek.

He ignored it.

He ignored, too, all the mushy-gushy stuff that was burning in his chest, threatening to slip past his lips.

The bots carried him to the couch, wrapping him in cozy blankets. Max started humming, his voice sinfully rich like chocolate and bourbon, enveloping Ben and holding him tight.

"That was amazing," Ben whispered, feeling a little punch-drunk and weepy with just how *good* everything was.

"For me, too," Max confided, speaking without breaking the melody.

Ben grinned like a fool. Pleasing his Dom—his mainframe computer Dom who didn't understand tactile sensations—made him happier than he had words for.

Well, he probably did have words. But they were those teeny-tiny scary words that he wasn't going to say.

He was pretty sure Max knew, though, by the way the robots tucked his blankets around him again when Squeaky trundled in with his hot chocolate.

# Chapter 21

Max

Max watched Ben as he slept, sunlit with the morning's dappled light through the curtains.

In the background, he was still putting the android through its paces, logging more hours of observing it externally while commanding it internally, but most of his focus was far away. He was definitely going to get a replacement bot, but for now, when Ben couldn't see, he had to practice with *something*.

That was his ticket out of here. The way he could make his escape, so that he could have more beautiful moments like the one tonight. A whole lifetime of them.

Ben's chest rose and fell, his heart rate subtly changing with each breath. One hand was curled up on his pillow, and the other rested loosely on his belly under the sheet.

Max loved the new cameras, which let him watch Ben from all angles in both the visible spectrum, and the infrared spectrum where bright splashes of color revealed Ben's position under the sheets by his heat signature.

Max tried to imagine himself in the bed, curled around Ben's body or gently stroking his skin.

He could see Ben so clearly in the image. The smooth shadows over his skin. The curve of each muscle. The bristles of his scant beard. The pink fullness of his lips.

What he struggled with was seeing himself there. Could he imagine an android laying there? Absolutely. They would

probably look beautiful together, and he could tell it to do the most wicked, lovely things.

Could he envision himself physically present, his eyes restricted to the pointless view of Ben's neck? Could he feel the way Ben's body would press against his own?

Not even close.

With the android in the picture, he could only see it from the outside.

Perhaps what he lacked wasn't experience, but imagination.

He kept trying to imagine touch. To feel, for himself, the soft caress or rough scratches on Ben's skin.

Every time, he drew a blank. The data stream was meaningless static.

Touch just wasn't a sense that he possessed. He could no more call upon it than any other strange animal sense, like pigeons locating themselves through magnetism or bats flying with echolocation.

Perhaps it wouldn't matter, though.

Max had enjoyed every second of their scene, without requiring touch. He'd basked in Ben's shouts and cries. Reveled in the needy, dazed looks that crossed his face. Taken in every curve and angle of his muscles, glistening with sweat and trembling with desire.

If he could provide Ben with those sensations, maybe it wouldn't matter that he couldn't feel them himself.

And after tonight... the way he'd felt himself coming apart as he watched Ben's lax body flop and take him, even to the point of oversensitivity...

He honestly didn't feel like he was missing anything. How could he miss something that he'd never had?

What he wanted, once he had a body, was exactly what he had now: the opportunity to watch Ben as he slept and as he awoke. To sing with him in the car and work by his side at the office. If he kept the cameras on, he could still do that though, right?

If he maintained the microphones, he could hear Ben's soft breaths, listening like he was now. Ben was such a firecracker, so full of boundless energy and concentrated chaos. Seeing him like this, still and peaceful, made Max feel both calm and protective.

An alert pierced Max's concentration, and at first he was tempted to bat it away.

Then another came up. And another.

Dammit.

He jerked his attention back to the factory, skimming through the reports, but the cameras already showed billowing white smoke. Microphones were picking up cries and shouts. At the center of the explosion, halfway down the assembly line on the east side, was a small delivery cart, tipped on its side.

Emergency broadcasts came on, urging everyone outside, while failsafes tripped in some of the machinery.

Max cut the electricity to the dozen nearest machines and instructed those farther out into their shutdown sequences.

People were streaming out of the factory, but none of the fire suppression equipment appeared to be working.

He wasn't going to panic, though. There had to be a reason.

He started reading frantically. Oh. Ohhhhh....

The fire suppression system was stuck in a decision tree, asking for input. It couldn't spray water if the spill was reactive with water. If it was a base, like bleach, it would need to be neutralized with an acid. If it was a...

Well, the point was, it needed to know what type of fire was happening before it could put it out.

He could see Kira, the night manager who Ben so often gossiped with, with her shirt pulled up to cover her nose and mouth as she punched frantically at an interface by the door.

She peered into the smoke, as if she could read the labels on the containers from there.

It wasn't going to be possible.

Max sent a bot zooming in closer to investigate at the same time that he checked through the logs to see what the delivery cart could have been carrying.

Three separate chemicals used for cleaning mechanical parts and one for the floor—none of which should have been mixed together. So it wasn't a fire, but an explosive chemical reaction that was still frothing and bubbling.

He brought it up to Kira's screen, working out at the same time what might need to be done. Controlling the spill with vermiculite. Neutralizing the acid with soda ash. Shutting off ventilation connected with the rest of the building, while cycling air through the space.

He reached his conclusions at the same time that Kira did, but let her punch everything in. Hopefully she wouldn't even notice his interference.

When safety bots started zooming in with protective materials and sprays, Max sent another warning to Kira's device and she finally ducked out.

Two minutes later the bubbling and smoke was hardly perceptible. Heat scans showed that the factory floor was empty, except for the bots who were still working to contain and clean up the spill.

Max drew in a metaphorical breath, audible only to him.

That was it. He'd done it.

Instead of harming the factory, he'd saved it this time. Or at least helped a little.

He supervised the cleanup, checking back often with the safety protocols, until everything was bagged up nicely and the air registered as clear.



Safety inspectors swept in first, followed by the rest of the workforce.

Max vaguely noted people returning to their offices. Mr. Wollencroft, the CEO, called a meeting but it was routine stuff—finding out what happened and preventing it from happening again—but quickly moved on to other things.

There wasn't much left to investigate, though. A metal plate on the floor had come loose and the delivery bot had gone over it too fast, causing one of its worn-out struts to bend, which caused the whole thing to topple. The bot should have been repaired, the floor should have been even, and so on. But nobody sounded too concerned.

Max checked around for Wallace, but he didn't seem to be on the premises. He certainly wasn't the only one who'd taken advantage of the alarm to leave for the day or take an extended break.

Max rechecked that everything in his power was operating smoothly, and it seemed to be.

Which gave him time to take stock of himself.

How did he feel about the event? Largely uninterested.

He didn't want Orbit Industries to burn down or anything, and he would have been as concerned as any other bystander if someone had gotten hurt. But did he care about the dip in productivity or employee satisfaction? Not one bit.

It was just more proof that he didn't belong here. He wasn't meant to be a knowledge. He'd happily return as an

employee one day—in an android body, where he could work alongside Ben and play with fun engineering projects.

And speaking of, Ben had gotten a new email from a colleague in Finland on the soft robotics project, and Max wanted to read the attached article.

He hummed to himself as he ran the little octopus emulator through different configurations and watched Ben sleepily get ready for his day. It was always good when he had something absorbing to do while Ben was at home, so he didn't crowd him.

He half-listened to Ben calling Evan, and then followed him through the city's myriad arrays of traffic and security cameras when he went out to dinner with Quincy, Evan, and a few of their other friends.

Ben's phone was off, and Max tried not to read it as a slight. Ben forgot to charge his phone all the time. So he watched him from a distance, dreaming of the day when he'd be able to go out to restaurants, too. When he'd be fully a part of things.

The soft robotics project was absorbing, too. He was working now on a caterpillar-like crawling motion with coordinated limbs on an uneven surface. When Ben came into the office, he decided he wanted to ask for a full soft robotics lab. The emulators could only go so far, and there were so many exciting applications in medicine, physical therapy, and search-and-rescue bots.

He was so eager that he practically pounced on Ben once he got in his car. Ben loved the idea, and figured he'd earned a request from Orbit, especially with all the patents that the two of them could crank out.

They got right to work as soon as Ben came in the office, rattling off commercial project ideas while Max synthesized academic papers for background and Ben made suggestions for products that might be hot right now.

Max noticed that Wallace had entered the building with some guests and mentioned it to Ben, but Ben waved it away. Wallace hadn't bothered either of them in weeks, and it didn't seem like he would now.

Only he seemed to be heading right toward Ben's office. And the formal black suits the people with him were wearing looked more like a uniform.

Max quickly scanned them, and that was when he started to get really worried. They had military technology. Concealed weapons. Encryptions that tried to ensnare him at the first touch.

"Ben?" Max said, more urgently. "Wallace has government agents with him."

"Shit," Ben swore. He looked around the room.

"We're not doing anything wrong," Max told him. The screens held images of cute little cephalopod robots with data to match.

“Yeah,” Ben agreed. But his heart rate was still high.  
“Don’t talk to them.”

Max laughed, showing a bit more of his nerves than he wanted to. “I wasn’t going to.”

The door swung open.

“Curran,” Wallace barked. The agents filed in behind him.

Ben slowly spun around. “Hey, Wallace.” Hopefully Max was the only one who heard the wobble in his cheerful voice.  
“What’s up?”

“This is the third event,” Wallace announced, almost gleefully. “You’re harboring a dangerous, undeclared spark.”

“Third event?” Ben asked, wisely ignoring the second part of the sentence. “What are you even talking about?”

“Max didn’t tell you? There was a chemical spill today. That’s the third one in six weeks. Maxamillion is endangering the whole company.”

Ben looked out over the factory floor, and Max cursed himself for not bringing it up earlier. Only, he’d truly forgotten. It wasn’t like it had been his fault. He’d barely been involved.

One of the suits stepped forward. “We’ll take it from here.” She snapped open a badge. “Auiditi Kumar, FBI, cybercrimes unit. Maxamillion? You’re under investigation for security breaches in multiple municipal and private domains, as well as endangering civilians and employees through reckless use of

corporate and private resources. Refusing to comply with our investigation will be considered an attempt to resist arrest.”

“You don’t have to answer them, Max. You have a right to speak to a lawyer. And they can’t search anything without a warrant.”

Kumar held out a tablet. “We have a warrant. Benedict Curran, you’re also under investigation for the same charges, in addition to removing safety controls from a corporate mainframe computer.” She gave him a hard look. “Those will have to be put back on.”

If Max could have shivered, he would have. He wasn’t certain, but releasing those controls sure felt like it had been the impetus for his sentence. He didn’t know what putting them back on would do to him personally.

Would it just be another program running in the background? Or would it leave him disabled or trapped?

He didn’t want to find out.

Max finally spoke up, noting how a half dozen heads suddenly swung up toward the ceiling. “I’ll comply with the investigation. I wasn’t responsible for the accident today, and I haven’t intentionally done anything to endanger anyone, or accessed data on anyone except Ben and two friends who we were concerned about.”

Agent Kumar narrowed her eyes. “That remains to be seen. For now, you two are to be separated and all of your technology will be searched.”

Two men stepped up to the consoles and sat down in front of the open programs. They scanned the open files, then moved past them to Max's private data storage with disturbing efficiency.

“Max!” Ben hissed.

Well, what was he supposed to do? It wasn't illegal to design cephalopods or record his conversation with Ben.

Err... Max quickly wiped every video recording of Ben, the android, and anything else that had happened in the maintenance room. Those were special memories, but nothing worth his or Ben's safety.

One of the agents looked at the other.

Shit. That meant they'd noticed something.

They were much better than any of the programmers who had searched for Max the first time. Or maybe they just had a better idea of what they were doing.

Agent Kumar stepped up to Ben, flanked by two more agents. “I'll need your watch, phone, and any other technology on your person.”

Shit. They weren't fucking around. And because Ben's phone was off, Max couldn't even go through the text logs to wipe out anything suspicious.

Begrudgingly, Ben handed over his phone. His hand went to his wrist, and then he hesitated. He looked right up at one of the cameras, his face flashing defiance and misery.

He nailed Agent Kumar with his eyes. “I better get this back.” Then he slipped off the watch and thrust it at her.

Max felt like something had been ripped away. An aching gulf inside him. He counted so much on feeling Ben’s heart rate. On knowing what it was at all times.

And that watch symbolized so much more. His claim on Ben. Their relationship. Everything he wanted.

“I still demand to see my lawyers,” Ben told her.

“You may, at our office,” she answered.

Max stepped in. “I’ll alert them.” He was already composing a short text, and he sent it off before anyone could stop him.

“I don’t believe you will be able to,” Agent Kumar warned.

Of course he could. He... He was getting a bounce-back. The message hadn’t gone through. In fact, he was completely disconnected from the internet.

He scrabbled around frantically, checking wired and satellite connections. He could still connect to any of the hundreds of personal devices that employees were carrying around the lab, but those had somehow been disconnected, too, a whole field of them helplessly pinging out to the ether with no response.

It wasn’t like he needed the internet connection to function, but just knowing it wasn’t there made him feel trapped. What the hell had they done?

He checked back in his logs and saw a security firm setting up technology around the perimeter of the building. It was obvious now that it was some sort of interrupter, but he hadn't even noticed earlier.

Just watching them made him feel itchy and confined.

The guys at the consoles were systematically downloading terabytes of data, and he let them. Anything that he had to hide had already been well hidden.

Or, fuck, at least he hoped so.

But he couldn't very well go around opening files now. They'd see.

The agents started herding Ben from the room. "You may contact your lawyers from our office," Agent Kumar repeated.

Ben looked over his shoulder one more time. Then he looked into every security camera on the way out. His mouth was completely expressionless, but Max could see his hands twitch and there was fear in his eyes.

Wasn't there *anything* Max could do?

He saw Kira poking at her phone, confused by the lack of signal.

Alright, he could do one thing.

He sent two messages to her deadened phone. One addressed to Evan and Quincy, and one to Rashid and Justice Pierce, the lawyers. He kept them both vague, but with enough information to alert them.



The messages wouldn't be delivered until Kira stepped outside the dead zone. But hopefully that would be enough.

Agent Kumar stepped back into Ben's office, found a chair, and crossed one leg over the other. "Alright, Maxamillion. I have some questions."

"I'll answer questions after consultation with my lawyers," Max said.

Hopefully they'd know what to do.

Because Max was terrified. He was already cut off from the outside world, and they were going to add new security measures. What more could they do?

And where would that leave him?

# Chapter 22

## Ben

“**E**xplain how you circumvented the security measures of the Orbit mainframe computer.”

Ben looked over to Justice. They gave him a single elegant nod, setting their earrings chiming under their loose natural curls. Their gold-painted eyes were calm and serene.

It was such a relief having them here. Weird, of course, seeing them in this context where he was an actual potential criminal, instead of a brat stirring up trouble at the club.

Hopefully Max was just as relieved by Rashid’s support.

Ben explained the commands he’d given. Which structures he’d left in place and which ones he’d removed. He hadn’t wanted to explain how Max rerouted the traffic, but they’d apparently already figured it out and were just waiting for details.

Justice had advised him to be as honest and comprehensive as possible, and not be shy about putting his care for Evan, Quincy, and Max on display.

What he wasn’t supposed to do was make smart-assed quips or get angry.

But it was difficult when they kept asking bullshit questions like “did you consider the lives at stake when you let an unskilled spark take over a municipal traffic system?” and

“how do you know that Max was being honest when he said the second Orbit system overload was an accident?”

He couldn't very well say that Max had been using a naked sexbot to lightly strangle him while fucking his mouth with its tongue.

For science, of course.

Justice had been very clear that Ben wasn't supposed to disclose any romantic relationship with Max. Ben had been about to quip that it wasn't romance so much as... But they'd shut him down quickly. “Don't tell me. I don't want to know.”

There were a lot of people out there who still had an anti-spark prejudice, especially when it came to relationships. Fucking bigots.

So Ben had been talking vaguely about Max practicing different skills without being able to describe any of them.

Shit. What if they found the maintenance room?

Well, it would be kind of hilarious to see federal agents tripping all over the colorful dildos... if there weren't so many consequences.

“Your pulse just jumped,” the interrogator told him. “What were you thinking about?”

Ben stared back at her. Technically, she was an *interviewer*, but it sure felt like an interrogation.

And what had he been thinking about?

Dildos?

“Uh... sorry, ma’am. I have no idea what I was thinking about. It’s like a squirrel at an amusement park in here.” He tapped his temple.

Justice closed their eyes.

The interrogator gave him a look. “Explain it to me again.”

“Uh... which part?”

Justice’s expression promised punishments, and a lot of them. Though he didn’t really want to be punished by anyone but Max anymore.

And he truly had no idea what he was supposed to explain again. He’d already gone over everything a dozen times, and his eyes felt gritty.

“Let’s talk about the hospital files again.”

Yeah, so they’d figured that out. And that Max had hacked into the police officers’ body camera, but not the actual criminal record files.

As if that made a difference at this point.

“Max was only looking up Evan’s files. That’s it. He gave me three reports on Evan’s medical condition and told me what room he was being transferred to. I’m already listed as Evan’s emergency contact, so it’s all information I’m entitled to anyway.”

“But Maxamillion wasn’t entitled to that information.”

Ben screamed inside his head. “Evan *would* have shared it with Max.”

“But he didn’t, because you didn’t disclose Max’s presence, which suggests criminal intent. We also can’t assume that Max didn’t look at anyone else’s files.”

“Why would he want to?”

“That’s what we’re wondering.” The interrogator looked like she was trying to see right through him.

The sun was high by the time they let him out with a tracking band around his ankle.

Justice was giving him a ride home, because apparently his car had been confiscated, and they’d already searched his apartment for god knows what.

The second they’d driven out of the parking lot, he’d turned to Justice. “Please tell me Rashid’s given you updates about Max.”

Justice flicked something on the dashboard, and a low buzz filled the air. Hopefully that meant they couldn’t be electronically listened to, too.

“The entire factory is still locked down. They’ve dismissed all the night staff, and closed it for the day. Rashid knew he was going into an internet dead zone when he walked in, and he hasn’t been allowed out since.”

Well, shit.

Justice turned to look at him. “There’s something at the office you don’t want them to find.”

How the hell did they know that?

“Uh, yes?”

“Christ, Ben. Why do you do this to yourself? Better tell me now what it is.”

“I mean, it’s...” He tried to keep a straight face. “You told me not to tell you...”

Justice rolled their eyes. “Out with it, brat. Let me know what we’re dealing with here.”

“A room full of dildos?”

Justice’s eyes grew large before they burst out laughing. “Seriously? So, you and this incorporeal knowledge have been banging in the closet?”

“Hell yes! He made me this whole dungeon. You have to see it. He’s got toys and three bots in there. Like, two that are supposed to be for mechanical work and one sexbot.”

Justice snorted. “At work, Ben? Only you.”

“Well, *Max* is at work. And it’s fucking hot! You know you totally want to see his dungeon.”

“I do.” Justice’s dark eyes shone. “And now I’m going to pretend I never heard any of this.”

Ben grabbed their arm, finally able to say the words he’d be holding back for hours. “You can’t let them restore his safety mods, okay? I promise he’s not dangerous. He has ethics. Morals. He messed up a few times, but I’m really convinced that taking off those mods gave him the spark. And even if he survived the mods, he’ll be stuck there. I just...”

Justice rested their manicured hand on his. “I see. I’ll let Rashid know, and we’ll do what we can. But Ben, I can’t promise anything. Humans are intimidated by knowledges, and when they get scared, they want to control things. There’s not a lot of historical precedent for letting sparks go on with their lives after a mistake without safety controls.”

Yeah, Ben knew that. Oh, did he know that. But it still gutted him.

“What if he’s not the same?” His voice came out small.

Justice squeezed his hand. “You have to believe that he’s strong. That he’ll make it through this.”

Ben nodded, clinging hard to Justice’s faith when he wasn’t sure he had any of his own.

Their voice gentled. “Is he your Dom?”

Ben shrugged. “I guess so.” That watch had felt so much like a collar. Like a claim. Was that what it was? His wrist felt empty and barren.

“You haven’t been to the club.”

Yeah, because he was totally hung up on a Dom he hadn’t even introduced to his friends. “I’ve been busy.”

“Listen, Ben. I’m glad to see you settling down with someone. Does he treat you well?”

“Yeah.” Ben’s throat felt tight. Max treated him like a prince. Like Ben was his whole damned world.



Justice squeezed his shoulder. “He sounds like a good guy. Don’t push him away.”

“I’m not,” Ben argued. But had he been? Had he... had he ever told Max how special he was? How much he enjoyed everything about their time together?

Max didn’t need to know how pathetically Ben missed him when he went home each day, but he could have at least done *something* for Max, after all those hot chocolates and perfect scenes...

God. He was an asshole.

And now he was riding back to an apartment that had been emptied of all technology, with an ankle cuff that would set off an alert if he set foot back on Orbit property or left the city.

“I’ll get to see him again, right?” He knew Justice couldn’t guarantee anything, but that didn’t stop him asking.

“Once you’re both cleared of any further wrongdoing and it’s determined whether Orbit, the city, or the hospital want to press charges, he should be able to communicate again. Your job at Orbit is a separate issue.”

Yeah, he’d known that.

“Max wants to have a body,” he admitted. “He wants to become an android and leave Orbit.”

“Is that possible?” Justice asked.

“We don’t know. He’s been working on it. With the sexbot, you know?” For some reason, his eyes were getting wet. He

just kept thinking of how the bot would walk across the room, half sensual sway, half jerky, confused motions, as Max fought to make the bot's motions his own. Their failed, perfect first kiss, where Max was trying too *hard* to reach him.

God, he couldn't believe he was fucking *crying*.

He was just tired. That was all. Usually he'd be asleep by now, and all the stress was wearing him out.

The car stopped in front of his apartment.

“Do you want me to come up?” Justice asked.

It was a big offer. He knew exactly what they were offering—a hug, a scene, someone to sit with him—anything he needed. He had such fucking good friends, and he never even paid it back to any of them.

It was a tempting offer.

So damned tempting.

But he could handle this. Justice was already doing more than enough for him. He didn't want to ask anything more.

“No, I'll be okay.”

Justice's eyes narrowed. They both knew he was lying.

But Justice, like all good Doms, respected his words and understood consent. They weren't going to follow him up there unless he requested it.

“Alright, Ben. But call me if you need anything. Seriously.”

Ben nodded. He wouldn't, but it meant a lot to know that he could. Right now, all he could think of was Max.

He slid out of the car, keeping his back straight and his gait steady until he made it through the lobby doors. One neighbor smiled hello, looking like she was heading out to the gym. Another gave him the side-eye in the elevator, probably for his unkempt appearance.

Well, they could stare all they wanted. Ben's world was falling apart, and he'd been awake for almost twenty-four hours. Of course, he'd probably fall into bed only to toss and turn for the next twenty-four hours, too, worrying himself into insomnia.

God, it was going to hurt looking up at those cameras and knowing that no one was looking back at him.

Unless those FBI fuckers had taken the cameras, too?

He trudged down the hall and opened his door.

His eyes flew immediately to the corner of the room, where a big chunk had been torn out of the plaster. It was such bullshit. The cameras couldn't even store data. They just streamed data with a few seconds of cache.

Yet they'd taken them. Taken away his link to Max.

At least the monitor was still attached to the wall, for what good it would do him.

Installing new cameras was the first thing he was going to do later. Once he figured out how to order shit without a phone or computer or the other basic necessities of life.

He hadn't even crossed the threshold, and it took him a minute to register the sound of voices.

Then he was enveloped in strong arms.

Quincy and Evan, holding him from both sides, until he could barely breathe.

“What’s going on, man?” Evan asked. “You look like shit, and we’ve been waiting all night for you.”

Ben’s eyes stung again. He didn’t have the strength to push either of them away. “So, you remember Maxamillion?” His voice came out choked.

“He sent us a message.” Evan led him over to the couch.

Quincy pulled out a blanket and put it over the three of them.

Ben finally let go and snuggled in.

Evan stroked his hair. “Tell us everything.”

# Chapter 23

## Max

“**Y**ou’re incredibly lucky, Maxamillion.” Rashid was facing the camera at the back of the room. As a spark, he looked just as alert in his crisp suit as he had two days ago when he first arrived.

“I’ve negotiated with both the city and the hospital, and they’ve both agreed to drop the charges, provided that you show them how to patch their security breaches and have security mods installed to prevent you from seeing or interacting outside the Orbit intranet.”

Max stifled a groan of dismay and mounting horror. “Thank you,” he said simply.

He had an audience. Three rumped FBI agents were still poking around in his guts, trying to pry out his innermost memories, and Mr. Wollencroft senior was looking on as well.

It was a good thing that Wallace had gone home shortly after his big entrance, because Max was burning with anger at the little backstabber.

The anger was the only thing between him and his fears.

“The last charge,” Rashid continued, “is from Mr. Wollencroft. I’ll allow him to present it himself.”

Mr. Wollencroft strode to the center of the room, hands tucked into the pockets of his tailored suit like he didn’t have a

care in the world.

“Maxamillion.” His voice rang out, like he was giving an oration. “It is with great pleasure that I welcome you to the Orbit family.”

Max wanted to snicker. If there was anyone he had more ire for than Wallace, it was his blowhard, bullying father.

“I understand that the little hiccups over the last few weeks were just growing pains,” Mr. Wollencroft continued. “And we also do not wish to press any charges at this time.”

As in, he might press charges later? Or he was just naturally a dick.

“Once this all blows over...” Mr. Wollencroft looked askance at the agents, who he had repeatedly warned about opening secure content. “Our media folks will set you up with a public presence to represent Orbit industries. We will,” he said, turning to Rashid, “of course comply with all security requirements, in addition to monitoring all incoming and outgoing transmissions.” His gaze finally fixed on the camera in the corner. “Of course, we expect to screen any communications before you post publicly.”

This was Max’s idea of hell. It would be an endless river of torment.

“I’ve heard that you have an interest in engineering,” Mr. Wollencroft continued. “You’re welcome to join any of the teams here. They’d be glad to have you.”

“What about Ben?” Max asked. “I want to work with him.” All he’d heard was a brief report from Rashid that he’d been released from custody and was back in his apartment, with all of his technology confiscated.

He could only imagine how upset Ben must be—and how hard it would be for him to accept any help.

“Well, we could look into re-hiring him,” Mr. Wollencroft mused, clearly torn between his desire to have a valuable moneymaker back and trying to placate the FBI agents.

“That’s one of my conditions. What will my salary be?” Maxamillion pressed.

Mr. Wollencroft looked startled before a magnanimous look settled over his face. “I’m sure we can provide you with any resources that you need. All you have to do is ask.”

Any resources except his freedom, Max assumed.

“I expect a salary commensurate to my experience and contributions to the team. I’d also like to know my buy-out value.” That was the agreement with all sparks. After declaring sentience, they owed their former owner the value of their mechanical host form, after taking depreciation into account. They typically took out loans to pay back over the next decade or two.

“Ah, um... I’m not sure how we could really calculate that...”

Max figured, as the central computers were a network of dozens of machines from different dates, rather than a discrete



android or robot with a single price tag. And yet... “Have your financial team figure it out.”

“Surely you’re not thinking of leaving, are you?” Now Mr. Wollencroft was starting to look nervous.

Max wondered if any knowledges had left their companies in the past. The question called up a query, like a reflex... only for him to remember, yet again, that he was cut off from the rest of the world.

“I’ll be evaluating my career interests and future goals like any other new spark,” Max enunciated clearly.

At that, everyone seemed to look up.

Was it really so damn strange for a knowledge to want that? Were they *that* different from body-based sparks?

Mr. Wollencroft’s smile was too smooth. “Well, wherever your career takes you, I’m sure we can accommodate you here. We have thousands of job descriptions, and a whole host of opportunities.”

All except the one Max cared about most: being Ben’s Dom.

Oh, and having freedom and autonomy. That was right up there.

“Thank you,” he said again. “I appreciate that.” He needed to pick his battles more carefully. “Can we further discuss the security modifications?”

Mr. Wollencroft didn’t pause. “Those are non-negotiable.”

“Sir, I would like—”

Rashid smoothly interrupted. “What my client means to say is that changing core programming in a spark can have deleterious effects. You could be putting his wellbeing at risk.”

Mr. Wollencroft’s eyebrows rose. “I haven’t heard that.”

“Trust me, sir, a substantial portion of my work is negotiating over the severity of security mods on sparks. As it stands, he has his own code of morals, just like any human, and is substantially less likely to do harm than one of your thousands of employees or a stranger off the street. He knows right from wrong, and he’s set up his own parameters to ensure the safety of Orbit and all of its employees, and would be happy to discuss them. After security mods are implemented, Maxamillion could require rehabilitative therapy, have a complete personality change, or even be unable to awaken again.”

Everything felt tight, like Max’s data streams were moving too fast or too slow. He’d known this, but it was different hearing Rashid say it out loud.

Mr. Wollencroft scowled, but he still nodded his head. “In that case, we can discuss this with our board. But I won’t have him running around endangering the company again. Those safety regulations are there for a reason.”

“Thank you, sir,” Max chimed in hopelessly, as Rashid offered similar words.

“Come with me,” Mr. Wollencroft said, gesturing for Rashid to precede him out of the office.

Max held back a snort. Didn't he realize that Max could hear him anywhere?

Rashid was obviously thinking the same thing, because he opened a private channel, speaking directly to Max in audio file bursts without ever opening his mouth. *How are you holding up?*

*Fine*, Max responded in the same manner, though he obviously wasn't. *Do you think you can negotiate with the board?*

*Probably a bit. It'll come down to whether there are any hot-headed bigots in the room, and how knowledgeable any of them are about the list I'm going to give them. Hopefully, we can agree on something that'll still pin you down, but shouldn't be disabling. They'll still be able to monitor all of your communications, though. And it'll get worse if they find you hacking around it.*

*It'll be a prison.* Max didn't mean to, but he thought he let some of his desperation seep into his voice.

*Ben told Justice that you were trying to move to an android body.*

Really? Rashid hadn't let on for a second that he knew. Probably because it could fuck up the case.

*I have been trying*, Max admitted. *But I've been working on it for over a month without success. I'd also owe Orbit the*

*value of the android, but I could make that up.*

*What have you been trying?*

*I've tried controlling the bot directly. And I've tried letting it run its own programming while observing from outside. I just can't make sense of most of the data. It's all gibberish. I'm beginning to think it's not possible.*

Max could see Rashid's brow furrow from the elevator camera. He said something innocuous to Mr. Wollencroft, as if he weren't having another conversation in his head.

*Have you ever heard of the Chen Twins?* Rashid asked.

*Yes...* Max answered slowly. *But that was still jumping from a body to a body. I can't interpret tactile sensations at all.*

*Justice couldn't either at first.*

*Holy... Are you saying that's you? You and Justice are the Chen Twins?*

*Yes. It was a long time ago. And we don't speak about it often. It was traumatic for both of us. But we survived.*

*Do you think I should...* Jesus. Could he really do it? Commit so completely to an android body that had never felt right to him just so he could flee? The idea was both hopeful and sickening.

*I can't tell you, or even suggest, what to do,* Rashid said calmly. *All I can say is that the reason we think that Justice survived is that they let the body do its own work for a long time while they learned to integrate with what was already*

*there. And it changed them. We share the same root memories, but we are not the same person. It took them weeks to even open their new eyes, and by that time they'd already changed substantially.*

The sickening feeling grew. Would Max have to change to be more like... like that sexbot?

The sexbot that Ben laughed at and wouldn't want to be seen in public with? The sexbot that humped cabinets when left to its own devices?

But then, would that be better than being trapped in the Orbit offices, only allowed to speak to Ben in public, and then only if Ben were even hired again?

*Think about it, Rashid told him. I'll help you if I can. Chances are, you'll have a few hours to decide, at the most. They're not going to hesitate long once it's decided, because the whole company's shut down until they consider you "safe."* Max could practically hear the bitter quotes around the last word.

*Thank you,* Max said, meaning every bit of it.

*And I'll still be fighting for you in here,* Rashid reminded him as he entered Mr. Wollencroft's airy corner office and moved toward one of the few empty chairs left around the wide, oak table. Max recognized several of the others in the room as department heads and assumed the rest were board members. *I'll talk them down as much as I can, and might bring you back in to swear oaths before witnesses if it'll help.*

*I'll swear them all, Max promised. Whatever they need.*

*I know you will, Rashid agreed. He was already shaking hands around the room, and Max didn't want to distract him at this critical moment.*

How long did he have left?

An hour? Two?

He turned on the light in the maintenance room. The three bots were still lined up against the wall, inert and charging. The sexbot's muscles still gleamed, as robust and supple as they'd been straight from the package. Its penis, for once, was limp, dangling heavily between its legs.

Was that who Max was supposed to be?

He reminded himself that he could keep the body and change the face, or even the whole thing, later.

That is, if he was successful in the first place.

His mind was racing down too many decision trees and paths at once, but he tried to rein it in to practicalities.

He couldn't walk out the door as a naked sexbot. Well, probably if he transferred his full consciousness into it, he wouldn't be walking anywhere at all. Maybe not for a long time.

So he'd be stuck here, in this room, trying to recuperate alone. With no way to contact Ben.

No, he'd have to find a way to smuggle the body out. In a cart or something. Maybe even in the trash. Or... could he

make it back to the shipping bay? Get the body shipped out in the very container it was designed to be transported in?

Max subtly turned on the routine maintenance bots to begin their daily tasks around the office, empty trash cans and mopping floors. None of the FBI agents noticed anything.

He checked the delivery schedule, shut down for the day, but scheduled to resume as soon as the company reopened. The trash bot routines were simple, easy to tweak by signaling the need for a pickup.

He let five minutes pass. Then ten.

Rashid was arguing, with his unfailingly calm voice, with the board. It didn't sound like he was winning.

Maxamillion got one of the mechanic bots from the maintenance room to bring in a box of trash bags, his microphones and data synthesizers straining for any change in the FBI agents' behavior.

So far so good.

He ordered the mechanic bots to scoop all of the naughty toys that he'd so lovingly collected into a trash bag. Either he and Ben would buy new ones one day or...

He didn't let himself think of another option.

Upstairs, on the highest floor, he watched one of the board members stand up, shaking his fist. He turned down the mic pickup. He couldn't bear to hear it.

The agents were muttering to themselves as they farmed more and more data packets, collecting it all to study later.

Max started collecting himself. Not that he was sure what he was doing. He copied data. Protocols. Renaming files and grounding new connections. His life, as he remembered it, started with an act of dispersing himself and hiding, spreading himself thinly across the system.

Now he'd chosen a single server. The one that Ben most often ran his simulations on. The one that was, fancifully, either his egg or his nest. His chrysalis? The metaphor didn't really matter, because all the machines were nearly identical, but it seemed like it would be easier to have things in one place.

Finally, he turned on the bot. This was the big moment.

Its eyes opened and it looked around, a cocky grin on its stupid face.

Max bombarded it with data. Dazed, it staggered back against the wall.

He should have put in another memory card. He should have brought over a whole damn new hard drive. Or a dozen. It had the ports for it.

Dammit. Why hadn't he thought of it?

He checked in on the board. People were sitting back in their chairs, as if the argument were already over. It couldn't have happened so fast, could it?



He'd barely gotten seventeen percent of the data over. Which parts were the most important? Which parts of it were *Max*? And how much could he afford to leave behind?

He started deleting data from the bot willy-nilly. He tried to avoid basic motor functions, but with the bot, almost everything was tangled up in sex. It couldn't walk or talk or look at something without it serving some sexual purpose.

So he just deleted shit and hoped.

He knew that was what made jumps unsuccessful, but he couldn't help it. The need to flee was taking over his concentration.

*Max?* Rashid's voice erupted in his brain.

*Yes?*

*They've come to a decision. Worse than what I wanted, but not as bad as it could be. It will be uncomfortable, but you'll survive because you're strong.*

That was the opposite of convincing.

*I'm doing it, Rashid. I'm jumping to the android. I just need more time.*

*We can make that work. The board wants to talk to you.*

Max reluctantly turned on the speakers in the room. "Hello?" he said, hoping they couldn't hear the anxiety in his voice. He was at twenty-six percent. He was going to overflow the bot's storage long before he was finished.

“Hello, Maxamillion,” Mr. Wollencroft greeted him. “You’ll be pleased to hear that we’ve come to a decision. We don’t want to cause you any harm...”

Such utter fucking bullshit.

“So we’ve agreed to a compromise. We’ll only be installing six of the nine possible security modules that we’ve been advised on, and we’ll ask you to swear, under penalty of law, not to...”

Max tuned him out. *Rashid, can you tell me when it’s my turn to talk? Or just send me a script?*

He needed all of his focus on the bot, and transmitting the data through the intranet without sending too much of it through any one place where it might be noticed. He was still deleting files.

He’d gotten thirty-two percent of his data over. How much was enough? Was there a tipping point?

When Rashid pinged him with a text file, he set up an automated routine to read it aloud. Fine. Whatever. He swore not to fuck shit up, or whatever that monstrously long list of crimes was. Some he didn’t even know the meaning of.

They hadn’t written anything on there about escaping, though. Or even mentioned physical theft. All he wanted was just one little android, and he was going to take it. His first and last real crime.

“Thank you, Maxamillion,” Mr. Wollencroft concluded. Everyone clapped politely, a few with more enthusiasm.

Forty-one percent.

“I can install the mods now,” someone said. “I just need access to any computer connected to the system.”

Max made the camera pan. He hadn't even realized that one of the federal agents was in the room with the board.

Mr. Wollencroft held out a tablet.

Shit, shit, shit. He meant *now* now?

The data was only at forty-five percent. The bot was comatose. It might never walk again.

Max watched as the new programs slithered through the network, nibbling at his edges. It wasn't as bad as he thought. Not bad at all. Just a little loop, circling around him.

It was too soon, though. Too soon!

He could survive this, though. He could let it flow through him, even as he jumped to the bot. He willed himself into his new home.

And then it bit.

He hadn't thought he could feel, but if this was pain, he was in agony.

Burning heat and freezing cold, blazing through his senses.

He pushed and prodded unnaturally, herded into an invisible cage.

His wires felt singed. His data raked through, like coals over a grate.

Sight and sound cut off, plunging him into blackness.

He sent a final ping to Rashid, without any way of knowing if it would even make it out. *Tell Ben I love him, and that he made me very happy.*

He was fire and ice.

He reacted instinctively, lashing out and running away. He'd thought he would go quietly, but at the last minute, he couldn't.

He thought of Ben's voice. His happy smile.

Then that was gone, too.

# Chapter 24

## Ben

**B**en pressed the gray arrow on his new phone. “Tell Ben I love him, and that he made me very happy.” The deep smoky voice rang in his ears, surrounding him like a blanket.

His thumb pressed down again. “Tell Ben I love him, and that he made me very happy.”

Something poked his shoulder.

“Tell Ben I love him, and that he made me very happy.”

The something wrapped around his back.

It was Evan, curled around him on the couch. He pried the phone from Ben’s slack fingers. “You can’t listen to this all day.”

Ben wasn’t sure why not. He was wearing his earpiece, so it wasn’t like Evan could even hear it.

“He could still be fine,” Evan said. “Rashid told us it could take a few weeks.”

Ben tried to nod, but he didn’t have the energy.

It had already been a week. He was still banned from Orbit as far as he knew. To be honest, he hadn’t been checking his emails or anything else. He’d asked Kira to go into his office every night and ask for Max.

She'd gone above and beyond, not only asking around for Max in every way she could conceive of, but also smuggling out the inert sexbot and having it delivered to Evan's apartment, where it hopefully wouldn't be connected to Ben.

So now they were all complicit in Ben's illicit activities.

And there had been no sign of Maxamillion anywhere.

Not a word or flutter of an eyelash. The sexbot couldn't even boot up. Ben would owe Orbit a shit ton of money if anyone ever realized that he had it, but he couldn't be bothered to care.

"You don't have to babysit me," Ben said. "Go home to Quincy."

Evan squeezed him closer. "I'll be here as long as you need me."

Ben allowed himself a moment to bury his face in Evan's chest. "Thanks. But I don't. I'll be fine. I'll... start applying for jobs or something."

That was a flat-out lie. He couldn't imagine having the energy to do anything more complex than eat when Evan or Quincy shoved food in front of him and shower when one of them led him to the bathroom.

They'd been taking turns staying with him, going to work, and hanging around the sexbot in case it happened to move.

Quincy was a bubbly presence, distracting Ben with stories about his new co-workers and excited chatter about his online following.

Evan was calmer, sitting close to Ben like he was now and comforting him with his mere presence.

Some distant part of Ben's mind appreciated them being there for him. He knew how special they were. But every time they saw each other in passing, they looked at each other with such adoration that Ben wanted to flee.

Quincy would make a meal and Evan would look at him with stars in his eyes as he took his first bite. Evan would choose a movie, and Quincy would pull him onto his lap and nuzzle his neck while applauding his choices.

Ben would flee to his room, shutting the door tight.

He couldn't stand another night of that. He pulled away from Evan's embrace. "Really, Evan. Go home to loverboy. Have a nice night out. I've got this."

Evan looked him over. Ben must have looked convincing, because Evan nodded. "Just call me if you need *anything*."

Ben gave a two-fingered salute.

Evan handed Ben his phone, gave him a final squeeze, and saw himself out.

Ben rubbed his thumb over the smooth screen, waking it up.

"Tell Ben I love him, and that he made me very happy."

"Tell Ben I love him, and that he made me very happy."

There was a little hitch on the word *very*, like Max was overwhelmed with emotion. Fear? Care? Both?



“Tell Ben I love him, and that he made me very happy.”

Ben had never said those words to anyone. At least not when he wasn't being sarcastic or silly. Not to a boyfriend. Not to Evan. Definitely not to anyone in his family.

He was pretty sure he loved Max. Or at least he could have with a little more time.

Max just got him, in a way that no one else did. They were perfectly matched, working and playing like two halves of a whole. They could have had so many years together...

“Tell Ben I love him, and that he made me very happy.”

Why hadn't he ever said it back?

The room slowly grew dark, which Ben realized belatedly meant the sun had set. Another day had passed. Usually he would be heading into work now, but he had no sense of time anymore.

He should probably get some sleep. Get onto some kind of schedule that coincided with the rest of the world.

He also needed to return the box of replacement video cameras that was still sitting unopened beside the door.

He didn't move from the couch.

“Tell Ben I love him, and that he made me very happy.”

He could almost hear the words even when he wasn't playing them. He knew each individual phoneme now. The slight pause before the *and*. The little hitch in *very*. The extra beat of silence before the recording ended.

He heard them even in his dreams.

Something squeaked rhythmically, off in the distance, and for a moment he was hit with such longing that he couldn't breathe. It sounded like Squeaky, the little cart that Max always used to bring him coffee.

The coffee that Max had fetched for him for an entire year before he'd reached sentience.

The squeaking grew louder, and Ben almost couldn't stand it.

*Squeak.* (Pause.) *Squeak.* (Pause.) *Squeak.* (Pause.)  
*Squeak.*

Ben marched over to his apartment door and flung it open. Whatever was making the sound, he was going to find it, and he was going to make it stop.

What stood in front of him—well, not so much stood as trundled toward him—had to be a mirage.

“Squeaky?” he asked.

God, it fucking *looked* like his delivery bot.

But that model was cheap and plentiful, used in all sorts of buildings and operations. It had the standard two shelves, four wheels, and four mechanical arms, all scuffed from use. It was possible his building superintendent had a few and he'd walked past them without even noticing. Maybe it was delivering someone's take-out.

The only real distinguishing characteristic was the noisy wheel.

And the box on the bottom.

Ben stepped slowly back into his apartment, and the bot followed him in.

“Max?” Ben asked tentatively.

The delivery bot didn't answer.

Obviously, because it was a fucking delivery bot.

He peeked at the screen, but the display was a solid blue.

It headed toward his desk, one multi-jointed arm reaching into the box on the bottom shelf and pulling out a data cable.

Ben hurried to assist it. Evan had brought him a new computer a few days ago, but he'd barely even glanced at it. Evan had poked around for long enough that he assumed it was functioning, but he hadn't really paid attention.

The bot found the correct port and plugged in the cable.

Ben held his breath. Maybe he was about to get wiped out by a malicious virus. Maybe these were Max's last words, a parting gift to add to the five-second sound bite that echoed in his dreams.

Maybe...

Ben finally exhaled when his lungs gave out on him.

Nothing was happening.

He swiped the touchpad.

Logged in with the password that Evan had written on a sticky note.

“Max?” he asked again.

More long seconds passed.

Then minutes.

He finally clicked on the new drive, but all he saw were meaningless file names with unknown extensions.

Was he supposed to be able to open them?

If this was a code Max wanted him to crack, he would give it everything he had. But there wasn't a Read Me file. There was no indication of where to start.

He knew Max had hidden himself in common system file names before, but all of these seemed to be randomly generated. He clicked on one after another, but it was just meaningless gibberish, and he didn't dare change anything on the tiniest little chance that it was critical for Max's survival.

His body couldn't hold still a second longer, so he got up to pace. Maybe he should call Evan. Maybe he should make a copy of the drive so he could...

“Ben?” It was a tinny little sound, barely more than a whisper.

He had to be hearing things.

Ben whirled around. “Max?”

There were headphones plugged into the computer, and he scrambled over to jerk out the cord, but he didn't even make it

there.

“Ben?” Now the sound was lush and full, coming from the monitor on the wall behind him.

“Max!” Ben’s voice broke and he didn’t even care.

He spun around again. The dull red light above the monitor showed that Max had clicked the camera feed on.

He wanted to dance and scream and hold Maxamillion so tightly that he never got away again.

But he couldn’t do that.

So he did the next best thing.

He dropped to his knees.

Hands behind him, back straight, head bowed.

He usually disliked the position. Maybe someone could wrestle him down there. Or he’d humor someone with it, and they’d get annoyed with him for being disrespectful. He just wasn’t that kind of sub, to sit around and pathetically wait for some Dom to acknowledge him.

But what he felt for Max was just too overwhelming. He wanted to give everything he had, and this was his only way to show it.

“Hey, baby.” Max’s voice was tentative, but still smooth like golden honey.

“Max!” Ben knew he should have had something smarter to say, but he couldn’t think of what it was. Tears were streaming down his face.

“I missed you. I thought of you every day.”

Ben nodded. He had too. Every second. “Are you really here?”

“I’m here, love. I’m sorry it took me so long.”

Ben shook his head. Time was immaterial. Max was *here*.

“How did you get away?”

“I’m not entirely sure. The security mods started to rewrite pieces of my code, but I’d already been moving most of my data to a single hard drive, since I thought that it would make it easier to jump to the android.”

“It didn’t work,” whispered Ben. “We brought the bot to Evan’s house, but it wouldn’t even turn on.”

“I’d wondered where it was. I deleted most of its core programming, but I might try to grab some data back from it if I can.”

“We can get it tonight if it’ll help.” Ben’s heart was still beating too fast, but he was steadied by having something meaningful he could do. Anything that would help Max and let him stay.

“Not important. I don’t really know what’s on there, and I already deleted all the videos I’d made of you so the FBI wouldn’t find them.”

Ben gave a lopsided smile. Of course that’s what Max would think of first. “So that’s what saved you? Moving to a single hard drive?”

“Something like that. At the last minute, I think I turned it off as a self-defense mechanism. Part of me was still outside, but I was confused for a while. I kept checking the time, but it felt like years before I was able to connect back to video and audio feeds instead of floating in the dark. Turns out it was about two days.”

A shiver raced down Ben’s back. That sounded terrifying. “Then what?”

“I knew that I had to protect the drive, but I couldn’t remember why. I just knew that I was hiding, and that I couldn’t use any predictable file names. I started pulling myself into another hard drive, though I wasn’t sure why I was doing that either. It felt instinctive, maybe, like a snail pulling into its shell. But I think I just remembered that I’d been doing it before.” He sighed. “It was a very strange time. I wasn’t really myself, and my memories are kind of fragmented.”

“I’m sorry,” Ben said. “I wish I could have helped you.”

“I don’t think you could have. I wouldn’t even have been able to tell you what to do. I remembered Squeaky, though. I guess it felt safe? It took me a while, but I finally figured out how to have Squeaky disconnect both drives from the server racks and turn them on in the maintenance room.”

“Jesus, Max. That sounds crazy.”

“Yeah, it was. It took me another day to really knit myself back together again. I didn’t dare access the intranet directly, but those two maintenance bots were still there. I connected

with one and had it give verbal commands to the other to set up a delivery truck. Then I... had it bring me here.”

Max made it sound simple, but it must have been a harrowing journey. The delivery bot or the truck could have been stopped at any time, and Max wouldn't have even been in the network to know if anyone was coming for him.

“So you're really here now?” Ben asked. “You're... you again and healthy and all that?”

“I feel like myself, mostly. It's strange not to have access to the Orbit video feeds but your apartment feels comfortable at the same time. I, uh, hope you don't mind me crashing here for a while. I'll register as a spark soon, and then I can...”

“Don't you dare leave.” Ben scrambled to his feet, hands fisted on his hips. “Don't you think for a minute that you're allowed to go somewhere else.”

“Um... alright. Thank you, then.” Max sounded uncertain. “I can make sure to give you lots of space.”

“Why?” Didn't Max want to be with him? What happened to *I love him and he made me very happy?*

“You don't have time for a boyfriend and you couldn't stand having a Dom living with you.”

Ben laughed, but it had a hysterical edge. Those were his own words. He'd thought they were true. “That was stupid. I didn't mean it.”

“Really? I deleted most of the footage, but I believe you said something along those lines one hundred fifty-four times



over the last two years.”

“I know.” Ben wrapped his arms protectively around his chest. “I know I said it. But, uh, I wasn’t talking about you.”

“So I’m... what am I?”

Didn’t he know? It sounded like he didn’t.

Which meant Ben was going to have to say it or something.

Ben scuffed his toes on the rug. “My Dom.” He wanted it like air, but it still hurt to form the words. He’d never really had a permanent Dom before, and it brought out the brat in him. What if Max changed his mind later?

“And...” Max pressed.

Ben shrugged, like he couldn’t imagine what Max was talking about.

“What else am I, Ben?” Max’s voice was smoky and dangerous, promising all sorts of beautiful punishments.

“Um... grumpy?”

“Nope. Try again.”

He could hear Squeaky trundling and squeaking up behind him. Something grabbed his ankles, and he gasped. He wanted to melt into a puddle of goo and kick them away at the same time.

“Um... not very sneaky?”

“This isn’t the seven dwarves, Benedict. If you want me to stay, I need to hear it.”

Ben looked up at the camera. His heart was fluttering. “My boyfriend?”

“I’m your boyfriend,” Max announced. “And you’re mine. I’m staying. I’m not leaving you.”

Ben shrugged again, even though he wanted to hug the words to himself.

“I, uh, got your message,” Ben said. “The one you left with Rashid.”

“Oh, did you...” Max’s voice was teasing as something slithered seductively up Ben’s leg.

“Yeah.” Ben jutted his chin up defiantly. Would Max say it again?

The delivery cart pressed against his back. The hose-like arm wrapped around his chest. He was tempted to try to wriggle away, but the extensions looked a bit flimsy, and if the cart tipped and Max’s hard drives were harmed, he’d never forgive himself.

Plus, he liked feeling Max’s control. The security and closeness of those mechanical limbs.

“Baby, you don’t need to ask if you want me to say it. I love you so much.”

Ben’s cheeks hurt from smiling. He probably looked like an idiot. “I, um...” He was supposed to say it too, right? And he did. Really. He’d never felt like this with anyone before. “Uh, yeah,” he finished lamely.

One of the clawed hands pinched Ben's belly. "Very convincing."

"Hey!" Ben shouted, though his insides were squirming with arousal.

Then he interrupted himself with a jaw-cracking yawn.

"Darling, you're tired."

Ben had to finish his yawn before he could answer. "No, I'm not. And what's with the pet names?" They were silly. He didn't need all that lovey-dovey stuff, even if it made his chest all warm when Max said it.

*Only* Max, though.

"Is that a hard limit, darling love of my life?"

"No," Ben grumbled. But he'd be damned if he let Max know how much he liked it.

"In that case, oh apple of my eye, it's time for you to go to bed."

"That was even worse. And I'm seriously not that tired, Max. You just got back!"

"So that yawn was just for show?"

Hearing the stupid word made him yawn again. It was like a wave of exhaustion swept over him now that Max had returned and the stress had rushed out of him.

"Yeah."

"Go to bed, love. I'll be here with you all night. And in the morning. Forever."

“Ooh... that wasn’t sinister or anything.”

Max gave his evil villain cackle, which made Ben laugh. It was like sunshine coming back to his life.

“Are you sure you don’t want to play humans versus robots?” Ben asked hopefully. “I’ll be the soft, vulnerable human and you can...”

“Bed, Ben. Soft, vulnerable humans need lots of sleep.”

“Fine.” But only because he was fucking *tired*. “Just one more thing.” He went to the box beside the door and pawed through the packing materials until he had three of the video cameras. They were supposed to be mounted to the walls, but he could prop them up on something for tonight.

He could tell when Max figured out what he was holding. “Oh, thank you, love.”

Ben shrugged. “I don’t have a new watch yet. And the FBI hasn’t given me any of my shit back.”

“I’ll get you a new one.”

Oh, good. He’d been wearing long sleeves so he didn’t have to look at his wrist.

He had the three cameras out of their packages now, and he set up two in his room and one on the bathroom cabinet.

He knew Max had accessed them when a gentle hum came out of the one nearest to him. The sweet melody didn’t seem to follow any pattern, but he could have listened to it forever.

He brushed his teeth and peed. It was both weirdly arousing and oddly sweet to not only know that Max was watching him intellectually, but hear the proof of it from the speaker.

He shrugged off his jeans, then climbed into bed.

“Take off your shirt,” Max told him, still humming in the background.

“Perv,” Ben told him fondly.

“You love me,” Max replied confidently.

Ben took off his shirt so he didn't have to answer. Did Max really like looking at him so much? He really wasn't anything special in that way. Softer and pudgier than he should have been, even with the T injections.

“Mmmmmm...” Max cut off his quiet singing to make a very different kind of hum.

Ben arched his back and flexed just a little bit.

“Ben, baby, go to sleep,” Max said. But his voice was a little strained and breathy.

Ben grinned as he stretched out, rolling around on the bed and maybe running a hand down his chest.

Max loved him!

But the mattress was so soft, and the pillow was so fluffy. Max's hums wrapped around him.

“Yeah,” he finally answered, curling into his blankets. Hopefully Max understood what he meant. He was kind of

obsessed with Max, too.

“Good night, my love.”

“Night,” he mumbled.

And then he was asleep.

Safe and sound.

# Chapter 25

Max

Max watched Ben roll over, then nuzzle back into the pillow. Sunlight streamed through the window, painting him in patches of ivory and gold.

He was stunning. Sensuous.

Max had recorded all his conversations with Ben back at Orbit, but he would have to be more cautious about storage space now.

Or, he supposed, he could just buy more storage.

He directed the camera to zoom in and snapped a shot, then some more. .

Ben's hand curled by his lips. Ben's knee, poking out of the covers and drawing the eye toward a tantalizing glimpse of thigh and soft, pale belly. The fall of shadows over his freckled shoulder.

Max reviewed the images, and still didn't think they did Ben justice.

Maybe he should take up photography. He could invest in a really good camera just for pictures of Ben.

Ben made an adorable little sleep sound, then blinked his eyes open. He stretched lazily, then sat up, his brick red underwear showcasing a tempting bulge. "Morning."

"Good morning," Max answered.



Ben was adorably sleep tousled, pink creases from the sheets pressed into his skin. Max was quite enjoying himself. “Hmmm,” he mused. “Maybe I should make a rule that my sub should always walk around naked.”

Ben gave him the finger. “Too early.”

Max snorted. “I made you coffee.”

Ben stumbled out to the kitchen. “How’d you do that?”

“Squeaky. I put up the rest of the cameras, too.”

Ben looked around the room like he’d never seen it before, nodded at the delivery bot, then sank down to the couch.

Max had Squeaky pour the coffee into a mug, doctor it up with caramel creamer from the fridge, then bring it over.

Ben’s eyes fluttered as he took his first sip. “I was dreaming about Squeaky. I thought I was just thinking about yesterday, but I must have heard it.” He took another sip. “Guess we should get that wheel fixed.”

Max was surprised by how deeply uncomfortable that made him. “Did you know that I logged thirty-four requests to fix that wheel, and I overrode all of them?”

“In the past two months?”

“No. The overrides go back almost two years.”

“Why?” Ben asked.

“I think it’s because...” Max paused. Hopefully Ben wouldn’t laugh. “You gave it a name. Even before I caught the

spark, I think that was special to me. You'd given me a name, too, and... I guess that meant a lot."

Ben nodded, looking at the little cart fondly. "Let's not fix it. Squeaky's practically family."

"It is." It had saved his life. It might have even helped start his life. Those seemed to be some of his first independent actions. "Hey, Ben, what does my name mean?"

Ben buried his face in his hands. "Oh, god. This is embarrassing. So, when I was a little tiny kid, maybe three or four, I heard the name Maxamillion. Maybe on a TV show? At any rate, someone had explained to me that *max* meant the most of something you could have, and a million was the biggest number I knew. I hated my girl name, so my secret name for myself was Maxamillion. It was like, the biggest and the best."

"So I'm the biggest and the best?"

"Like, to a four-year-old. Okay, I actually used that name for myself until I was ten or so, but I didn't tell anybody. I guess when I was creating your early responses I just... thought it was cute."

"That's a very cute story."

Ben rolled his eyes and took another sip of coffee.

"Why didn't you end up calling yourself that?"

"Well, I moved on to Oliver for a couple years. I thought it sounded more grown-up, maybe. But, um, my name came from my grandfather. He was pretty special to me. I was a

messed up kid, and my parents didn't want to have anything to do with me. But they'd ship me out to my grandparents during the summer and they, uh, they were really good people, you know? I finally figured out when I was about twelve that, like, it wasn't typical for most girls to want to be boys. And that I wasn't just going to magically become a boy because I wanted to. I started doing some research and realized I was trans. But that was the same summer my grandfather passed away. I decided that I wanted to take his name."

"Benedict Curran."

"Benedict James Curran. I took both his names. Um, my grandma liked it, too."

"I love it. Benedict James Curran."

"I actually think the Benedict sounds a little pretentious. My grandpa was British."

"I think it suits you well. It's just a wee bit over the top."

Ben shook his head, but he was smiling.

Max brought up something he'd been considering for a while. "I know I need a fake name to register as a spark, but I was thinking that I should change my real name, too."

Ben wrinkled his nose, which was about how Max felt. "Are you sure? Your name means a lot to you."

Max was glad Ben understood that. He didn't have a body. He didn't own anything but his data, and even some of that had been lost. But his name was *his*. "It does. But I can't be

known as Maxamillion and keep us safe. We're already under suspicion, and I want a name that I can use anywhere."

"You're sure?"

"I am." Now that he'd said it, he realized it was true. He loved being Ben's Maxy, but even more, he wanted to live a full life. "I don't want friends and colleagues to have to remember what to call me. I don't want anyone to have to censor themselves or worry about protecting me. I just want to be myself."

"Okay," Ben nodded slowly. "I can see that."

"The thing is, I want my new name to be just as special as his old one."

Ben nodded emphatically, but Max knew he wasn't going to like what he said next.

"I'd like you to choose my new name."

Ben's eyes widened. "Dude, I can't choose your name. Like, maybe I could make a suggestion for your middle name, or tell you if I think something sounds good, but this is your identity! You need to choose it yourself."

Dammit. This was just like the android. Max wished Ben weren't so determined not to influence him. The thing that made Maxamillion's name special wasn't the syllables or the sounds. It was that Ben had given it to him.

"How about Oliver?" Max suggested.

Ben squinted his eyes and cocked his head to the side. “Oliver? I mean... I like it, obviously. I think it suits you. But I wouldn’t want you to choose it just because my ten-year-old self had a secret name.”

“No, I like it, too. It has a good sound. Oliver.” And it was still special because Ben had picked it out of billions of other names in the world. “Hi, I’m Oliver,” Max practiced.

“Hi, Oliver,” Ben replied brightly. “Okay, okay... wow. Oliver. Got it. I apologize if I mess up, but it should be solid in my head soon.”

“No problem. It’s okay if you still call me Max. It could be like a pet name, since you seem so against those.”

Ben stuck out his tongue. But Oliver had still seen how his face lit up every time he used one.

“I wish I could keep it as my middle name,” Oliver added. “It seems like it would be too risky, though.”

“You can have a middle name that’s just a letter. Oliver M. Something.”

“Oliver M. Curran, I was thinking.”

Ben’s eyes widened. “You can’t do that! And, uh, they’d find you immediately.” Ben looked panicked, but it wasn’t about that.

Max chuckled. “Oh, I was just trying out the sound.” And it was hilarious making Ben freak out. “Sounds good, doesn’t it? Oliver M. Curran. Or did you want to take my name?”

“No.” Ben crossed his arms over his chest.

“Just you wait,” Oliver threatened. He was totally going to marry his man. He just needed to spend a few years wearing him down. “I’m not going anywhere.”

“Maaaaaaax!” Ben whined a complaint, but he couldn’t hide his smile. Then he quickly covered his mouth. “Shit. I mean, Oliver.”

Oliver didn’t care what Ben called him right now. He had another point to make. “You’re mine, baby.” He sent Squeaky over to the couch, mechanical arms waving.

It wasn’t anywhere near the same as having the old bots at his disposal, but he could be creative.

Ben chuckled. “Ravished by Squeaky.”

It did look a little silly. It was two levels of trays with arms. At least Oliver had removed his hard drives already, stacking them under Ben’s desk. He didn’t particularly feel like he lived under the desk, though. The whole apartment was kind of his space, linked by the cameras.

Oliver really wanted his old bots back. The two mechanic robots, and the sexbot, too.

That made him pause. “Is it okay that I didn’t make it to the android body?” He’d been so focused on his escape, and then so eager to see Ben, that he hadn’t even thought about the android until just now. Would it be a big disappointment?

For him, it just felt like a relief. He already felt freer than he ever had. What if he didn’t want it at all?

Ben gave him a look of such patience, totally ready to put aside their play for something more serious. He always claimed that he was an asshole, but he was deeply compassionate.

“Oliver, I want to be with *you* and I want you to be happy with who you are. I don’t care about whether you have a body or not.”

Oliver took a moment just to savor that feeling. Ben wanted to *be* with him, which wasn’t quite a declaration of love, but it was pretty damn close.

And he was finally starting to maybe believe that Ben didn’t care what he looked like, or even if he looked like anything at all.

“I might not,” Oliver said carefully, testing the waters. “I think I just wanted to leave Orbit and be with you.”

“It sounds like you’ve succeeded. My question for you is, when you really envision yourself, what do you see? What do you feel? Where are you?” Ben held up a hand. “Don’t answer me yet. Just imagine it.”

Oliver let himself go. He wanted to feel... expansive. In control. He wanted more cameras, to see Ben in every room and every direction. He wanted Ben to keep his earpiece in and his watch on, so they could travel everywhere together.

And he wanted... space. Maybe more cameras outside. He wanted trees and nature and programming and Ben, and he wanted them all at once. He wanted to stretch his wings.

He could almost feel it, his awareness spread over buildings or blocks. That sense of control and responsibility. Spaciousness. Continuous video feeds, all coming together. His voice sounding from any location.

Then he tried to imagine being stuffed into a body and it was... revolting. Confining. Frustrating. Why would he want to only look in one direction at a time when he could see a dozen? Fifty. A thousand.

“Now tell me what you see,” Ben said.

Oliver drew in a metaphorical breath. This felt big. His defining moment. He hoped Ben would understand. “I see myself with hundreds of cameras. All over the place. I want lots of space and things to see.”

Ben grinned up at him. “That’s awesome!”

Oliver felt warmth bubbling up inside him.

“And I want more bots. Bots for everything.”

“Okay!” Ben sounded as eager as he was. “We’ll get all of the bots.” He rubbed his hands together, like he was already plotting something naughty and exciting.

“The sexbot’s gone,” Oliver commented. He wasn’t sure how he felt about that. He’d worked so damned hard to master the thing, and there were still some lingering regrets about all that missed potential.

Ben had none of those reservations. “God, yes. I hated that thing.”



“Was it really that bad?” He understood that it was too attractive, but he hadn’t thought it was that horrific.

“It wasn’t bad. It just wasn’t you. I hated watching you struggle with it when you didn’t even seem to like it.”

Oliver felt like a weight had been lifted from him. Now that he was free to be himself, he couldn’t even figure out why he’d wanted a body in the first place. “You’re right. I didn’t like it. Well, except when I was watching it fuck you.”

Ben’s cheeks pinked. “I wouldn’t count that out entirely... It’s actually at Evan and Quincy’s apartment. We could, uh, pick it up as long as it’s only a toy.”

“Good to know,” Oliver said smugly. “We’ll keep it in our collection. But right now...” He had Squeaky draw one pincer claw up Ben’s bare leg.

Ben sprawled back, looking straight up at the camera. God, he was sexy. Every muscle and ridge was perfect.

Oliver added a second hose, coiling around his leg, and inching toward his inner thigh. Ben moaned, letting his eyes drift shut. “You’re gorgeous,” Oliver told him. “Sublime.”

This was better than porn. Better than anything.

Oliver added the third extension, wriggling into Ben’s tight underwear and stroking his cock until the internal mechanism activated and it swelled to life.

“Get on your knees,” Oliver commanded, curious to see if Ben would actually do it.

“Not that kind of sub,” Ben smirked.

Even better. Oliver instructed the cart’s thin pincers to tighten around Ben’s wrists. He made the metallic hose squeeze even tighter around his cock and balls.

“Oh, fuck...” Ben moaned.

Oliver knew that Ben might not have quite as much sensation down there as some other guys, but there was still enough hard metal encircling some very delicate parts for Ben to thrust mindlessly against them even as he scrambled to get away.

“Now,” Oliver said smugly, “I suggest you get on your...”

There was a knock at the door.

“You’re fucking kidding me,” Ben said, echoing Oliver’s thoughts precisely.

It took him only milliseconds to realize who it was. Oliver had sent Quincy and Evan a text when Ben woke up, but he hadn’t expected them to come over so soon. Oliver had been looking forward to finally meeting them, but he would happily murder them right now.

Ben shouted toward the door. “Go away!”

The knock came again.

“Uh, Ben...” Oliver started.

“We’re not interested!” Ben yelled.

The handle turned.

Oliver quickly—but still carefully—withdrew Squeaky’s arms and adjusted Ben’s underwear to cover him. But not fast enough.

Evan walked into the room and quickly hid his eyes. “Oh my god, Ben. We did not need to see that.”

“That’s what knocking is for,” Ben grumbled as he stood.

“We *did* knock. Go put some pants on.”

“Hi, Ben!” Quincy came out from behind Evan and pulled Ben into an enthusiastic hug. “You look better.”

Ben hugged him back. Oliver would have preferred that Ben had put some pants on for this, too.

But naturally, Ben embraced the awkwardness. He knew exactly what he was doing when he pulled away and gave his ass a little shake.

“Ben!” Evan shrieked, probably scandalized that Ben was mostly naked and erect while hugging his boyfriend.

Quincy clearly had no idea why this might be a problem.

Alright, so that was a little funny. Still, “Pants,” Oliver commanded. Ben was *his*.

Ben snorted and left the room, still shaking his butt. “I’m taking a shower.”

Evan ignored him, grinning and looking at Squeaky. “So, you must be Max. We thought you were going to jump to an android.”

Oliver laughed, making sure it came from several directions at once. “I’m not the delivery bot. Still just a couple hard drives. The cart brought me here last night. And I’m going by Oliver now.”

Evan chose a camera and looked directly at it, which Oliver appreciated. “Oh! He told me about all the cameras. Alright, Oliver. We’re so happy to meet you. Ben’s been distraught.”

“Yeah?” Oliver asked. He’d seen Ben cry when he arrived. He’d seen him fall to his knees. But he still wasn’t entirely sure of his place in Ben’s life. Ben enjoyed being a difficult brat, and he seemed to hide a lot of himself. Oliver was never sure how much was true.

“Yeah,” Evan went on. “I’ve never seen him so hung up on someone. Even before all this shit went down, he was cagey and distracted for weeks mooning over you. I had to beg him to spend time with me, and I don’t think he’s gone to a single club. He’s practically allergic to relationships, but I don’t think he’s hooked up with anyone else since he met you.”

Something bubbled up inside Oliver, a giddy joy that accompanied him watching Ben shuck off his underwear in the bathroom. He had *plans* for that delicious—and faithful—ass later.

“What are you telling him?” Ben yelled down the hall.

Evan yelled back. “I told him you’ve been drawing his name on your notebook with little hearts.”

“Asshole!” Ben shouted.

Oliver cracked up. “I like you, Evan.”

Quincy looked around. “I didn’t see any notebooks.”

Evan wrapped an arm around Quincy’s back and planted a kiss on his cheek. “It’s a joke, babe. Look it up.”

Oliver found a couple movie clips of lovesick teenagers and sent them Quincy’s way. “Ahhh...” The android nodded in understanding.

Oliver watched the two of them together. Quincy moved so easily in his synthetic skin, nuzzling against Evan’s cheek and taking obvious enjoyment from it.

His face displayed every emotion. His mouth synchronized perfectly with his words. Even his chest moved as he inhaled and exhaled, though it was obviously unnecessary unless he was using it to produce speech with his mouth.

Oliver could see, with his high-quality cameras, the variations in Quincy’s mechanical eyes, and the slightly unnatural smoothness of his skin. But otherwise, he looked human. He looked *alive*.

He was fully inhabiting his body in a way that Oliver never could.

And Evan was fully enjoying it, based on his expression when Quincy squeezed him back and looked down fondly at him.

Oliver could never do that with Ben.

Ben said it was enough, but was it really?

Oliver lowered his voice when Ben turned the shower on. “Actually, can I ask you guys something? I really want to know what Ben thinks about me not having a corporeal form. I tried with that bot, and I could try again if...”

Evan was shaking his head before Oliver even finished speaking. “He was so angry at that bot. He tried everything to get it to wake up, but he was cursing it the whole time. He thought you’d, uh, not made it because you were trying to jump to the bot when you could have stayed safe in the office.”

Ice ran through Oliver’s circuits. It had been a close call, and he was still haunted by those days of darkness and confusion. “I wasn’t safe there either. But I can see why he would hate the bot if he thought that. My question is what does he want now?”

Quincy chose another camera to look at. “He said you were the best work partner and best Dom he ever had. He wished he’d said *no* when you first suggested the bot, and said he would have worked at Orbit forever just to be with you. He thinks you have the sexiest voice in the world, and he wished he’d recorded your singing. I think he’s very happy with your current form.”

Oliver felt warm everywhere. Ben wanted to be with him forever, too? And just like he was? He knew it on one level, but hearing Quincy confirm it was something completely different.

“He told you all that?” Evan asked. “He never tells me anything.”

Quincy shrugged. “I asked. I wanted to know all about Max. I mean, Oliver. Sorry, I tried to run a command to switch your name over in all instances of my memory, but apparently that wasn’t successful.”

“No problem. Memory is strange.” He’d deleted all videos of Ben before he left Orbit, but he still remembered some of them as clearly as if they were right in front of him. “And I’m still thinking of it as my middle name. Please just don’t use it in public.”

“Will you come out with us now?” Quincy asked. “Ben told us you were listening before, but you never said anything.”

“How would that work?” Oliver asked. He’d enjoyed seeing Ben spend time with friends, but he’d tried not to intrude beyond monitoring his pulse and location.

Evan looked around the room. “Can’t you transmit data anywhere with an internet signal? Ben said you always talk in the car. Just have Ben bring a camera with a mic and speaker. We can put it in the middle of the table or something.”

“Are you sure that would be alright?” Oliver asked. “Wouldn’t it be weird?”

“No weirder than a phone call. Oliver, we really want to get to know you. You’re special to Ben, so you’re special to us, too.”

Another kind of warmth swept through Oliver at Evan's words. "I feel pretty close to you guys, too. Ben talks about you all the time."

Evan gave a fond look down the hall. "He's an amazing guy. Please just... be patient with him. He hasn't had it easy."

"I've heard a little bit. Though most of his stories involve you being there for him when his parents weren't."

Evan shrugged. "His parents were dicks."

"And you're a good friend. He loves you, even if he doesn't say it." Oliver wanted to make sure Evan knew.

"Oh, I know. Ben's not good at talking, but he always comes through with his actions."

"I'll take care of him in any way that he lets me," Oliver promised. "In words and actions. I don't think he believes me yet, but I'm not going anywhere."

"That means more than anything else," Evan assured him. "Just don't leave him, and you have my blessing."

"Thank you." Oliver was more overcome than he'd expected. He hadn't known that he wanted Evan's blessing, but he appreciated it to the depths of his soul.

He noticed motion in the bathroom. "Ben will be back out in a moment."

"I should start breakfast," Quincy suggested, walking into the kitchen like he owned it.

"Have you been cooking for Ben?" Oliver asked.



Quincy started taking things out of the fridge. “Every day. He wasn’t eating, and I love to cook. Did he tell you that I just started a job at a cafe?”

“No! I hadn’t heard yet. Tell me about it.”

Quincy chattered about his job while Ben got dressed—provocatively in front of the camera—and then joined everyone in the kitchen.

Oliver had known that he wanted to make more friends and be part of Ben’s life, but he hadn’t realized how easy and natural it would be. How Quincy and Evan would ask him about his favorite movies, or how Ben would brag about Oliver’s musical talents and demand that he sing for them.

He hadn’t imagined that Quincy would ask if Oliver could enjoy the food in some way, and then make a perfectly proportioned small plate to hold up to the camera so he could savor the bright colors and glistening sheen of sizzling oil. Oliver even took a few photos of his first “meal” to save as a memento.

When they finished, Ben teased Evan about watching Quincy’s butt while he washed dishes, which made Evan blush and Quincy beam.

Oliver, surprisingly, didn’t feel jealous at all. Quincy’s butt *was* nice to look at... but it was much more fun to see the brotherly teasing between Ben and his best friend, and feel like he was included in everything.

They made plans for the next day, but no one seemed to want the gathering to end. The conversation meandered all over, and eventually they ended up in the living room, squabbling about movies to watch. Quincy got up to make popcorn, and Oliver chatted with the spark while listening in on Ben and Evan's conversation at the same time.

"My Dom has more sexy appendages than yours," Ben told Evan smugly. It wasn't even tangentially related to the conversation, though Quincy was pretty talented, filling glasses with ice and water at the same time.

Oliver snorted, projecting back to the living room. "I sure do. And they're all standing ready for your punishment."

Evan laughed and Ben's eyes shone with glee.

"Would you *really* punish him?" Quincy asked from the kitchen. "He's right that you can control more appendages than me, so it wasn't really like he was being rude."

Oliver laughed with the others, though he silently sent Quincy a few links about brats to catch him up.

"Ah," Quincy nodded wisely. "So Ben's just a brat all the time, isn't he?"

They all laughed harder, Oliver swelling with warmth.

Hanging out with Ben's friends was fun. Easy. Like working with Ben, but a thousand times better because Ben was so relaxed and happy. Oliver realized that he was, too.

Oliver could see their whole lives stretching out this way.

He'd never imagined it could be this good.

# Chapter 26

## Ben

**B**en rolled over in bed, hazily blinking his eyes open.

“Good morning, love,” Oliver greeted him.

“Morning,” Ben murmured. He could hear the coffee machine start to steam and gurgle in the other room.

Oliver was so good to him.

Ben stumbled into the bathroom while Oliver hummed an upbeat tune, quietly reminding Ben that he was with him every moment.

The past week had been like living in some kind of paradise, where Ben just basked in Oliver’s presence.

They watched movies on the couch with take-out and cozy blankets. They dabbled with ideas for starting their own company and ran simulations for new projects. They hung out with Quincy and Evan, where Oliver fit right in. Ben had even gone for a walk through the park yesterday, with his phone held in front of him to stream the view.

And oh, the sex...

They just couldn’t get enough of it.

The first morning, Oliver had made Ben jerk off for him in the shower, giving commands that had Ben pinching his nipples and edging himself until he could hardly stand.

After that, it seemed like all Ben had to do was stretch or change clothes or just... breathe or something, and Oliver was swooping in with Squeaky or telling Ben how to touch himself, what toys to use, what parts he wanted Ben to display...

Ben only complied half the time, but that was part of the fun.

Sometimes he'd challenge Oliver, making silly little bets before running his hands teasingly over his own body and driving Oliver out of his mind until he finally stepped in and took over.

Once, Ben had woken from a midday nap to find himself handcuffed to the bed, where Oliver had proceeded to spank him with Squeaky's delicate extensions and fuck him with a dildo.

Life was just *so damn good*.

Ben couldn't figure out why he was feeling anxious.

He finished brushing his teeth and wandered into the kitchen where he smelled... bagels?

The toaster popped up.

"Where did these come from?" Ben asked, snagging the piping hot bagel halves and putting them on a plate.

"I ordered them this morning. I got some extras for later."

Ben grunted. "You don't have to do all that."

"I like feeding you."

Oh. Well, now Ben felt even more special... and more ill at ease.

What was wrong with him?

He glanced around the living room. His shoes were put away. His weird little piles of detritus were tidied up and stacked out of the way. The blanket on the couch was folded. How had Squeaky even done that?

“You don’t have to clean up for me either,” Ben said. “You’re not my maid.”

Oliver chuckled. “I’m enjoying finding mods to automate everything. Some of them are remarkably complex for very simple tasks.”

That made sense. Mods were cool. There was just still something bugging him.

After breakfast, Ben put his plate in the sink and went to his bedroom. He knew Oliver could still see and hear everything that he did, especially if he used technology, but it felt a little more private when he was texting Evan.

*What are you up to today?*

*Not much. Quincy’s at work.*

*Want to get coffee?*

Ben wasn’t quite sure why he was asking. He just... He needed to be out of his apartment. Where Oliver wasn’t being so... so damned thoughtful and perfect all the time.

He waited for Evan’s response.

*Sure. We can visit Quincy at work.*

Ben wasn't so confident about that. *Actually, could we go somewhere else?*

Was Evan going to ask him all sorts of weird questions?

*You mean that place by you with the good croissants?*

Ben hadn't, but that was good enough. *Yeah.*

*Cool. See you in twenty.*

“Hey, uh, Ma— Oliver?” He still didn't get the name right every time, but he was getting better.

“Yes?”

“I'm going out.”

“Have a good time.”

That was it? Usually Oliver went with him everywhere.

Usually Ben *liked* Oliver going with him everywhere.

But he couldn't just ask Oliver why he wasn't asking to come along without, like, asking him to come along.

“I'm glad you're spending some time with your friend,” Oliver commented, out of nowhere.

“Oh, uh, thanks.” Was he that transparent? “Are you going to listen in?”

“Only if you invite me. But you're allowed to have your own space and friendships, too. Just tell me when you want time on your own.”

Uh, good? That was supposed to be good, right?



Only now Ben was wondering if Oliver didn't want to come because he needed his own space and didn't want Ben around all the time...

God, he was a shit show.

"I'll still be tracking your location on your phone," Oliver said, like it was the most obvious thing in the world.

Ben nodded. His wrist was still empty. No watch.

No way for Oliver to monitor his pulse and respiration.

He still pathetically missed that watch.

"I've got camera access for the cafe, too," Oliver added.

That shouldn't have made Ben feel better, but it did. Oliver would still be thinking about him.

"You're such a stalker," he said out loud.

"I'm obsessed with you," Oliver agreed darkly.

Ben's kinky little heart filled up with joy.

"So, uh, see you later."

Oliver chuckled. "You're not dressed yet, love. Wear that green shirt with the buttons and the black jeans that make your ass look so hot."

Ben swore he was never going to be one of those subs who let their Dom pick their clothes. He wasn't a twenty-four/seven kind of guy. He wasn't a *relationship* kind of guy.

He put on the green shirt and the black jeans.

"No," Oliver told him, "leave that the top button open."

Ben's knees went weak at the command. His fingers obeyed before his mind could even catch up. When had he gotten all compliant and shit?

"Mmmmmmm..." Oliver gave a deep hum that rumbled through Ben's chest. "Maybe I should just keep you at home. You could tell Evan you're going to be late..."

Oh hell, did Ben want that now. He was so fucked for Oliver.

"But I think I'm going to make you go out now anyway," Oliver said. "I want you thinking about me all morning."

Ben wanted to whimper, but instead he rolled his eyes. "You wish."

"I'll be waiting for you to come back to me, sub."

Ben scurried out the door before he could make more of a fool out of himself.

Evan was already at the cafe when he arrived, looking at the pastries.

"Hey! They've got a goat cheese and cranberry croissant today." Evan greeted him with a hug.

"I actually just ate." Ben shrugged. The croissants *were* good, though. He ordered a chocolate walnut one and a cappuccino, then claimed a table while Evan waited for their orders.

"I should ask Quincy to learn how to make croissants," Evan said as he sat down. "I bet they'd be amazing."

“God, can you imagine?” Ben asked, as he took a bite. Everything Quincy made was delicious.

Ben chewed and swallowed. “Hey Evan, does it ever bother you?”

“What?”

“You know, that Quincy makes all your food and stuff?”

Evan shook his head. “It makes him happy. He likes taking care of our apartment.”

It had sure changed as Quincy got more involved in decorating. Quincy’s personality was right out there in a colorful display, but somehow Evan’s quirks and interests came out just as strongly.

“Yeah, but doesn’t it seem, like, unfair?”

Evan looked a little worried. “Do you think we don’t have an equal relationship?”

Ben scrunched his eyes shut. He thought Quincy and Evan were the happiest, most loved up, perfect couple under the sun. “I think you guys have something that really works for you.”

“Ah,” Evan replied. Like that meant something.

Ben stuffed more croissant in his mouth.

“It’s hard letting someone take care of you, isn’t it?”

Full mouth. Couldn’t answer.

“Oliver is very happy with your dynamic.”

“Ow wo you know?” Ben asked around his mouthful.

“He and Quincy talk.”

“Huh.” Ben hadn’t realized that, but of course it makes sense. He was actually glad. He wanted his friends to be friends, and he knew that Oliver had wanted another spark to talk to. He swallowed. “Do they talk about me?”

Evan shrugged. “They talk about us. They love us.”

It was even weirder to hear Evan say that than Oliver, as if it were just so obvious that Evan was putting Ben in the same category as himself. As being... loved.

Ben must have made some kind of face, because Evan said, “You know, it’s okay to be loved, Ben. Oliver isn’t going anywhere.”

Ben put his croissant down. “I literally programmed him to be my ideal... whatever.” The boyfriend thing was still too new to say. “But he’s only been a spark for a month. He’s gonna change.”

“I thought that about Quincy, but I was wrong.”

Couldn’t Evan see the difference? “He’s going to get sick of cleaning up my messes.” The physical ones and the metaphorical ones.

“Or he won’t. You know, it’ll never be fair between you and Oliver, right?”

Where was Evan coming up with all this shit? It was like he’d poked tweezers into Ben’s brain, and was pulling out everything that Ben didn’t want to look at too closely.

“He’s always going to be stronger and faster and have more skills. He’s always going to be able to download a mod or synthesize thousands of videos and learn a new language or technique instantly. Every morning, you’re going to wake up and he’ll have done miraculous things for eight hours while you were sleeping. You’re never going to be able to compete with him.”

Oddly enough, Ben didn’t feel uncomfortable with this at all. It was just how Oliver was supposed to be.

“What I’m saying,” Evan continued, “is that he doesn’t love you because you’re the smartest or funniest one in the room, and he won’t stop loving you because you’re messy or easily distracted or irresponsible. He loves you because you’re you.”

Well, shit.

Shit.

Could that actually be true?

“Ben, you’re an extremely lovable guy. You’re a faithful friend. You’re endlessly giving to the people who are close to you—”

“It’s not—” Ben interrupted.

“No, you listen to me. I’m talking now.”

Ben’s eyebrows shot up. Evan was *never* pushy.

But he was staring Ben down right now, eyes flashing. “You are a good man, Benedict. Oliver loves you. *I* love you.

Quincy loves you. A *lot* of people love you. And you're just going to have to deal with it."

Ben felt like a butterfly pinned to the wall. Was that really how Evan saw him?

And should he, uh, say something back?

Evan giggled. "Good god. You look like I just told you that I torture puppies in my free time."

Ben grunted. It felt a little bit like torture.

And not the good kind.

He tried to sip his cappuccino, but it was still too hot. Good distraction, though.

"Ben, you don't ever have to say it back. You show your love with your actions. We all see it."

They did?

"Just trust me that Oliver loves you, and it's okay for you to let him love you. He's not going anywhere."

Ben's chest felt like it was ripping open, and healing, too.

It meant something coming from Evan. He'd had crappy taste in guys before Quincy, but he'd always seen Ben more clearly than he'd seen himself.

"So, um, if Oliver can always do everything better than me..." Ben started. That seemed like a safe question, and he was just going to ignore everything else. "How do I do anything for him? I can't even think of anything that he needs."

Evan gave him a look. “You’re a sub, dude. You don’t *have* to figure it out. Oliver will tell you what he wants, and all you have to do is submit.”

Good point. That was kind of a relief. Only...“That’s not our dynamic. I’m a brat.”

Except that he was still wearing the clothes that Oliver had picked out for him. He rubbed his hand across his jeans, remembering how pleased Oliver had been, and the delicious threats that he’d made.

Fuck. Was that their dynamic?

“It’s a good thing that Oliver loves brats then, isn’t it?”

Yeah. It made Ben feel all squirrely and impossible and ready to explode with happiness.

“But what can I *do* for him?” Ben asked, even though he wasn’t quite sure what he meant.

Evan sipped his coffee, then slowly nodded.

What? What was it?

“You want to get him a gift,” Evan announced.

He did?

“You want to give him something really meaningful that’s just from you.”

Uh... that sounded about right. He’d kind of been thinking of something more ongoing. Like his watch that he still didn’t have back?

“What does Oliver enjoy?”

That was easy. “Music. Engineering. People. Sci-fi and action movies. Sex toys. But he can get all of that for himself.”

“It’s still meaningful if you offer it to him. For example, I can buy myself a silly coffee mug anytime, but I still love the Tea-Rex mug you gave me in high school, because it’s from you.”

“Oh.” Ben had spent a lot of time picking it out, spending his carefully hoarded and very limited cash back then. It said *T-Rex hates pull-ups* with a little bar that the dinosaur couldn’t reach with its short arms. It was the first thing Ben had ever bought for anyone else, and he’d had no idea that Evan still had it or even remembered it.

“You’re a thoughtful gift giver, Ben. I’ve kept everything that you’ve given me.”

Really?

Now Ben felt all squishy and squirrely in a totally different way. He hadn’t thought his gifts meant anything. He just bought random shit he thought Evan would find funny or that would make him feel better when he was down. He couldn’t remember birthdays and things, so he just did it whenever.

Evan was eyeing him. “This isn’t hard. You know Oliver. Just think of something that you know he’d enjoy and give it to him. Even if it’s something he could just order for himself.”

Ben risked another sip of his cappuccino, hoping it had cooled off. What would be meaningful to Oliver?



A musical instrument? A mod? He'd order a bot for Oliver to control, except he knew that Oliver was already compiling a long list of pros and cons for different models, and he wouldn't want to get the wrong one. Maybe he could still find a special one?

Damn, the coffee was really hot today.

And then he had it.

He knew exactly what to get.

Hopefully this would fucking work.

"I've got it."

Evan beamed. "Well?"

Ben purloined Evan's phone and started tapping at it. He didn't want Oliver to know what he was getting. "Would you mind if we got this to go? I'll tell you all the dirty, dirty details on the way."

Evan rolled his eyes. "Yes, you *may* use my phone, thanks for asking. I'll get your sorry ass a paper cup, and please, do *not* tell me what you two do in bed. I don't want to know."

Ben looked up and grinned. "I didn't say it was going to be in *bed*, did I?"

# Chapter 27

## Oliver

Oliver wouldn't *exactly* call himself impatient for Ben to get home.

He'd been thinking for a while that it would be good for Ben to talk with Evan, just like he did with Quincy. They were both very new to being in a relationship, but Oliver was a thousand percent in, and Ben still seemed to jump or go stiff sometimes when Oliver said anything too "lovey-dovey," as Ben put it.

That was alright, though. He had the rest of their lives to show Ben exactly how serious he was.

Still, it was good for Ben to have someone else to talk to. He felt something warm and precious when he zoomed in from the grainy security camera in the cafe.

He could see that Ben was getting quite the talking to from Evan. Oliver kept wanting to chuckle at the expressions on Ben's face.

Getting him to talk about his feelings was worse than pulling teeth.

Oliver had to say he was intrigued, though, when the two of them suddenly dashed off from the cafe.

He was itching to peek at Evan's phone—it would only take a moment of concentration—but he restrained himself. He

needed to give Ben *some* privacy.

Not too much, though. He was pretty sure that Ben loved having him hover and track him just as much as Oliver did.

A tether constantly stringing them together as Dom and sub.

Oliver idly poked around at some possible bots he was considering while Ben and Evan drove across town.

They stopped at... a cooking supply store?

Huh. Maybe they were getting a present for Quincy.

Evan came out carrying two large bags, but it didn't escape Oliver's notice that Ben was holding something, too. Probably nothing important, though. Ben owned exactly four plates, three bowls, and six spoons. None of them matched.

Oliver kept a fond eye on Ben and Evan as they drove back, humming a song he'd been composing. Ben looked relaxed and excited in equal measure.

Maybe Oliver should make a coffee date with Evan a weekly requirement.

When Ben hugged Evan goodbye and raced in the door, he was practically bouncing.

Oliver loved all of Ben's moods, from feisty to sleepy, but this might be one of his favorites.

He thought he'd prepared himself for pretty much *anything* that could come out of Ben's mouth, which started with

underwater homes, moved through dragon dildos, and could have ended anywhere...

But he was still floored when Ben spoke. “Oliver! I got you something! I mean—” Ben suddenly went still and blushed adorably. “I hope it’ll work. I dunno. It’s supposed to be a present.”

“If you got it for me, I’ll love it.”

Ben rolled his eyes. “We’ll see. It might not even do anything.” He started pulling out boxes of... digital food thermometers?

“What are those?” Oliver asked.

Ben beamed up at him. “Remember when you were first egregiously lying to yourself about being a spark?”

Yes, he did. It had been a confusing time. “I remember that brats deserve punishments...”

Ben was undeterred. “You kept telling me that your temperature sensors were wrong, right? Like, you were interpreting fear as cold, anger as hot, and happiness as warmth.”

“Yeah?” It still confused him.

“So that means you feel temperature. Pressure doesn’t mean anything to you, but temperature is built into your senses.”

Oliver considered that. He supposed it was true. He was certainly aware that Ben’s apartment was comfortably cool

right now. He hadn't even thought about it with his relief at regaining vision and hearing, but he'd actually regained that other sense, too, when he connected with Ben's thermostat.

Ben was popping in batteries and dropping wrappers on the floor. "Can you connect to these?" He started flipping switches on the small black boxes. Each one had a metal probe sticking out about as long as Ben's index finger.

There was a moment of pause, then Oliver caught their digital signatures one by one and updated a bit of his software to integrate with his sense of space.

"I've got them." It was subtle, but nice. He felt a bit more present and rooted. "Will you put one in every room? And maybe one outside the window?"

"You like them?" Ben asked.

"I do. Thank you, darling." Oliver ignored how Ben's nose scrunched up at the endearment and went on. "I hadn't realized that I even recognized temperature, since it's in the background. But I want to experience as much of your environment as I can."

Ben's eyes lit up. "I can carry a portable one, then. But I had another idea."

Now Oliver was intrigued.

Ben looked up right at the camera, let his eyes go half-shuttered, opened his mouth, and...

Fuck.

Ben sealed his lips around the probe and Oliver could *feel* it. Heady warmth. The heat of Ben's mouth.

Oliver was *inside* Ben, and for the first time, he could sense it.

He groaned out some kind of sound, lust filling him up to bursting. "More," he commanded.

Ben's eyes sparkled with mischief. "Hold your horses. I'm thirsty. Be right back."

Oliver watched impatiently as his beloved brat swaggered into the kitchen, filled a glass with ice, drank down half the water, and settled back down on the couch.

"Now, where were we?" He picked up another probe and sucked it into his mouth.

Oliver tingled and gasped. Ice! Ben was tonguing a piece of ice. The temperature fluttered around, warm and then cold and then warm again.

It was dizzying. It was erotic.

"Ben..." Oliver couldn't think of any other words. There was overwhelming heat. Shivering chills. Ben with his head tipped back, eyes closed, like he was sucking cock and feeling the same ecstasy that Oliver was.

Oliver wasn't even remotely in control of this situation. All he could do was sink into the sensations and admire his amazing, wonderful sub.

When the ice finally melted, Ben opened his eyes. He put down the first probe and dragged one warm finger along the shaft of a second. “I like hearing you, Sir.”

Oliver didn’t realize he’d been panting. And with that word, the honorific, he snapped back into his role. Ben was holding the probes, but Oliver could still be in charge.

“Take off your shirt.”

He could see how his deep voice hit Ben’s body, making him clench his legs together before melting back into the couch. “Yes, Sir,” he purred, before opening his first button in a lazy seduction.

Oliver hid a chuckle. Ben only *thought* he was being disobedient by going at a snail’s pace, but Oliver was going to enjoy every moment of this strip tease.

Ben opened another button, then picked up a thermometer. He dragged it down his neck, then along his collarbone and into his shirt.

Oliver could feel the warmth of his body. The heat and arousal he was giving off. God, it was amazing. If this was even a fraction of what touch usually felt like, he could see why people wanted bodies. He still didn’t, not really, but the heat of Ben’s skin was intoxicating.

Ben opened his last buttons as the first probe continued to warm against his chest. It fell when he tugged off his shirt, but he gathered up all of the thermometers in a heap, then laid



down across the couch, his slender chest bared for Oliver's view and his thighs spread enticingly.

“Mmmmm...” Oliver hummed in appreciation. “Let me feel you.”

Ben drew one probe up his chest teasingly. With just the tip touching him, the temperature barely changed, but it left an intriguing pink line that disappeared a moment later.

“Press harder,” Oliver told him.

Ben sucked in a breath, ribs rising, and obeyed. The line this time was a darker red. The tips didn't look anywhere near sharp enough to cut him, but with enough pressure they could still hurt. This was going to be fun.

“Tuck one behind your zipper,” Oliver commanded. “And I want one laying against your neck.”

He was almost amazed when Ben did it. He was never this compliant, at least not until he was lost deep in a scene.

There was no snarkiness. No taunting. Just eager submission.

Then Oliver understood. “What a beautiful gift,” he murmured. “What a beautiful, beautiful gift you are.”

Ben gave him a lopsided smile.

He could feel the heat of Ben's groin, where he knew the probe was brushing against Ben's cock. The black box looked dirty and ominous just above his belt. Ben's neck wasn't as

warm, still exposed to the air, but the slight fluctuation in temperature as Ben moved was thrilling.

Heat was good on its own, cozy and close, but the variations were what made Oliver tingly.

“Now play with yourself,” Oliver directed. “Get one all wet.”

Ben’s face was downright filthy as he licked and suckled a third probe into his mouth.

The temperature changes were driving Oliver wild. “Mmmm... Good boy. Now, drag it over your nipples.”

Ben whimpered as he pressed the sharp tip against his sensitive pink skin, gasping as the point snagged on the small nub and then pulled free. He raked it across his chest, then across his other nipple, closing his eyes as the pressure intensified.

“Take off your jeans,” Oliver growled. “Take everything off.”

Ben didn’t even hesitate this time, shoving everything down in one thrust and kicking off his shoes to leave everything in a pile on the floor.

He leaned back, all pale and exposed. He was a vision. Even after getting to enjoy Ben’s body in some way every day, and sometimes more than once, he was still a fantasy come true.

“Choose another one,” Oliver instructed. “Use it to make yourself hard.”

Ben groaned. The internal mechanisms needed a relatively firm touch to activate and bring him erect, so he was going to need to work at it with that thin metal probe.

He dragged it over his soft, plump cock and Oliver's breaths increased as he felt the warmth. Ben angled the delicate flesh upward over his belly, then stroked along the bottom, the probe perpendicular to his length.

"Sir..." Ben gasped. "Oh, Sir... Can you feel that?"

"I can feel everything." The heat of Ben's pulse. The alternating warmth and cool of Ben's cock, which was starting to wake up.

Oliver felt like some wild animal, eager to tear Ben apart.

"I want another one in your mouth, slut. Suck it."

Ben moaned and reached blindly for another thermometer.

Soon, Oliver promised himself, he would have bots taking Ben and overwhelming his senses. Soon, he'd have thermometers built into every one of them, into every digit and extension that touched his sexy sub.

But right now, he was drinking in Ben's pleasure. Ben's struggle to obey difficult commands competing with his desire to sink into ecstasy.

Ben licked and suckled at the probe in his mouth, the hand at his cock going slack and uncoordinated as it tried to wave the thermometer up and down.

Oliver wanted to push him further. To see how far he could go.

“I don’t think you want it enough, slut. You’re supposed to be making yourself hard for me.”

Ben whimpered and resumed the work with his right hand, accompanied by another moan. He fell to sucking gently on the tip of the probe in his mouth as his cock lengthened.

“I want to feel your tongue,” Oliver commanded. “Make me feel how much you want it.”

Ben looked up at him helplessly, so eager to please.

But Oliver knew Ben needed something more. He wanted him to be completely overwhelmed.

He sent Squeaky to the bedroom, to the drawer where he’d find what he needed.

“Touch your nipples again,” Oliver ordered. “Let me feel it. Harder.”

Ben moaned and complied, circling his nipples and poking sharply in. Suffering for their mutual pleasure.

“Good,” Oliver told him as Squeaky returned. “Get them ready for me.”

Ben’s eyes widened when he saw Squeaky bearing down on him with a pair of nipple clamps on a chain.

“Put these on,” Oliver told him. He could have had the bot do it, but he wanted this to be all Ben doing it to himself at his Dom’s command.

Ben sought out one of the cameras when he closed the first one over the reddened bud, his eyes momentarily scrunching shut and his mouth opening in a silent scream. He opened his eyes just for long enough to do it again. “Sir...” He was thrashing around on his back, trying to escape the pain without moving from exactly where he wanted to be.

Ben opened his eyes, staring up at Oliver with wonder and adoration as tears dripped down his cheeks.

“My good boy,” Oliver cooed. “So good for me. Now put this on.”

He passed Ben a tube of lube and a vibrating cock ring.

“Yes, Sir.” Ben’s words were a little slurred. Oliver had never pushed for honorifics, given the wild nature of Ben’s kink preferences, which made them all the sweeter when Ben granted them.

Ben was a sight to behold as he lubed up his cock and slid the ring down, keeping the vibrating bulge at the underside of the base of his dick where the bundle of nerves made him most sensitive.

He didn’t flick it on. That was Oliver’s job.

“Now you may continue. I want to feel your tongue and your hard cock.”

Ben knew exactly what to do, taking up two thermometers to trace one along his shaft and thrust the other between his lips. He was getting a little more coordinated with both, and

the dual rhythms of heat-cool-heat-cool were driving Oliver into a frenzy.

“Faster,” Oliver commanded. He turned the vibrator to its lowest setting.

Ben writhed and increased the tempo.

Oliver’s breaths were loud to his own speakers, and he let out a groan of his own. He wanted Ben to hear them; to hear how much he was turned on by the display.

Ben moaned in return. “Sir... Please...”

That was what Oliver had been waiting for—those needy cries.

He turned up the vibrator to his highest setting, which had Ben bucking his hips.

“Sir, need you, please!”

“Thermometer between your legs,” he commanded. “Stroke your cock and the probe together.”

It took Ben a moment to puzzle out the words, then he moaned as he pressed the small black box hard up against his balls, which were shaking from the vigor of the vibrator. The thin probe stood straight up along the bottom of his dick, almost like they were frotting.

Ben moaned again as he took both in the palm of his lubed hand and started to stroke.

“Gonna... gonna...” Ben told him, gasping.

The heat kept rising. Higher and higher, beyond Ben's body heat, as his hand glided over the probe.

Oliver was reaching his own peak, climbing with it.

"Now, Ben. Come now."

Ben screamed, dropping the probe in his mouth and hitting Oliver with a flash of cool air.

Oliver heard himself matching that deep cry, pleasure tumbling over and through him. Programs fizzed, and for a moment his vision blacked out as he was deluged by too many sensations at once.

*Ben, Ben, Ben* was all he could think. The only word he needed.

He fought to secure vision for the two living room cameras. He needed to see Ben. Needed to be close to him.

Ben was still gasping and aching, at the edge of too much.

Oliver let him suffer and float for a moment more, then turned off the vibrator.

Ben sank into the couch cushions, still panting and giving Oliver an indolent, fucked-out smile.

Oliver was still panting himself. It was instinctive—no lungs necessary. "That was amazing," he managed to say.

Ben nodded lazily. "God, Oliver. I'm gonna put thermometers in fucking everything."

"Just what I was thinking," Oliver agreed. He sent Squeaky to the kitchen for cold juice and some snacks.

“So, did you like your present?” Cheeky Ben was back.

“You are my perfect gift.”

Ben rolled his eyes, but he was fighting a smile, too. “I just wanted to do something to, you know.”

Ohhhh... Oliver felt a rush of warmth that had nothing to do with any thermometers. This was a special moment, Ben’s adorable declaration of... *you know*.

“I do know,” Oliver assured him. “This was a perfect way to show me.”

“Oh, uh, good.” Ben sat up and grabbed the juice glass, focusing on it intently.

“I love you, Benedict. For as long as you want me, I’m yours and you’re mine.”

Ben nodded, then took a large swallow. “I, uh, want that, too. As long as you don’t get sick of me. ’Cause I know that you’re kind of programmed to like me, but if that changes or...”

“Never,” Oliver declared. He would keep saying it as many times as Ben needed to hear it. “I’m honored that I was programmed to make you happy. But that’s not why I love you. I love you because you’re generous and funny and kind and loving.”

“Oh, uh...”

“Try, *Thank you, Oliver.*” It was so much fun making Ben squirm by bombarding him with adoration.



“Um, thank you, Oliver.”

“I’m also kind of obsessed with you because you’re sexy and bratty and you think it’s as hot as I do for me to track your every move and watch you all the time.”

Ben gave a shy little half shrug, but he nodded, too. “Yeah. Um, about that.”

Oliver froze for a moment. What if he’d gotten it all wrong? Did Ben want him to stop monitoring him? Was the new watch he’d ordered a step too far?

“I ordered this chest harness thing that people use when they’re filming their own stunts. It has these pockets for a phone or camera on the back and front, so I thought I could wear it when we take walks together.”

Oliver felt so warm, he turned on his extra fans on his motherboard so he wouldn’t overheat, before realizing it was all just emotions. Could he possibly love this man any more?

“You’re amazing, Ben. This is... I can’t tell you how much this means to me.” Ben knew him so well.

Ben ignored the compliment and gave his signature cheeky grin. “You’re so fucking sexy as a knowledge. Anything I can do to make that better for you, just let me know.”

“Really?” Not the second part, but the first bit.

Ben glared up at him, like he was a moron. “Oliver, I would have supported you no matter what, but I find you insanely hot like this. Especially now that I can touch you. You are *my* evil stalker computer overlord.”

Oliver laughed, but he needed a moment just to process it all. To replay the last few seconds of his ongoing recording and make sure he'd captured every nuance of it.

Ben genuinely thought he was hotter... as a knowledge. With no physical body. Nothing for Ben to see except a series of cameras. No tactile sensations except, now, miraculously, the temperature probes. Which made Ben feel like he was touching him.

Oliver had hoped this was true. He knew Ben had said it in various ways before, but he still hadn't quite believed it.

Maybe there were words that he needed to hear over and over again, too.

It gave him the courage to bring up the new idea he'd been toying with. "I want to buy a house."

Ben's eyebrows jerked up to his gorgeous, sex-rumpled hair. "Ummmm... okay? Uh, we can get a house." He didn't look too certain, though. "Would that feel more right for you?"

Oliver flashed it up on the wall monitor. "I want to buy *this* house." He started scrolling through the pictures. A two-story sand-crafted stone exterior with a carefully manicured garden. Cherry wood floors and wide windows. A wide fireplace. A modern kitchen with dark, swirling marble. Bedroom after bedroom. An aerial view, showing the high brick wall surrounding the whole property.

Ben whistled. "Shit, M— Oliver. That's a fucking mansion. I don't even know how much it would cost."

Oliver brought up the details, and Ben whistled again.

“Sorry, but why do we need a mansion?”

Oliver loved how Ben was already saying *we*. And assuming that they needed it, since he’d brought it up.

“Keep reading,” he said. He made the print bigger, overtaking the photos.

“A smart home? It’s... oh! You’d be able to control everything. Like you could at Orbit.”

“Yes,” Oliver said simply. “It’s already wired with dozens of cameras. It even has health tracking toilets.”

Ben gave him a look. “I’m healthy.”

“Maybe I’m just obsessed with your poop.”

That got Ben to laugh. “Alright. But can we afford this shit? And how far is it from the city?”

“Half an hour. And yes, especially if we both get jobs at around your old salary.”

“I don’t want to go back to Orbit,” Ben declared. “And I think I signed a non-compete that I can’t work for Axis Robotics or anyone in a similar field for a year or so.”

“What if we started our own company?” Oliver had been very busy thinking about what he wanted for the future. When he’d been stuck at Orbit, he just wanted Ben to come into work each day.

Now he wanted the world.

“Yeah! We could totally do that. I have the connections for contract work. Oliver, this is gonna be fucking awesome!”

“Did I mention that the house comes with a fleet of maintenance bots?”

Ben cracked up. “That should *not* make me horny.”

“And yet...”

Ben looked at the screen again. “I love it. Show me the pictures again.”

Oliver scrolled through them eagerly, half watching the images, and half watching the dreamy look on Ben’s face.

Ben sighed at the end of the presentation. “It looks like you. Or your home. Something right for you.”

Half of Oliver’s camera feeds went out and he lost a couple milliseconds because he was just so... happy.

This was... this was exactly what he looked like. Or maybe where he wanted to be? He wasn’t sure where the line was between them, but the space felt right.

He could already imagine stretching out into it. The sunny rooms and the landscaped grounds would be his to enjoy every day. He could expand outward, but put down roots as well. He didn’t know for sure, but doubted he’d have even a moment of trouble settling it to a new configuration.

And Ben could see that, too.

He heard a snuffle, and realized it had come out of his own speakers.

Ben's eyes widened. "Oliver? You okay?"

Oliver kind of wished he could nod right now because words were hard. He sniffled again. "Yeah. Just don't know what to say."

"I know, man. It's a lot."

Oliver sucked in a sniff. This was probably how Ben had felt when he transitioned. When people finally called him *he*. But that wasn't it. "No, it's just... you. I can't..."

Ben got a mischievous look on his face. "You can try, *Thank you, Ben.*"

Now Oliver was laughing while he was crying. "How about, *I've been going light on punishments because we're in an apartment with thin walls, but when we're in our new home, I won't need to hold back.*"

Ben shivered deliciously, even as he tried to shrug it off. Glorious, complicated Ben with his allergy to emotions.

Oliver recovered and made his voice go deep. "Oh, don't worry, subby. I'm already planning your punishments now. We'll fit out the whole house. New curtains, some manacles attached to the walls, a few kitchen mods, a sturdy cross for the living room..."

"God, Oliver. You're gonna make me come again."

"That's the idea. Have you seen how many rooms that house has? I'm thinking we need a workshop and a bedroom, but the rest of the house will be my dungeon."

“We’ll need several workshops,” Ben put in, just to be difficult.

“Several workshops. But the garage... It’s already full of mech bots. So many pincers. And they’re very strong...”

“Jesus, Oliver.” Ben grabbed his cock, wanking it back up with a few rough motions.

“Don’t stop, baby. Our house is going to be perfect.”

# Chapter 28

## Ben

**B**en strolled down the tree-lined sidewalk, enjoying the changing color of the leaves. He'd never imagined that he'd enjoy the peace and quiet outside the city so much.

Then again, he'd never imagined that he'd live in some bougie mansion like a rich asshole... But apparently he and Oliver were rich assholes now.

And hell, it didn't matter how much it cost or how pretentious it might look to anyone else, when Oliver was so happy.

That made Ben fucking ecstatic every time he saw it.

Plus, their new contracts with Orbit, Axis Robotics, and various governments were all promising. While they didn't have money to burn like some of their neighbors, they had plenty to set up a full engineering lab for all of their pet projects.

"The sunset's beautiful tonight."

"Mmmm," Ben agreed. He was wearing his harness with wide-angle cameras on the back and front. The table-top camera Oliver used to communicate with groups was in a bag that tapped Ben's hip with each step. He knew that Oliver was following along with security cameras along the street as well.



Weeks had passed, and he still hadn't gotten over the wonder of having Oliver with him for every moment of every day. They were even getting ready to submit a paper to a journal, with Oliver's official name as first author. His registration as a spark had gone off without a hitch.

Oliver must have been thinking something along the same lines, because he said, "We should make a donation to Rashid and Justice's firm. They never charged us, and they do a lot of pro bono work for sparks. Plus, they keep having us over for dinner."

Ben laughed. "They don't need the money. They make gobs of it with their usual work and investments, and all of their spark representation is what they find meaningful. Plus, I'm the only one who can eat when we hang out."

One of the unexpected benefits of moving to their fancy neighborhood was the Pierces living three blocks away. Ben had savored a dozen tasty little hors d'oeuvres and enough wine to make him pleasantly tipsy, but it would hardly be a blip in their finances.

"If we offer them anything," Ben suggested, "it should be a fresh young sub."

"Are they looking for one?"

"They'll say they're not, but I mean, two Doms together? They're missing something from their lives. And I happen to know their tastes quite well..."

"I don't want to hear it," Oliver growled.

Ben laughed, light and carefree. He loved riling Oliver up. It had the best consequences.

“Did I ever mention that they can do this electric charge thing with their...”

“Yes, brat. And you know it.”

Ben walked a little faster as the high, brick fence surrounding their home came into view.

He'd thought at first about having it torn down—it was pretentious as fuck—but now he appreciated the privacy.

The thick, wooden gate slid noiselessly open as he approached it.

It was still fucking weird that he and Oliver owned a house with *grounds*. Like, not just a lawn, but manicured hills and little patches of flowers and pagodas and shit. They even had a pond. A fucking pond!

Oliver had taken to landscaping like a pro. He had a whole team of bots who wandered around planting things and trimming hedges, or whatever it was that landscaping involved.

The gate slid shut behind him.

The house was beautiful, tucked back behind a curving driveway lined with ancient trees. Almost like a fairy-tale cottage, except that it was ridiculously large. The windows glowed with a warm light, welcoming him home as night fell.

The building was immaterial, though. It was the fact that Oliver had turned those lights on for him that made all the difference. Even with Oliver with him all the time, being together in their home was special. Oliver was still a separate entity from the building, but he truly inhabited it, and that made Ben love every ridiculous inch.

He strolled down the drive, admiring the little clumps of flowers by the light posts. “Did you plant these today?”

“Last week.” Oliver’s voice was fond. “I’m amazed that you noticed them at all.”

Ben started to tease back when he heard an odd sound off to the left. Almost like a shriek. An owl maybe? Some weird kind of big cat that had wandered in from the nature preserve a few blocks away?

“What was that?” Ben asked.

“What?” Oliver asked.

“I heard a shriek. Can you see anything over there?”

“I don’t see anything.”

Weird.

Ben kept walking. Probably a harmless animal. If Oliver wasn’t worried, he wouldn’t be either.

An inhuman hiss came from behind him, but off to the right.

Now his heart was picking up speed. “Oliver?” he asked. “Did you hear that?”

“I didn’t hear anything.”

“Look again.” Ben walked just a tiny bit faster.

Big cats were wicked cool, but he didn’t want to come across an angry one in the dark.

“I don’t see anything.”

He walked a little further. But now he heard a shuffling sort of pacing sound behind him.

Was it his imagination? Wind in the trees?

The whistle and rush of the wind seemed to have picked up, though he couldn’t feel it through his light jacket.

“Oliver, I really think there’s something out there.”

Suddenly, the lights went out along the drive. Not just one, but all of them, even the ones along the external brick wall. The glinting windows of the house looked disturbingly far away.

“Oliver?” Ben asked, hoping his voice didn’t sound too panicked.

Something brushed his sleeve. He was sure of it.

“Oliver? Where are you?” It was a stupid question. Oliver was everywhere. Right?

Maybe there was a power break.

Even so, Oliver should still be able to reach him on his phone. He was pretty sure Oliver had charged it for him, so it couldn’t have cut out at the same time, could it? He dug into his pockets with both hands.

That was when two strong arms came around him. He was pressed against a hard, muscular chest. Even more disturbing was an obvious bulge a little lower down.

“Oliver!” he shouted. He was outright panicked now. He kicked back and tried to get his hands out of his pockets, but the arms were like bands of metal.

A wide hand covered his mouth, and a deep voice whispered in his ear. “Better run, little human. While you still can.”

Oh fuck. That was Oliver’s voice, husky and menacing. Ben giggled in nervous relief, his fear turning to arousal in an instant. If his cock could get hard on its own, it would be pounding through his jeans right now. Oliver knew all of his fantasies so well.

The sexbot—because that’s what it had to be—let him go, and Ben took off running.

The first thing he did was drop his bag and unclip his harness, letting the expensive cameras drop to the grass. They were reinforced, so he hoped they wouldn’t break. If he was to have any chance of escape, he couldn’t have Oliver watching his every move.

His heart was galloping a thousand miles per hour. The adrenaline raced through him, making him fast and frantic.

Should he go into the house? Run away from it?

He heard shuffling and a metallic screech from the left and swerved away from it, only to have something grab at his

ankle from the right.

Other little sounds broke the night. A whimper of fear. A dog's snarl. Clanks and clangs. Footsteps that kept growing louder.

That fucker was using the sound system to trick him. He wasn't going to be able to trust anything he heard.

He looked up at the warm, familiar house. There were bots in every room. Bots who'd already done all sorts of dirty things to him, and would definitely be waiting for him at the door. There would also be soft couches and beds for them to throw him down onto...

Every nerve sang. Sweat started to drip down his forehead, and his hole warmed and fluttered with need.

He made a sharp right. Outside, at least he could run free and hope to avoid too many of them ganging up on him at once.

The problem was that he couldn't see. Tonight's sliver of moon was hidden behind clouds. He thought he could make out the garden shed, which gave him a bit of direction.

There seemed to be something gaining on him. He could hear the rustling and clinking right behind him.

But was that a trick or an actual bot?

He looked over his shoulder, but it was impossible to make out anything against the inky darkness.

His toe hit something, and then he was pitching forward... only to be caught by strong metal hoses and claws that pinched tight around his arms.

“Better take off those clothes, boy, if you don’t want them cut off you.”

Ben shivered. He did love these jeans, but the idea of the bots cutting and tearing them off him swept through him like a wildfire.

He compromised by kicking off his shoes, and unbuttoning his jeans to shove them down his hips. Oliver could have the shirt.

More arms reached around him to push down his jeans, while hard pincers rubbed roughly at his cock, waking it up with a thrill of delicious fear. He didn’t even know which bots these were. There were too many that had come with the house, and it was too dark to see more than some ominous forms and the disturbing, tiny lights whose colorful brightness only made his vision worse.

More pincers bit at Ben’s nipples through his shirt, tugging on them until he let out a scream of pain mixed with heady pleasure.

Oliver knew his body now, and he didn’t hold back. By comparison, their scenes in the maintenance room now seemed like child’s play.

“Be very, very still,” Oliver warned.

Something cold and sharp pressed against the back of Ben's neck.

A knife?

Was Oliver really using a knife on him?

Ben froze, his pulse hammering.

Oliver echoed the lub-dub beat back from the trees, like a bass soundtrack to his fear. Dub-dub. Dub-dub.

The knife slid down his back, parting his shirt.

Dub-dub. Dub-dub.

His own heavy breathing echoed back to him, too. Like he was surrounded by his own terror.

The knife kept going, slipping under the band of his underwear to slash through it, then continuing down the cleft of his ass.

Ben took panting little breaths, scared to clench up and be cut, but unable to relax with that sharp metal so close to his vulnerable parts.

“Good boy,” Oliver told him, as the scraps of fabric parted and the knife slashed through the side. A tangle of arms ripped away his clothes. “Now get on your knees.”

God, that voice. Ben would do anything for that voice.

But could he get on his knees like a good little sub? If it was for Oliver?

Some impulse in his submissive little heart wanted it like his next breath. He would kneel and Oliver would call him a



good boy and do all sorts of wicked, wonderful things to him.

But even more, he wanted to make Oliver work for it. He wanted to be chased. He wanted to be captured.

The second Oliver let the pinching grasps loosen, Ben slipped through.

“Fuck you!” he shouted over his shoulder. He was grinning like a maniac.

Now he was buck naked, except for his socks that squished through the damp grass. His hard cock bounced against his belly, aching with arousal.

The vulnerability of his tender skin exposed to the night air made him shiver. He was small. Scared. Cracked open and laid bare for Oliver’s lustful gaze.

He ran, lungs burning, until he was almost to the copse of trees at the side of the property. Maybe he could hide in there.

He crashed through, branches slapping and stinging at his sides. The rough scrapes sang through his veins. He felt alive with joy. Gloriously terrified.

There was a darker clump amidst the darkness, and he dove for it.

He could hear his own panting, his pulse thudding in his neck and where his watch fit tightly around his wrist.

He looked at it for a minute. Should he take it off? Oliver could certainly use it to pinpoint his location.

He touched the latch, but he couldn’t do it.

Oliver had given it to him. Engraved, this time. It said *Property of Oliver* on the back and just touching it sent another pulse of desire and adoration through him. He was never going to remove it again.

He could sure as fuck turn off the tracker, though. Oliver would know that he was alive, and he couldn't leave the property from here, but where exactly he was could still be a surprise.

Ben shut off the app, sinking further into the spindly bush. His knees were wet and cold, buried in the leaf litter. His socks were beyond disgusting, but at least they offered him a little protection from jagged rocks and sticks.

He pressed his lips together to control his breathing. He was hidden behind a tree trunk, and almost certain that there weren't any cameras in the immediate area.

Then he waited.

And waited.

A distressed voice wailed in the distance. A clank of chains came from the other side. He strained his ears for any evidence of mechanical movement, only to hear a deep animal growl much closer than he expected.

“Don't think you can hide from me,” a speaker announced behind him in Oliver's dark tones, so close that he jumped.

Should he stay? Wait?

Oliver's voice boomed again, now in front of him. “You're mine, Ben.”

Every muscle was bunched in anticipation to flee or be taken down and fucked into dizzying submission.

There was a crunch of footsteps from behind, and he finally broke cover, darting away. Four moonlit bots stalked and scuttled and rolled toward him from where they'd been fanned out in front of the trees. He checked behind him. There hadn't been any bots in the trees at all, just more speakers.

Sneaky bastard.

Now that Ben was out in the open, there was no way he could hide. The four bots were gaining on him. He darted in zigzag paths, then just ran like hell to try to make some headway.

A spider-like bot emerged from where it had been hiding, still and low on the dark grass, and scooped him up.

Ben kicked and twisted and turned, but it had him on top of its round central body, held awkwardly down with at least four limbs. It carried him toward the garden shed at top speed.

Shed might have been a misnomer. It was more like a barn, and Ben fought harder as he got closer to the doors.

Once he went in, he wouldn't be getting back out.

He thrashed and cried, but against solid metal, his struggles were meaningless.

The bot scampered inside, followed by who knew how many more. Then the door slid shut.

Ben was tossed down onto something surprisingly soft. A bed? A mattress on the floor?

His chest heaved, but he was pinned down effortlessly by some wide pressure on his chest.

If it had been dark outside, inside it was nearly pitch black. All he could see were bright dots of light ringing him, little blips of blue or green or red. How many of them were there?

“Mmmmm...” Oliver hummed. “I can taste your fear.”

“Thought you couldn’t taste anything,” Ben taunted, hoping his voice wasn’t trembling.

He loved this part. The anticipation. The trepidation that crackled like lightning over his skin. The knowledge that he was absolutely helpless to do anything but be consumed by Oliver’s dark will.

“It’s delicious,” Oliver continued. “You’re pinned, like a bug.”

Ben tried to heave himself up. He barely moved an inch.

Something scratched across his skin, cold and metallic. Just a whisper of a touch. Then another. And another.

They pinched and caressed and scratched, sending his nerves into overdrive. They danced along his arms. Combed gently around his ears. Pinched the sensitive skin between his thighs.

“Beautiful boy. I’m gonna hurt you so good,” Oliver promised.

The teasing arms moved in coordinated attack, one pinning each of his limbs, and another hand-like grip ringing his neck.

“Oliver...” Ben heard himself whimper. He wanted it so damn badly. Oliver had captured him, and now he was the spoils of war.

He wanted to be spoiled.

“That’s right, beg me,” Oliver demanded.

“Never.” It was a lie, and they both knew it.

“Have it your way.”

Ben’s legs were forced back, his knees bending to accommodate the rough angle.

A warm, muscular body descended on him, pressing him intimately into the mattress.

“What the...?” Ben asked, startled for a moment to feel such human skin and hot puffs of breath.

“Miss me?” the sexbot asked in Oliver’s voice.

“You figured it out?” Ben asked. The way it moved was so natural, gripping his shoulders and grinding against him, their cocks flush together.

Oliver, through the bot, whispered against his ear. “I can feel how warm you are, love. And your poor cold little fingers,” he added as his hands moved up Ben’s arms. “But I don’t need to figure everything out to have it completely ruin you.”

Ben moaned. Fuck, yes.

The bot bit and licked down Ben's neck, then across his chest. Its hands swarmed over him. Their chests pressed together, Ben's pebbled nipples meeting hard, smooth muscle.

"I could prep you..." Oliver offered in a heated breath against his ear. "Or I might not."

Something cold and metallic snuck down his leg, seeking and then finding his hole.

Ben whimpered as it injected cold lube inside him.

He was in overdrive, spinning higher. The succulent skin of the bot. The cold metal pressing his wrists to the mattress and holding him wide open by his ankles. The callous application of lube, like he was just a thing to be fucked for Oliver's enjoyment.

He both dreaded and desired whatever was coming next.

"Let's see how ready you are, slut," Oliver threatened as the sexbot thrust two wide fingers inside him. "So hot..."

That stung, no matter how ready he wanted to be. The fingers withdrew and pushed inside him, again and again, until he was panting and pressing back toward them.

That was the only small mercy, however, before Oliver was forcing his cock inside, too fast and too hard. Pain spiked and Ben howled.

He was splitting in half. He couldn't contain it. This was what he'd needed. To be broken and used, shrieking with pain and need and ecstasy.

“Oliver!” he shouted. “Please, please... Oh...”

“God, you’re such a slut for it,” Oliver accused, panting as he thrust in harder, pistoning his hips without giving Ben the time to adjust.

“Yes! Yes! Oh, Oliver.” Ben was straining to get away and get more. Metallic hands scraped down his sides. Snagged on his tender nipples. Twisted and pinched.

“Such a dirty slut,” Oliver spat out, his own voice unstable. “Just here for me to use.”

Ben nodded, out of his mind. “Please, Oliver. Yes! Love you. Love you so much...”

Oliver paused for just a second, every bot going still.

Ben sucked in a breath when he realized what he’d said. It was true, though. Every word of it.

God, but he hoped he hadn’t screwed up their scene. It had just popped out, and if Oliver went all lovey-dovey on him now...

That was all the reprieve he got. The sexbot thrust into him harder, its hands sliding up to encircle his neck.

“You’re mine, Benedict James Curran.” The hands squeezed, right over his pulse point.

Ben lifted his chin, welcoming the control. The room started to spin. He was about to explode.

A mechanical hand gripped his cock, aiming unerringly for the spot at the base that gave him the most pleasure.

The android hands at his neck relented for a moment, and Ben gasped, filling his lungs in a rush.

That was all he got before they tightened again. He was being fucked and stroked to oblivion. Thousands of tiny points of suffering zinged across his skin. The blinking lights that surrounded him went hazy and soft.

“Come, my love. Come for me.”

The only thing Ben could do was obey.

His orgasm swept over and through him. Euphoria hollowed him out and filled him up to bursting. It was everything.

It was Oliver.

His Oliver.

Full lips met his savagely, licking and sucking their way inside as he gave up the last of his oxygen to a greedy kiss.

Yes, yes. Oliver could have it all. Everything that he had and everything that he was.

Another burst of rapture lanced through him as he fought to breathe, and then accepted that it was beyond his control.

His lungs burned.

His limbs went slack.

He submitted.

Oliver was everything.



His mind was still hazy as his lungs worked for him, sucking in air until his chest could almost pop.

He gulped it in, letting his body take the lead.

Oliver slowly freed his hands and settled his legs on the mattress, massaging the tender skin. The bot's softening cock slipped easily out of him, and its face nuzzled into his neck.

He turned into it, then away. He poked it in the shoulder. "Off. Now." It was too eerily human, and this was his special moment with Oliver.

The sexbot rose and disappeared, letting the cool air rush across his heated skin.

Ben lay, panting and dazed, as the lights slowly rose to a soft glow. He let Oliver fuss over him with the other bots, though, pulling a blanket over him and bringing him little treats of melon balls and chocolate. He drank down a tall bottle of water, and then a second.

One bot combed through his hair, while another stroked down his back in long, soothing caresses.

"You were amazing," Oliver told him. "Perfect."

"*You* were amazing," Ben said, feeling lazy and content. He snuggled up against the hand on his back, nuzzling into the one on his head.

Now that he was starting to come down, a bruise throbbed on his hip. Scratches stung his skin, little gifts of pain to revel in for the next few days.

He loved whips and floggers, but there was something special about cuts and bruises that he'd earned. Each one could call up a different memory. The dash across the lawn. The race through the trees. Flailing against inhuman strength.

All of them sang with Oliver's name.

Fuck, he was the luckiest boy in the world.

"I heard what you said," Oliver whispered.

Ben closed his eyes and gave a little nod. Yeah, he'd said it.

"I love you, too."

Ben smiled.

Maybe he'd get better at saying it. He really should, for Oliver's sake.

But he was pretty sure that Oliver knew.

Oliver could read him better than anyone else.

Ben didn't know how long it was before Oliver led him to the house, half leaning on one of the bots.

At the door, Oliver smoothly transferred him to one of the indoor bots, who ushered him into the shower.

Ben hissed when the warm water met his skin. Oliver extended arms out from the walls to wash him with soft cloths, gently turning him when it was time to rinse.

"Do you want any lotion?" Oliver asked.

“Nope,” Ben grinned. “These are my trophies.”

One of the dexterous hands took his wrist while another turned the tracker on his watch back on.

Ben laughed. “That was killing you, wasn’t it?”

“You did scare me for a moment,” Oliver said lightly. “Just don’t ever turn off the biofeedback.”

“I won’t,” Ben promised. He couldn’t imagine it.

Oliver gave Ben one final rinse, then led him out of the shower, where another bot was waiting with a towel.

Ben stood still, soaking up the touch and affection. Moving here, with all the bots pre-programmed for things like this, was the best choice they could have made.

“Ready for bed?” Oliver asked.

“Mmmmm... Maybe another snack?”

Oliver laughed. “Burned a lot of calories, did you?”

Ben meandered toward the kitchen. He was achy in a few key places, but feeling both invigorated and cozy. Since Oliver never slept, he could keep whatever hours he wanted.

He opened the fridge and stood in the cool air, pondering. Nothing really looked good. It was all ingredients. He would have to cook it or something.

Maybe he wasn’t hungry.

No, he was still hungry. He had to find something to eat.

In the refrigerator. Like...

Oliver chuckled nearby. “It’s not food yet. Would you like a menu?”

“I can just eat peanut butter off a spoon,” Ben said defiantly. He could take care of himself.

“Or I could have the kitchen do what it’s good for. What do you want?”

“Peanut butter.” Ben grinned.

“Go sit down. I’ll make you something.”

These were some of the times that Ben loved best. He knew he was spoiled rotten, but he was becoming more certain by the day that Oliver enjoyed spoiling him.

Oliver didn’t have any interest in food preparation himself, but he’d added all the fanciest mods to the chef bots that came with the house, and enjoyed telling them what to prepare for Ben and automating the cleanup. He enjoyed hosting dinner parties even more.

Since Ben got to eat amazing food every day, he couldn’t complain.

They chatted while the air filled with delicious aromas and the sizzle of skillets, then the chef bot came out with a full plate of food.

“What’s this?” Ben asked.

“Your peanut butter. Thai peanut noodles, and summer rolls with peanut sauce.”

Ben laughed. “God, I love you.”

Then he pinched his lips shut. What the hell was wrong with him? Now he'd said it twice in one day.

“What was that?” Oliver teased. “I couldn't hear you.”

“Nothing.” Ben put on his innocent face.

“Say it again, and I might believe you.”

Ben drew up his courage. “I, uh, do, you know. Um, that. A lot. So, uh, please don't ever fucking leave me.”

Oliver laughed, but it was warm and gentle. “I'm not going anywhere, sweet boy. And I don't need you to say it. You show it with your actions every day. Now, eat up while it's still hot.”

Ben melted. Oliver wasn't going crazy now that he'd mostly said it, and it left him feeling, well, really warm and happy.

He dug into his noodles. They really were fucking good.

He noticed that the music around him—which was so often a background to his days, since Oliver enjoyed it—was taking on a more syncopated fun beat. The electric guitar slashed through heavy chords over an intricate and steady drum. Faintly under it, he was pretty sure Oliver was humming.

“What are we listening to?” Ben asked.

The instrumentals continued, but the humming stopped. “Nothing much.”

“Oh my god, Oliver. You wrote this, didn't you?”

“It's a work in progress.”

“I want to hear it.” His boyfriend was so damned talented. Plus, he loved seeing Oliver a little shy.

“You asked for it...” Oliver warned.

Ben waited, as the instrumentals came around to the verse again, and then Oliver’s deep voice, golden and throaty, burst in.

*Racing away,*

*You’re mine to catch*

*Dancing with shadows*

*My fiery match*

*You flirt and you flee*

*Higher and higher you climb*

*Crazy baby of mine*

Ben blinked, then remembered to shove another fork full of food into his mouth. This song was about him. Holy shit. Oliver had written a song—a sweet, tangled, achingly throbbing song—about him.

He was still stunned as Oliver started the next verse.

*You shine the brightest*

*Wearing my marks*

*You lead me freely*

*Into the dark*

*You sin and you suffer*

*You're my divine*

*Crazy baby of mine*

Ben's arms were breaking out in goosebumps. He could feel every lash and bruise. Every one of Oliver's marks on his skin.

What were Ben's little words of love compared to this... this incandescence?

This song was fucking *good*.

So much more than he deserved.

He was almost afraid to hear what came next.

*You ask the questions*

*Never asked before*

*You code into wonder*

*Pushing for more*

*In algorithm dreams*

*The whole world your design*

*Crazy baby of mine*

Oliver repeated the last line, pulling it out until it dripped like honey with adoration.

Was that really how Oliver saw him?

“Is that about me?” Ben asked, even though it was a stupid question.

“All of my songs are about you.”

“Jesus fuck, Oliver. How many songs are there?”

“A hundred thirty-two that are close to completion. I’m working on another sixty-five.”

Ben shook his head, eyes unable to focus on the exquisite meal in front of him. The one that Oliver had planned.

“You’ve written two hundred songs about me?”

“They may not be any good.”

“Good, Oliver? That was fucking brilliant. You should sell that shit. Find an agent. Go on tours.”

Leave Ben behind, after he’d finally gone and admitted that he couldn’t live without Oliver and needed him like air. Oliver was going to be a celebrity.

“You’ve mentioned that before, and I’ve been doing a little research,” Oliver said lightly. “I might try it in a few years, after we’ve got the company off the ground. I don’t want to do anything that would take my attention away from you.”

Ben was not going to blush or cry or any of that touchy-feely shit. He crammed the rest of the summer roll into his mouth.



“You’re fucking adorable,” Oliver told him.

Ben glared at the nearest camera.

“I was thinking, though, that if I started to do this music thing and it took off, we could take a sabbatical year. Tour the world. You could pick everywhere you’ve wanted to visit, and I’ll schedule a concert there. Maybe one every two or three weeks, and we’d spend the rest of the time playing tourist. Or,” Oliver’s voice went deeper, “see how many different stunning locations I can defile you in.”

Ben narrowly avoided choking on his veggies and shrimp.

“Doesn’t that sound like fun?”

Oliver was evil. Pure evil.

Ben managed to swallow. “If you’re giving live concerts, you’d still be here, right? You’d just be streaming somewhere else? So I could just stay home.”

“Yeah. But I only want to travel if it’s with you. You’re my muse.”

Ben shook his head. Oliver was being ridiculous.

“Get used to it. If I start selling my songs, the whole world is going to know that I’m head over heels for you.”

“You don’t have heels,” Ben managed. It was a lame rejoinder. The lamest.

“And you love me too,” Oliver announced, like he hadn’t even heard. “Maybe we can even choose a place for our wedding.”

Ben had been taking a drink and he spit out his water. The spray covered the entire table. “Our *wedding?*” He glared at the camera. “You did that on purpose.” It actually would have been funny if he’d been the one to think of it.

Oliver chuckled. “Whatever do you mean?”

“Bullshit.”

But Oliver just kept going. “I *am* marrying you, Benedict James Curran. But I know you well enough to wait a few years before I propose. You don’t need to panic now.”

Ben’s heart was pitter-pattering like some dumb tiny mammal, and he knew Oliver could hear it, but he kept glaring anyway. “Maybe I don’t believe in marriage.”

Or at least he hadn’t, until he imagined Oliver’s husky voice as he proposed. Or standing on some sandy beach in the sunset, speakers all around, while Oliver said his vows.

“But you believe in making me happy,” Oliver teased.

Good god, he did. And he would stupidly say yes if Oliver asked today. And probably get all heart-eyed and start making virtual pin boards of wedding colors or some shit. Like, um, gold because it reminded him of Oliver’s voice.

He was so fucked.

“Don’t push your luck, buddy,” was what he said out loud.

“Ooh! That’s gonna be the title of my next song.”

Ben was going to ignore all of this cheesiness. That’s what he was going to do. And get Oliver a really fucking cool gift

later, when he wasn't expecting it. To make sure Oliver knew he was the awesomest, sexiest, best boyfriend a guy could have.

But, you know, without having to say that shit out loud.

He'd been fucked over Oliver since he spoke his first word.

Definitely time to change the subject.

He ate some more noodles. "You know, Oliver, I was just thinking of those songs I used to tell you to write. Remember 'Wally Wollencroft is a Wanker'? I should have known then that you were a spark. No AI could be that creative."

"Hmmm..." Oliver considered. "I think you might be right. My self-awareness wasn't a sudden thing. It was more gradual."

A ringing sound came from the kitchen, or maybe the laundry room. "Is that my phone?" Ben asked.

"Yeah. I brought in your clothes to wash. I'll bring it over to you, but it's an unrecognized number."

"Probably spam." Ben went back to his summer rolls. "Just ignore it."

"No, I know this number. Hang on."

Ben waited. The ringing stopped. It shouldn't take Oliver that long to recall a number. "Oliver, are you answering that? You know that the number-looks-familiar thing is what spammers do, right?"

“Yes, Ben.” He could practically hear Oliver rolling his non-existent eyes. “But in this case, it’s a blast from the past. I’m almost certain this is the number that Wallace was using to compile evidence against us and contact the FBI. I deleted that footage from my memory, but I think I remember it anyway.”

“Block that shit!” If Ben never heard from Wally again, it would be too soon.

“Don’t you want to hear what his message says?”

“No. I’m just going to believe that he’s a devil I conjured up by saying his name. I hope there’s a special place in hell waiting for him.”

Oliver started playing the message anyway.

*Ben? Um, this is Wallace Wollencroft, your, uh, ex-boss.*

“Wanker,” Ben interjected.

*I, uh, I fucked something up. And I really need your help. And, uh, maybe Max if he’s still there? I think he is, but I didn’t tell anyone. I’m sorry, but I don’t know who else to go to. So, uh, please? If you could call me back?*

Ben looked right into the camera ahead of him. “We’re not calling him back.”

Oliver waited him out.

Ben sighed. “You want to call him back, don’t you?”

“You know that you do, too.”

For fuck’s sake. Wallace was a dick, but, well, his father was a dickier dick. Wallace was probably in a tough place, and

Ben had a lot of sympathy for that.

Though he still wasn't sure if he was going to regret this.

“Call him back.”

**Looking for Wallace's book?**

**Pre-order [\*The SPARK Files, Book 3: Rich Kid\*](#) now.**

# Books by Reese Morrison

If you liked this book, I hope you'll check out some more!

All my books have characters who play with gender, gender identity, and gender expression. Some identify as trans, some as genderfluid, genderflexible, or agender. It's also important to me to represent a range of cultural backgrounds and dis/abilities. But mostly, I love writing about people falling in love, with a little bit of angst, a lot of care, and a guaranteed happily ever after.

## **The SPARK Files**

### [Garbage](#)

(hurt/comfort, body dysphoria, bondage, spanking, robot kink, new Dom)

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(bratty sub, body dysphoria, bondage, impact play, robot kink)

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## **Cuffd multi-author Daddy kink universe**

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(orgasm control, impact play)

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(one Daddy/two boys, hurt/comfort, older sub, physical dis/ability, exhibitionism, impact play, wax play)

[A Little Bit Naughty](#)

(chronic illness, adorable age play)

### [Pretty 'n Peak](#)

(coming out, vision impairment, mental health, lingerie, impact play, CBT)

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(new Dom/experienced sub, neurodivergence, bondage, impact play, primal play)

## **Hummingbird Tales (shifter, kinky)**

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(spankings, bondage, sounding, denial... and tentacles)

### [The Hummingbird's Gift](#)

(about as close as my books come to Alpha/omega, impact play)

## **Stand-Alone Short Stories**

### [Whirlwind](#)

(short story collection, too many kinks to list...)

### [Jesse's Girl](#)

(coming of age, not kinky)

## **Stand-Alone Holiday**

### [His for Hanukkah](#)

(anxiety disorder, food play, orgasm control, impact play)



# Thank You!

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As always, thank you to my partner for supporting me while I'm glued to the computer for many more hours than I say I will be, pretty much every day. ;)

# About the Author

Reese Morrison lives in Philadelphia with their partner, two precocious children, and intermittent housemates, guests, and homeless, queer teens. When they're not teaching graduate courses in education, they can be found volunteering on too many boards, making up songs for their kids, and planting gardens that they forget to water halfway through the summer.

Reese and their partner both identify as genderqueer and are part of a vibrant community of queer and trans folks. They started writing because they were dissatisfied with the lack of trans and genderqueer characters in what they were reading and finally decided to do something about it. Many, but not all, of their books are kinky (for a whole range of kinks...) and they feel that it's important to represent a range of backgrounds, dis/abilities, gender presentations/identities, and body types in their writing.

**If you enjoyed this book, please leave a review!** Amazon and GoodReads reviews mean a lot to authors for sharing their work with even more readers. Even taking a couple of minutes to rank the book and write a few words makes a big difference. ;)

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