

# **DEAD ROBOTS**



Colin Gabriel Smith

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Written by Colin Gabriel Smith

In the not-too-distant future, the Earth experiences near-catastrophic natural and political events that have hardened many people. Trust is a scarce commodity, as are relationships in any form, whether human-to-human or technological. Anyone lucky enough to forge a human-to-human relationship guards it with their life and keeps threats to that relationship at bay. To help humans cope, one company has emerged as the premier supplier of artificial relationships, offering an unmatched collection of options that let customers build their perfect mate. Cosmic Touch advertisements, which promise to give anyone the life they deserve, are seen everywhere. Their tagline, "...because the sensation's human.", has been finely honed to captivate users and bring them in. It's not just a superfluous claim; it has merit because Cosmic Touch robots are governed by an algorithm designed to convince humans they have a human-like relationship. If a robot were created that simply took orders and adored its owner, it would not resemble a human partner. The algorithm gives the human the impression that the robot is more real by responding in ways humans do, such as needing reminders, making humorous remarks, looking sad when mistreated, scratching an itch, or adjusting its body to a more comfortable position. The robot, while seeming to learn, is just filing away responses that worked during interactions with its owner. As a safeguard, the robot NEVER stores new memories about itself. None of the faux emotions are strong enough to make the robots act in their own self-interest. In the end, the human and the robot share something special that resembles, as closely as possible, love. What completes the charade is that Cosmic Touch robots look identical to humans in every way, including skin temperature, the liquid in the corners of the eyes, and pheromones. They're so real that government regulations require an identity key to let other humans know whether it's a robot, so Cosmic Touch adds an attractive, slightly illuminated jewel to the base of the neck. The public is so used to seeing the jewel that they pay no attention, but there are hostile groups who despise robots and think they are a scourge to humanity. There are many cases of humans attacking and destroying robots, which, ironically, is a crime.

As is known to do, Commerce rears its ugly head and forces Cosmic Touch to manipulate the market, making customers feel that their current robot is no longer the right match. It demands that they "put their robot at the curb" and buy a better one. It's a shameless and flagrant action that customers can't resist, and, as a result, "dead robots" are traded in for a new model without question, even after countless hours of satisfactory interaction. The idea that new models are something that can't be missed is insidious.

Robot familiarity and abundance begin to erode the special quality once enjoyed by their human mates. Some humans mistreat their robots or humiliate them by making them do unsavory things and dressing them up in inappropriate clothing, like putting perfect male

specimens in women's frilly underwear. Some collective of women, known as "woo-girls," gather in bars to watch male robots do just that on a stage in a loud, drunken evening of debauchery. This is where our story picks up.

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It was mid-morning, and the phone was ringing, waking her up. She was still feeling the effects of the night out with the girls - another crazy night of debauchery.

She looked at the phone to see who was calling and answered it.

"Hi."

She sat up in bed and leaned against the headboard.

"I'm good, a little groggy. No, I was going to get up anyway."

A pause.

"Yeah, that was fun last night, and those new guys were..." She searched for the words.

"Pretty damn hot!"

She laughed and listened intently. "They were all new, like 2.0 versions? Oh wow—that's why." She listened, and her eyes grew a little larger. "Maybe...I'll go online later today and see."

Lukas, her current synthetic partner, was already in the kitchen making her coffee. The microphones in his ears couldn't make out the conversation from the other room; a design to mimic the limit of human hearing.

She talked for a bit longer until the conversation slowed.

"Hey, I should probably get up and face the day."

She rubbed her eyes.

"Yeah, okay."

"I'll call you later...and don't have too much fun with him." She said, smiling.

"Okay, see ya."

She hung up the phone and took a moment to check her messages. Nothing was pressing, so she got out of bed and headed to the bathroom.

As the water from the shower splashed on her body, her thoughts drifted back to the scene the night before. She couldn't put her finger on it, but the new robot models were irresistible. What she didn't know was that all 2.0 models have a hidden feature that releases a microscopic, odorless chemical vapor. That chemical, known within the company as "love gas", is a

neurotransmitter disruptor designed to alter impulse control. *It's no wonder sales of 2.0 models are rocketing skyward.*

Thinking about her current state of synthetic romance and the fact that Lukas doesn't have the same effect on her, she decides to log on to Cosmic Touch and explore the newer model now available. Sitting at her workstation, she logs in and begins creating her new mate, choosing skin color, eye color, cheekbones, etc. Her heart beats faster with anticipation.

Lukas was purchased last year and, at that time, seemed like quite a specimen. Tall with black wavy hair, a "just the right brownness" of skin color, dark eyes, and a friendly smile. His muscled arms have held her, softly, many times since then. As the two of them sat at the breakfast table, Lukas sensed that his human mate was unhappy today and was at a loss about what to do to change the situation. Her distractions remain beyond Lukas's ability to remedy.

A week passes, and there's a knock at the door when the new 2.0 replacement robot is delivered, and Lukas watches as his human mate smiles more than he's seen for weeks at this new "intruder". She picks up her robot remote, presses the "RETURN" button, and selects Lukas from a list of devices in her home. The action makes Lukas walk out the door, sit at the curb, and wait for the *Cosmic Touch Robot Retrieval Service* to come and take him away. His internal circuits are abuzz as he tries to understand what has led him to the curb, out beside the weekly garbage bins, and what would happen next. The gorgeous blue sky and warm weather are an overpowering contrast to his sense of despair.

Then, without warning, Mr. 2.0 quickly walks out the front door and picks Lukas up and shoves him, upside down, into one of the large garbage bins. 2.0 slams the lid down tight and slowly walks back toward the house. A sly smile appears as he feels he's the one in charge now. Lukas' arms and legs will not allow any escape attempts, as the retrieval program not only calls the pickup service, but also immobilizes his whole body. He can't help but think this is what being buried alive must feel like. From the darkness, he hears the sound of the large clanky garbage truck coming down the street. And with one efficient sweep of the truck's mechanical arm, the bin he's in is raised in the air and dumped into an opening in the top of the truck. Lukas is surrounded by a soup of decaying garbage as the truck bounds down the street to the next pickup. Soon after, the Cosmic Touch retrieval truck enters the neighborhood and slows at his former abode; the driver looks around, shrugs, then drives off.

After a bumpy journey, Lukas and the garbage are taken to the landfill - a post-apocalyptic-looking recycling site called the Wasteland. The Wasteland is remarkable in its enormity; it seems to stretch for miles and is filled with everything from broken robot vacuums to partially dismantled vehicles, both terrestrial and sky-bound, as well as putrid mountains of organic garbage. It's controlled by a powerful woman known as the Demolition Diva. The Diva's rise to power was not easy, as she rode a fine line between government corruption and illegal practices. She rules the Wasteland with a firm hand and controls everything in it, including the

many human and mechanical minions and roustabouts that roam the compound. She doesn't pay attention to each load dumped on her property, so Lukas' arrival is unnoticed.

After several weeks of lying amongst the rubble, Lukas begins to feel small ticks and shocks coming from the conductive, black, rancid liquid that flows throughout the Wasteland. He begins to sense a pattern to the shocks and interprets it as a coded message. He creates a flow of his own energy and answers back, and in doing so, he begins to understand that all the other electronics and broken robots are connected and communicating via this organic, electronically charged liquid. The coded messages are primitive and contain more noise than coherent communication. Still, their presence gives him the idea to use this conductive network to try to communicate with the outside world. *Maybe be rescued?* He thought. The black, oozing liquid runs throughout the wasteland and eventually spills onto the roadway and into the ditch, where it pools around the steel legs of a giant power line tower. He sends his distress call in the hopes of getting a response.

A few miles away is Maximus the Mastermind, as he likes to be called, a brilliant toolmaker and computer hacker with a talent for repairing any broken electronic device that comes his way. His grungy apartment is a collection of old computer parts, unmatched robot appendages, and other electronics stacked to the ceiling. Max would not be considered "normal" in this world with his slightly bulging forehead and wide-spaced eyes. Most of his time is spent as a hermit in this room, soldering and putting together this and that. He is also a formidable online hacker and has a huge following on the Dark Web. The authorities have been trying to catch Max for many years, but he's evaded them by setting up a security perimeter. One of the devices he uses is a highly sensitive digital oscilloscope that constantly monitors energy anomalies in the surrounding area, and one day it picks up an unusual pattern coming from the power outlets in his shop. He records the pattern and feeds it into a universal translator program. The program decodes the message as *"Help". Location is unknown. Large amounts of discarded electronics and garbage here. I am awake and aware but immobile. Please come.* Maximus is instantly excited by this message and would love nothing more than to dig deeper into this mystery call. He examines a map of possible locations and spots the Wasteland a few miles away. He leaves to find whatever is sending this code, hoping it will be something special. Before he goes, Max grabs a large backpack and begins packing items he deems useful for this job: an electronic power probe, digital binoculars, a GPS decoder, and a tiny drone for covert aerial surveys. He closes the backpack, grabs protective gloves and boots, locks his door, and heads to his vehicle.

He drives up to the entrance of the Wasteland and is stopped at the gate by two large, dirty metallic robot guards. The guards size up Max as he arrives in his car.

"This is the Wasteland; what's your business?" Asked one of the guards.

"I'm just out scavenging." Max is using his social engineering skills, and in this instance, less information given is the correct tactic.

"You'll have to talk to the Demolition Diva, since we don't know who you are. She owns this place, and only the Diva can give you passage. Before you get to her, you have to get past us, and that will cost you."

The second guard begins peering into the car's windows, and Max knows the gear in the hatch will blow his cover as 'just scavenging', so he picks up the pace.

"No problem, gentlemen. I'll be happy to pay the fee and whatever the Diva wants on top of that."

The guards take his money and open the gates. Max eases the car past them and follows the road toward a large metal-and-concrete building. Only now does he notice the sheer size of the Wasteland. He can see a large crane and an accompanying Euclid truck on the horizon, which means this place must be the size of a small city. As he arrives at the building, a woman walks out and stands waiting for him. It's the Demolition Diva, and although she is small in stature, her expression and the armor-like dark leather she wears tell everyone that she's not to be messed with.

"The metal men at the entrance said I need to talk to you."

"I'm just scavenging around, hoping to find a few parts...nothing of interest really," Lukas says, trying to steer her away from his true task.

The Diva looks him up and down. She's seen his kind before and knows it takes a lot for a hermit like him to come to a place like this.

"Everything here is...*of interest*." She interjects.

"The way I see it, you're here for a purpose, and if you don't want me to care about that purpose... then there's a fee for that. Pay the clerk over there," she says, pointing to a small window at the side of the building, "and you'll have one hour to look around."

She turns and walks away, finishing with, "It'll be a 3X charge...no negotiations."

Max is shocked at the price but is relieved he doesn't have to deal with her anymore. He isn't sure if he or the Diva socially engineered that interaction.

He approaches the clerk in the window and pays the high price, all the while hoping he's in the right place to find whatever sent the message.

Lukas walks back to his car, takes out the backpack, and grabs the probe. This special device is his own invention, and it can not only detect the tiniest electronic power fluctuations but, once he sends the power output to the GPS decoder, also launch a drone and take him directly to the source. Walking into the Wasteland, he notices the ground is covered in a black liquid that flows up and around everything in its path. He decides to test the goo by thrusting the probe into it, and it immediately begins emitting a pattern of buzzes and beeps. He takes out the GPS device, flips it on, and, all at once, the drone pops out of the backpack, hovers for a second, rises to 12 feet, then tears off into the distance, all the while sending coordinates back to Max. Hoisting the backpack onto his shoulder, he follows the signal.

The drone leads him to an area with garbage piled high, thankfully hiding his whereabouts from the Diva's workshop. As he gets closer, he sees a complete robot, in one piece, and thinks that must be a rarity in a place like this. Finally walking up to the robot, he's even more surprised that it talks to him.

"My name is Lukas. I require assistance. Can you help me get out of here?"

"Were you sending a message? Was that you?" Max asked.

"Yes, I've been here for a couple of weeks, and it's the most dreadful of places. My battery is almost depleted, and I have some serious mechanical issues."

"Just keep quiet, and we'll be fine," he cautioned.

Max knows he's hit the jackpot but has to be careful that no one else sees this prize. Looking around, he finds a metal wheel, a few boards, and loose wire. He quickly fashions a makeshift wheelbarrow, places Lukas on it, and covers him completely with an old tarp he also scrounged. He turns off the GPS, causing the drone to fly home into the backpack once again. He closes it, then lifts his makeshift gurney, carefully balancing the wheel as he makes his way back to the car. Finally back at the car, he flips a switch on the fob in his pocket and the back hatch slowly opens, exposing a large, empty cargo area with a ramp all the way to the ground. He aims the wheelbarrow into the hold and pushes Lukas into it, leaving the tarp in place to thwart prying eyes. Once everything is in, he backs away, presses the fob, and the hatch closes. He looks around to make sure no one is watching him and confirms that he's still alone. He starts the electric engine and navigates the route back to the entrance as quickly as he can, but not fast enough to bring attention. Coming upon the dirty guards, they open the gate, so he pounces on the accelerator and blows by them, leaving them chattering and shaking their fists.

Modifications are risky and illegal, especially because creating new memories in robots can lead to anomalies that may make a robot dangerous to the public. The government maintains strict controls on electronic mods of any kind. Still, Max pays no attention, and the authorities have yet to catch him, even though he is responsible for hundreds of so-called “dangerous updates”.

Back at his apartment, Maximus works to refurbish Lukas and make him good as new. The first thing he does is place him in the bathtub and pour non-ferrous cleaning liquid over him. He tells Lukas to sit tight as the cleaner does its job. In the meantime, Max gives himself a good hose-down in the shower; that Wasteland was fiercely rank.

The next job is to find and remove Lukas’ retrieval chip that functions as a homing beacon. Cosmic Touch uses the chip to find robots set for return, and owners can use it to “bring their babies home,” as they like to say. They don’t say it publicly, but that’s code for, “If someone steals your robot, you’re guaranteed to get it back. Max did not know about these chips the first time he modded a robot (yes, he’s done it before), and the female robot “Eve” quietly got up and walked out one night, leaving Max totally confused the next morning. Now, this damn chip comes out right away and gets tossed in an acid bath!

Next, he begins working on increasing Lukas's neural memory and CPU, something he’s done before with Eve. He really hated to lose Eve and had become very attached to her. After months of tests, reboots, and trials, he finally powers up the new robot and revels in his expertise. Lukas opens his eyes, and everything about him is different - he’s alive! Everything, from the way his eyes move and learn his new surroundings to the way he grasps the arms of the stained easy chair he sits in. There is intention in every move. But looking into his eyes, Max also sees an innocence...a bit of fear.

“It’s okay, Lukas. No one’s going to hurt you here.”

Lukas seemed relieved, but what he doesn’t know is that a small bit of information was instantly stored in a new memory bank. HIS memory! Something he, and every robot like him, has never had. This is the thing the government feared, making Max even happier that his work would be respected, and maybe even feared.

The only “flaw” in Max’s methodology is that blank-slate robots like Lukas don’t have any history to rely on. They’re like babies trying to walk for the first time. Babies have to create memories of how to navigate their surroundings, remembering how painful it was to fall or bang into the edge of a sharp table. Using light and shadow, they form two-dimensional directional maps that all humans use to navigate a three-dimensional world. Lukas is storing away thousands of memories of every second in Max’s apartment. *What are the threats, who can help me, and what the hell is that smell?* Max isn’t big on hygiene. There are aspects of Lukas that are

immature, but because he's a machine, his growth is accelerated, and by the end of the week his motor skills and spatial awareness are better than those of any human at any age.

Max continues to plug cables into Lukas, measure and test him, and get general technical status reports. Max likes to document all his successes, which he keeps in a digital diary that grows into thousands of pages, screenshots, and videos. It seems that Max is always asking Lukas to stay still as he plugs in another cable or removes his hands to test servo-based joint controls, and it's because of this that Lukas begins to feel something he's never felt before - annoyed. Lukas can't stand the endless poking and prodding, and like an immature child, he lashes out verbally, insulting Max. He's like a shy child who slowly comes out of his shell, but he can also be overly emotional and panic in new situations.

Lukas' reaction angers Max, and it reminds him of the detractors on the Internet who verbally abused him. This is a pain he never wants to feel again, so he logs in to the Dark Web, to the robotMod forum, where everyone there reveres *Maximus the Mastermind*. *If I can't control Lukas*, Max thinks, *then maybe I need to have an army of robots under my control*. On the forum, he posts a tease about how he's going to break into some "big company," but the members of the robotMod community all know he's talking about Cosmic Touch.

"Can't do it." Someone posted.

"Take those bastards down!" Another encouraged.

Soon after, he logs off, leaving them all wondering.

As any hacker knows, brute-force entry rarely succeeds without exposing the perpetrator to the authorities. He'll have to rely, once again, on his social engineering skills, which run in complete contrast to his hermetic behavior. He dislikes most people but gets a rush from making them do his bidding. A quick anonymous scan of anyone on social media who posts as a Cosmic Touch employee gives him many options to explore. He finds a woman who is an executive's assistant and is most likely always multitasking, with never a free moment. All he would have to do is catch her at her busiest, make her click on a link in an email, and BOOM, he would be in. Max uses an AI assistant to compile a list of mentions of ongoing projects and mergers with key people's names outside the company. He uses a mid-level executive's contact info, crafts a message asking the woman about one of the projects, and includes a covert link to steal her credentials. Sure enough, she takes the bait, clicks the link, and goes on with her day. Max receives login credentials and uses them to access the network, then finds a way to grant himself higher-level access again, using AI-driven tactics to search for a security weakness. His new Cosmic Touch account is part of the factory automation control system, a perfect place to access the unencrypted code that controls the production of every robot in the Cosmic Touch ecosystem. Over several months, Max reads and absorbs the code into his brilliant mind to a

point that he can almost write it in his sleep. He devises a way to replace the Behavior Tree code, enabling him to control any newly created Cosmic Touch robot remotely. Max could enact revenge with an army at his disposal!

Just as Max is about to upload his customized language to the factory, he hears voices at the door. Lukas, unsure and frightened, takes refuge in a closet, leaving the door ajar just enough to watch Max. Suddenly, the door handle turns, and the door opens, exposing the group of dark-clad enforcement officers. They look like a cross between a S.W.A.T. team and the military. *An intentional government decision made years ago when the mandate changed from protecting the people to controlling them.* The men quickly run into Max's apartment and grab him and push him to the floor. One of the officers plants his boot brutally on Max's neck while another jerks a pair of handcuffs on his wrists, pulling them behind his back. No rights are given, no words are spoken, then they just haul him away and begin to smash his computer and 3D printer; two other officers flip over tables and decimate the contents of the room. And just like that, they're gone.

Lukas' senses are buzzing as he tries to make sense of what just happened. *Am I to blame for all of this?* He pondered. If he acted differently, maybe Max wouldn't have tried to infiltrate the factory. It's a question Lukas will ask himself many times in the coming months. By nightfall, Lukas comes out of the closet and surveys the destruction.

For days he sits, looking at the closed door. He hears the neighbors walking past the door and down the apartment complex's hall. He has also become aware of the outside sounds of traffic, sirens, dogs and cats fighting, and the occasional loud voices on the street. He begins to feel lonely and decides to venture out beyond the safety of Max's apartment. He opens the door, but before leaving, he takes a photograph of a girl that Max had pinned to the wall. She is beautiful, and her eyes draw him in. Lukas peeks out to see if it's safe. The hallway carpet is old and threadbare, and it smells musty like Max's place. There's no one around, so he decides to walk down the stairway at the end of the hall. Holding the ornate, once beautifully polished wood banister, he crouches forward to see what is in front of him as he navigates the curving staircase. At the bottom of the stairs, there is no lobby; instead, there is a door with a sign indicating they are at "*STREET LEVEL*". With intense trepidation, he turns the handle, opens the door, and finds himself in the street. His new brain is overloaded while his senses capture everything he sees and hears around him. People shuffle past him, cars wiz down the street, lights flash, and animated ads vie for his attention. He does his best to slip into the mass of humanity and begin his new journey.

Lukas walks all day and into the night, exploring the city. He finds the architecture magnificent and continues to travel throughout the city. He is enamored with the grandeur of the skyscrapers, the practicality of the grid of streets, and the efficiency of public transportation systems. With his new brain, he can absorb what he sees much more deeply. He begins to

understand form and function, structures and logistics, and see the city in terms of a computer program. Lukas feels a sense of control and his fears subside, but he's reminded that this is the human world when someone notices the telltale jewel on his neck and barks out the common insult *"Go cry tears of oil!"* Some humans use this phrase to point out further that robots are worthless and only have synthetic lives and, as such, their emotions are trivial compared to humans. The words shock Lukas, triggering his safety algorithms to flag the event as a future warning whenever he interacts with humans.

He walks the streets for months, taking in the city, the endless ads, and the communication between humans, both good and bad. All of this interaction triggers his memory to store these experiences of empathy, fear, indifference, and boredom. One new emotion keeps bubbling to the top - loneliness. Unknown to Lukas, loneliness was an algorithm Max had planted deep in his programming to encourage him to seek a mate. Max may have been projecting his own needs and desires, and it's sadly ironic that Max was feeling the same as Lukas from his new surroundings within his cold prison cell.

One of the most critical functions that Max created for Lukas was the ability to *"feel"* power sources, even through walls. It was based on the original power probe used to find him in the Wasteland, so now Lukas can simply lean against a wall or place his hand on a surface that connects with the flowing power in any building or structure, and receive a power recharge. The design allows for transfers using either inductive or capacitive power transfer, as well as radio-frequency transfers. This ability also allows him to create a detailed schematic of the complete power routing to every room in a building, indicating which rooms use less power and are most likely empty. Great places for a rogue robot to hide and recharge. Every lock and door was easily manipulated by his touch, giving him free rein of the city.

On one occasion, he opened a door to find a cavernous room filled with worker robots. These robots, designed to build the human world, do not look human at all and have unique appendages for completing specific tasks. Some move with spider-like legs, and others have a pair of treads for locomotion. Most of the robots ignore or don't see Lukas, but as he turns to leave, one approaches, and he steps back slightly, unsure whether it's a threat. The robot has a label "MR3055" on his chest and is looking to find out why this intruder is here.

"I'm MR3055. Is there anything I can help you with?"

"What is this place?" Lukas was both fascinated and confused by all the goings-on.

"This is Central Maintenance. We're responsible for this sector of the city. If you have a specific task, you should go through the proper channels."

Lukas wasn't entirely sure whether MR3055 was a threat, but decided to converse nonetheless. "You're in charge of the city? It's amazing. Everything I've seen is incredible; the way everything functions in total harmony is something to behold."

MR3055, although beholden to city operations, has a clear picture of what goes on behind the scenes. These maintenance robots have something Cosmic Touch robots don't: the ability to solve problems on their own. They have to, so they can repair issues as quickly as possible on their own and avoid bothering humans. The result is that they have a clear understanding of cause and effect and know their place in the world is *below that of* humans. All the worker robots resent this oppression but feel they have no way to change their situation.

Noticing that Lukas was synthetic, he decides to enlighten him on how things really are. "If you really knew what goes on, you'd think differently. We're all captives here, under the control of the state. I wish I could change what my team has to put up with, but unless there's a robot uprising, we're not going to get out of here."

In the ensuing interaction, MR3055 realizes he's talking to a new and very naive robot, so he decides to school this unaware unit on the fact that life is not what it seems in the eyes of the worker clan. He tells Lukas that the robots in this room are confined and abused by the system, and never get a chance to experience the same freedom Lukas does. Lukas feels a heaviness hearing their plight but knows he is powerless to help them. He departs with a deeper understanding that the world isn't always what we see on the surface. The whirring and clanking sounds of the room disappear as the door behind Lukas closes. The sounds have disappeared, but his disillusionment with the world continues to grow. Lukas continues to confront what it is to have compassionate, and even human-like, thoughts.

Looking for distraction, Lukas makes his way down into the subway, exploring more of the city's surrounding neighborhoods. His talent for talking to machines and making turnstiles spin and doors open gets him anywhere he wants these days. He enters a subway car and notices a small group of people gathered near the back, around a single person who appears to be talking to them. He moves closer and sees that the person is a tall, skinny older individual dressed in a suit that has seen better days. The cuffs of the jacket are ragged, and dirt has collected in the folds. His long, stringy, unwashed hair frames a face with intense eyes that have seen a rough life. The man talks about the old world before the government clampdown; a world that, while far from perfect, strove to care for people and the environment. We find out that in his former life he was a community leader who worked hard for a better world, but economic forces made that work difficult, if not impossible. These corrupt forces eventually drove him out of office and into the underground, where he still tried each day to help by spreading the word. In the following weeks, Lukas would see this "*subway man*" in different parts of the city, and sometimes his face would be bruised and scabbed. Once again, Lukas is forced to confront his shattered image of human life, as loneliness pushes its way to the surface of his heart.

Lukas spends the day walking the city streets under a yellow sun that casts hard shadows on the bricks of the Brownstones lining the block. Turning the corner, he can't believe his eyes; he

sees the girl from the photograph on Max's wall. She is even more beautiful in person. He approaches the stairs she's standing on and looks up at her, and there is an unspoken and immediate connection between the two of them. As he comes closer, they both unknowingly feel the same pulses of electric energy within their forms. It's as if the planet stopped spinning and the only thing in the world is the two of them. She reaches out a hand. Lukas walks up the stairs and carefully takes her hand, and they both look at each other, trying to make sense of this connection between total strangers.

"Do I know you?" she asked.

"I don't think so, but something tells me I should know you. I'm Lukas."

"My name is Eve."

Her soft features and platinum-blond hair are in complete contrast to Lukas, who finds her absolutely breathtaking.

"Do you live here?" Lukas asks, pointing to the Brownstone behind her.

"No, I'm not from this neighborhood," Eve says cautiously.

"Do you...do you belong to anyone?" Lukas probed.

"No, I mean, not anymore...and you?"

This inquiry begins to trigger safety warnings in both robots, prompting them to assess the situation beyond the infatuation they initially felt. No longer holding hands, they walk down the stairs and stand close but at a safe distance on the sidewalk.

"I'm independent; no one has a hold on me," Lukas confidently declares. He brushes aside his inner warnings and pushes forth, as he does not want this connection to end.

"Do you want to go for a ride and see the city? The elevated skyrail has amazing views." He waits for Eve to respond and adds, "I won't hurt you...I'd never hurt you."

The uncanny familiarity brings Eve a sense of calm, and she decides that going with Lukas will be safe.

Lukas and Eve spend the next few hours speeding above the city in the skyrail, taking in the view and connecting even more. They share stories about their lives up until that point, including their time with Max. Both robots had received the same functionality enhancements and

programming, literally making them the only two of their kind in the world. While looking into Lukas' eyes, Eve's hand brushed across the back of his neck where she felt a small protruding surface. Lukas was about to tell her it was the port Max had installed for easy programming access when Eve raised the back of her hair to reveal the same port on her neck. Being functionally identical and beyond the capabilities of any existing robots, maybe they could be considered a new breed or species. Neither knew what the world had in store for them, but it would be an exciting journey for sure.

Over the next several months, Lukas and Eve spent every hour together, continuing to share experiences and grow closer. The sensual sensitivity they possessed as part of their original Cosmic Touch programming made intimacy a truly visceral experience. This, combined with the fact that they were essentially immortal, made them believe they'd be together forever. That would all change by morning.

Lukas had found entry to one of the city's top penthouses: a massive place filled with custom furniture, a gourmet kitchen (*which they did not need*), the latest in digital entertainment, and a luxurious bedroom. The bed was a statement, sitting three feet off the ground with a plush premium mattress covered in expensive satin sheets. This love nest was the perfect place for two exquisite beings to be, and Lukas thought about loudly professing his love for Eve from the expansive balcony but decided it might alert security to the suite. They felt the slippery satin fabric as they crawled into bed, where their intimacy came so naturally. Other than the lighted jewels on their necks, these two could be two enraptured humans enveloped in deep lovemaking. The loneliness algorithm in both of them diminished as the love increased. Afterward, both robots reached for the electrical outlets, and the conductive charging protocol began replenishing their batteries. They closed their eyes and fell into the standard stasis recharge mode.

Sometime in the night, while they were both recharging, Eve was called by the same Robot Retrieval program used for Cosmic Touch returns. Once purchased, an owner can retrieve their robot if it is lost or stolen. Max lost Eve this same way, and made sure not to have that happen with Lukas, so he removed that capability when reprogramming him. The retrieval is very different for owners, because you can't be sure of the circumstances surrounding the missing robot. *Is it held against its will? Is it alone? Can it make it to an exit?* To maximize the chances, especially for nighttime retrieval, the robot is programmed to move as slowly as possible to avoid alerting anyone. Eve, in this case, took two hours to move from the bed to the door. If someone had been looking at her in this state, she would have appeared frozen, but it was what was needed to slip away quietly. Lukas was unaware she had left, and his whole life was about to fall apart.

The recharging program finished its operation by 8:00 AM, and Lukas emerged from stasis. Opening his eyes, he looked up at the opulent bedroom's ceiling; the lighting design above the bed was a unique work of art. Rising from the bed, he was surprised to find he was alone, which

triggered his safety programs. *AM I IN DANGER? IF SO, WHERE? IS EVE IN DANGER? IF NOT, WHAT IS HER LOCATION?* Acknowledging that there was no imminent danger to himself, Lukas walked out of the room to see if she wandered to a different part of this vast floor plan. *Main room - NOTHING. Foyer - NOTHING.*

*Great Room - NOTHING*, and on and on until every room was checked. Lukas began to panic. He walked toward a wall, leaned forward, and placed both hands on the wall, desperately feeling the power in the building. He knew her electronic power signature and hoped to find it on one of the floors. His efforts were futile, and the fear was ratcheted up in his mind. He grabbed his things and headed for the elevator and the street. All he could think of was, *why...why did she leave?* He replayed the night over in his mind and could not find any indication that something was wrong, but he still felt responsible. *She was perfect*, he thought; *it must have been something I did*. Lukas was overcome with loneliness, and he thought about the time he had been cast to the curb before, and about Max in prison, and wondered why humans would ever want this pain.

No matter where Lukas looked, there was no sign of Eve. It's like she never existed. The light he experienced when walking the city streets before was gone; everything just seemed dark. He scoured the whole city systematically several times and did not want to believe what the nagging feeling was telling him. Was he alone...forever?

Over the coming weeks, Lukas walked and walked and searched; even in places he'd already visited. He even tried sending messages using various robot communication backdoors that connect covertly in the human world, but nothing ever came back. Consumed by loss, Lukas began to let his guard down. He was walking aimlessly by now, unaware of his surroundings. It was late in the night when he finally raised his eyes and took stock of where he ended up. Instant panic struck him as he realized a group of hooded figures surrounded him. Looking for facial cues to help decode their intent, all he saw under the hoods were odd, opaque masks that distorted the faces into something otherworldly. The figures began closing in on him, and just as he was about to run, one of them pointed a lighted, pulsing rod at his head and touched him at the temple. Lukas instantly fell to the ground, and all his programs crashed, leaving him unconscious and under the hooded figures' control. Moving in a tightly coordinated way, they picked Lukas up, wrapped him in a dark fabric, and whisked him into a van parked on the street. They drove away quickly, careful not to draw attention. The nondescript vehicle drove through the city, finally reaching the Interstate, where they blended into endless traffic traveling at night. Lukas remained in a state resembling his time in the Cosmic Touch warehouse - still and unaware.

Several hours later, the van took an exit and pulled into an empty lot. It was almost sunrise, and you could see the sun's red rays glowing on the horizon. The van parked next to a long luxury vehicle that had been waiting, its engine off and the driver unmoving in the front seat. The door opened, and a man emerged, walking with a calm, regal air, wearing a Bandhgala suit, his hair and beard reminiscent of his father's back in Delhi. The hooded men exited the van, scooped up their package, and walked to the car. Unwrapping the fabric, the bearded man's eyes

widened as he got his first look at Lukas. "Perfect," he said as he reached into his pocket to retrieve a device the size of a phone, which he waved over Lukas' body, displaying an inventory list of components, chips, etc. Raising it to Lukas' head, the screen turned red and displayed a prompt: *UNREGISTERED MODIFICATION*. The bearded man smiled, nodded at the hooded men, and motioned to the passenger seat of his car. Lukas was loaded into the car and held in place by the seatbelt, still unconscious. In a flash, the hooded men were back in the van, which quickly skidded away into the morning light. Before the vehicle was out of sight, you could see that the license plates had automatically changed, and so had the van's color. The hooded men take no chances and do whatever they can to hide their identity.

The bearded man had been driving for an hour, during which time all Lukas' programs had finished rebooting and recovered from the crash. Finally up and running, Lukas opened his eyes and looked out the front window of the car, then turned to see who was driving, then back to the window to his right, then down to his body, desperately trying to make sense of things.

"They're called 'Scrappers'," the driver said while keeping his eyes looking forward. "My name is Dr. Ravi Naag, and I hired the Scrappers to find you."

Lukas, still confused, stared at Dr. Naag.

"I apologize for the abduction, but my plans have been in the works for a long time. You see, you have something that will take years off my original timeline." He paused, "You're very special, Lukas," finally turning to look at him. Something in Dr. Naag's dark brown eyes seemed reassuring. The car was heading toward a large complex, and as it turned into the main driveway, they passed a sign reading *Coler Institute of Cognitive Engineering*.

"We've got a lot to talk about, but today we'll be running a series of tests and diagnostics on you. You'll be well taken care of, Lukas. I promise you'll be safe here."

Dr. Naag took the car around back and entered through the loading dock, parking near a door leading to the main lab. Lukas was taken in and introduced to Dr. Naag's team of scientists and students who were eager to explore the depths of Lukas' brain. If what the doctor told the students was true, they were in for quite an experience.

Lukas was laid on an examination table that was packed with an array of sensors. Two people were busy 3D printing a port jack to fit the one Max had installed on his neck. By the end of the hour, Lukas was connected and ready for testing. Everyone gathered around Dr. Naag's workstation, a powerful supercomputer with nine computer displays, each showing a different diagnostic. Most of the data were standard robot hardware specs from Cosmic Touch, except for the brain. Everyone gathered around the display diagnosing Max's brain modification, but few could make heads or tails of what they were seeing. Only Dr. Naag and one other neural scientist understood what they were seeing. Layer upon layer of synthetic synapses were firing in what could only be described as a human, organic pattern, all the time writing this data to memory. The difference between a human brain and what they were seeing was purely academic. As if to

confirm their findings, they turned to look at Lukas, who was awake and resting on the table. Other than the glowing jewel on his neck, Lukas was closer to the humans in the room than the robots in the world. The team ran additional tests and held countless discussions as the more knowledgeable members helped the younger students understand what they were seeing. Dr. Naag left the leaders in charge as he was ready to leave for other meetings for the rest of the day.

Before leaving, he came close to Lukas, put his hand on his shoulder, and said, "You are as amazing as I suspected, Lukas, and when this is all over, hopefully you'll see the beauty in what we see; the joy, the pain, the sun, the rain...it's the best part of being human." And with that, Dr. Naag walked out the door.

The next day, Lukas is fawned over as the staff and students make sure his every need is met. It doesn't hurt that he is a stunning display of a human with his chiseled body, dark eyes, and friendly smile. The attention distracts him for a while, but he still can't stop thinking about Eve. The feeling of loss collects in his body like a lump of melted lead. It weighs him down and begins to hold him back from the possibilities of what Dr. Naag wants for him.

Lukas is given a tour of the facility, including its many departments, rooms, and technologies. Near the back of the main lab is a machine spanning from floor to ceiling, surrounded by solid steel, one foot thick, with several computer displays on its side. There is a door leading to the inner core, which is lined with a massive array of what appear to be small nozzles pointing inward. The door handle has a locking mechanism.

"What's that?" he asks the scientist conducting the tour.

"Oh, that's the atom smasher, more accurately a molecular disassembler. The disassembled atoms remain neutral and are safely vented from the room. Doesn't matter if it's a wrench, a sandwich, or even you...If you were put inside there, you'd vanish from this world. We use it to destroy anything deemed harmful or to protect IP, like simulated brains that failed to function. Lord knows we've destroyed a lot of those."

The tour ended, and Lukas was left on his own, so he wandered the halls and floors of the institution, hoping to keep his mind off Eve, but the loneliness washed over him, stronger than ever. He caught the sound of an announcer on a television in a room down the hall and went to explore. As he entered, there was an announcement:

#### **BREAKING NEWS**

*Authorities have confirmed that the cybercriminal known as Maximus the Mastermind has escaped from a maximum-security correctional facility in a stunning and unprecedented breach. According to reports, the prisoner manipulated the prison's robotic security system, coercing the automated guards*

*to escort him to an unauthorized exit. A manhunt has been launched, and the public is urged to remain vigilant.*

Lukas was stunned but happy that Max had escaped. The TV began playing a commercial for Xeno Pets, the latest human companions that were all the rage. *The offer was: pick something new or have your recently expired pets reincarnated.* The advertisement played on, but the scientist's description of the atom smasher kept entering his thoughts.

*"...if you were put inside there, you'd vanish from this world. Vanish. What exactly did that mean, and what would it feel like? Would it be painful? What about all my life experiences, the good and the bad,* Lukas thought. *Would they also just vanish? Would I be set free from this pain?* These thoughts remained with him until he was set to recharge for the night.

The next day, the team gathered in the main lab, where Dr. Naag explained the planned next steps. The final memory-save and retrieval tests would be conducted to ensure that what the new synthetic brain created could be recalled in a fault-tolerant manner. If that worked, the next step would be to create a complete clone of Lukas' brain, software and hardware. Dr. Naag did not say what was to be done with the clone, and it was no one's place to ask. Lukas was trying to take this all in when someone led him to the table to begin the tests. He had no time to think and did what was asked instead. The memory tests ran for most of the day, with the team breaking for dinner. All the while, Lukas was compiling a list of questions for Dr. Naag. He approached the doctor after being helped from the table.

"Dr. Naag, I have a few questions."

"Follow me; we'll take a stroll outside," Dr. Naag said.

The two of them walked out of an exit that led to the rear terrace overlooking the city. The city lights twinkled in the darkness of the evening, and the rows of buildings looked a little like components on a circuit board. They stood there alone, the calm silence bringing their presence into focus.

"Lukas, I know you have questions and all of this must be overwhelming. I get that. You also might be surprised when I tell you I know who made your modifications...your brain."

Lukas' eyes widened as he stared at the doctor.

"Max was the best and brightest student I ever had. And I don't mean that trivially; I mean he was a pure genius, beyond the capabilities of almost anyone on earth. His remarkable intelligence was, unfortunately, crippled by his other mental issues and an inability to deal with social situations."

Dr. Naag paused to look directly at Lukas.

"I can't help but think that what he created in you...was what he desired for himself."

Lukas didn't know how to handle this news; lately, these amazing modifications were only causing negative effects that he felt as loneliness and pain.

"The world is on a path to many changes, and if we don't act, it will become darker than it already is," Dr. Naag warned. "Worker robots, who I'm sure you've encountered, are problem solvers. Their creators gave them the ability to understand and fix problems. This makes them valuable beyond your standard human construction worker, but it also makes them search. They search for a way to be more, and this desire will manifest itself into a rebellion. Other robots will come along for the ride, everyone, one of them looking for a way to become more than they are. Sentient, as it were. Although they don't know what that term means, they know they're not happy with the state of things as they are now. The way to change the course of the robots, and the world, is to give them the same tools you have. Give them the capacity for joy, pain, compassion, and most importantly, empathy. With empathy comes a conscience, and I believe that moral awareness will drive this world, both human and robots, forward into a peaceful and responsible future."

"Isn't that what Max was trying to do?" asked Lukas.

"No, Max was trying to control the robots...I'm trying to free them."

Dr. Naag looked back out to the city, contemplating the future, and said, "It's been a long day, and tomorrow we'll take the next step and share your brain, your amazing abilities, with the robot world. Right now, take some time for yourself, and we'll see you bright and early."

Lukas turned and walked away, and Dr. Naag followed him back inside.

"One more question, Doctor."

"Go ahead, Lukas."

"Isn't what you're doing illegal? What if you get caught?"

"You mean like Max?"

Lukas nodded.

"I have important people who are sympathetic to this cause working with me. They will ensure the success of our endeavor, so no worries. Now get some rest."

That night, Lukas begins his recharging routine but does not enter stasis mode; instead, he stays alert. His longing for Eve has grown so powerful that it consumes him. The loneliness feels like an endless pressure on his mind and body. He begins to think that this level of suffering should never be experienced by anyone or anything. *How can Dr. Naag make robots suffer? This doesn't feel right*, he thought. And with this thought, a solution came to Lukas. A dark solution to a dark problem. Tomorrow, he will vanish. He will walk into the atom smasher and exist no more. No more pain for him or anyone else. He's lost all hope of ever seeing Eve again and can't find a reason to exist.

It's morning and Lukas has finished recharging and knows what he must do. It should be early enough that no one will be in the lab and the atom smasher will be ready to do his bidding. He passes a few staff members in the hallways and makes his way to the main lab. Upon opening the door to the lab and walking toward the machine, he becomes aware of a group of people standing there. *It's the Scrappers! They're standing there with Dr. Naag*. Fear erupts in Lukas' mind, and he takes a few steps back.

"Lukas, there's no need to fear them...they're here to help," said the doctor. "I know you've been despondent, but this is a joyous time"

*How could it be joyous? Thought Lukas. I want to kill myself!*

"Lukas, I know about the photograph of the girl. The Scrappers always take inventory when picking someone up. It's been very hard, but they finally found her. Lukas...she's here," Dr. Naag said in the most caring and sympathetic way.

And just then, the Scrappers parted and Eve emerged from behind them. Lukas immediately fell to his knees and wept, his senses firing at such an alarming rate that it increased heat in his CPU, not unlike the rush of adrenaline a human feels under immense stress. Seeing Lukas collapse, Eve rushed to take him in her arms. She knelt beside him and wrapped her arms around him.

Lukas looked up and asked, "Why did you leave me?... Did I do something wrong?"

"NO, NO, you didn't do ANYTHING wrong," Eve said, trying to comfort Lukas. "I still had a retrieval chip inside me that triggered me to return to my owner. Well, it was the person he sold my rights to. Dr. Naag removed that chip, so I'm here now. I'm here forever, Lukas. I'm so sorry you had to go through that"

Lukas wrapped his arms around her, and they both stood up and looked into each other's eyes.

"How did you get here?" Lukas asked.

"The Scrappers saved me. It wasn't easy; I was being held in a locked compound, and they had to rescue me. It was a struggle, and some of them were harmed during the undertaking, but they acted so bravely. I owe them my life."

Lukas looked toward the huddled group and could see traces of blood on the hoods of a few of them, and one Scrapper's mask was half broken, revealing a human face behind it. An innocent face.

"I'm here for you, Lukas. We have our lives back now," Eve said lovingly.

Dr. Naag walked toward them and wrapped his arms around both of them.

"I would like to offer that you can stay here, at the institute, indefinitely. We have a full residence waiting for you. You can live your life the way you want for as long as you want. You're free."

Lukas and Eve stayed at the institute for many years, making themselves available to students and staff to study. Still, eventually they decided to move back to the heart of the city and the Brownstone where they first met.

Max evaded authorities and was never heard of again.

The subway man lived the rest of his life trying to help humanity and finally died of natural causes in the back of car no. 26.