

# **Love Beyond the Code**

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ISBN



# Dedication

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# **Acknowledgment**

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## **About the Author**

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# **Preface**

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## Chapter 1: A New Beginning

In the year 2031, somewhere in the barren wastelands of the Shikari Desert, researchers working for a Kendarian research and auto manufacturing company called SYNTHOS Corporation (Synthetic Humanoid Organism Technology and Operations Systems) uncovered an ancient, alien technology that laid there in its slumber under the vast sand dunes. It was evident that a technology such as this could very well be the answer that humans needed to progress. A technology so advanced that researchers on the site couldn't fathom the omniscience of the mysterious device.

Laid before them was a spherical core, a relic buried in sand evidently from a time that had come long before. A long-forgotten technology that, if harnessed, can change humanity's future and revolutionize it. The scientific phenomenon was soon dubbed the Syntherium Core after the company's own name, SYNTHOS.

With the power of the Syntherium Core, SYNTHOS Corporation soon achieved what they thought impossible mere centuries ago. An intelligence that was able to communicate in human language and respond to the most difficult mathematical mysteries within mere moments. Embracing the power of the core, SYNTHOS soon began manufacturing

intelligent humanoid companions that would revolutionize industrial efforts, healthcare, home assistance, and more. SYNTHOS, globally acclaimed for their discovery, received numerous investments from global entities to further their development efforts into these mechanical humanoid machines dubbed the “Companion 2.0.”

The first series of these companions were presented at world conferences and marketed to the public as care assistants that would obey the host’s each and every human command. Those beings were vastly more intelligent than human interpretation— they didn’t need sleep, food, air, or water. It wasn’t restricted to human laws. It was an autonomous higher intelligence. The companions were infinite in their potential. They were a testament to the limitless power of the Syntherium Core.

Yet there was more to these companions than that, something...lifelike. The first batch of the companions was dispatched on July 9th, 2031, and delivered to the global elites who had already signed contracts with SYNTHOS Corporation to purchase the companions for varying purposes.

And thus, the humanoids penetrated society and were started to be used for industrial purposes as well. They lived aside humans, revolutionizing several spectrums in science, research, healthcare, agriculture, automotive, and much more. But for

some, they were the cure to loneliness and depression, a companion literal by definition.

One such was the elite Sarah Rubert of Kefla.

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Sarah Rubert, the mother of Avaline Theodore, belonged to a royal family in Kendaria. Being 41 years of age and a single mother in the prospering modern city of Kefla – the city worth a thousand fables, Sarah deemed her life “cruel.” She had the riches passed down to her through family heritage, but there was one thing that her life lacked. Something that even all her wealth couldn’t buy—a true love. And the feeling of belonging and companionship that came with it.

Sarah was fascinated by the elites who had ordered a companion 2.0’s early models. There was high praise from the global community and immensely positive feedback on the humanoids’ capabilities. Sarah yearned to seal the cracks that had formed within her love life.

Being an elite, she possessed the wealth to buy anything and anyone, but she was never confident. “Humans are selfish beings,” she used to utter every time questions about companionship were raised. She was alone because her husband, Kyle, had left her when she was 28 to pursue a normal life elsewhere. His motives always intrigued Sarah. “*Why would one*

*leave the life of a king and choose that of a vagrant?"* She used to ask herself in her regal demeanor.

Ever since Kyle left, Sarah could not find a man to date. Most of the men she met were purely after her riches and didn't care much about her daughter Avaline. Sarah would never wish her love to be built on lies. "*And humans lie,*" Sarah would often say to herself. She also couldn't go out to the streets of Kefla as prying eyes threatened her well-being. There was always a looming threat within the streets as the vox populi was against the elites of the society. People despised them.

Thus, her situation beckoned her to take a leap of faith. Sarah had decided that things were to change, and she couldn't remain alone anymore. No more would her villa's walls haunt her, and no more would she drink herself to sleep like every other night. She was not meant to be alone anymore; it was for the good of Avaline, too.

Avaline was a unique child; she used to tell Sarah about some of the dreams she used to have on occasion. Dreams about her talking to a mystery man who kept telling Avaline she was meant for greatness. The mystery man would speak to her in a stern voice whenever he appeared in her dreams. However, she never could get past that point.

Avaline was seven years of age when Kyle left Sarah. She had been living with her mother ever since. She was taught at home by Kefla's most renowned tutors, and Sarah bathed her in the most pristine souvenirs as a sign of her love for her daughter. Avaline always had a knack for antiquities, and ancient machinery had always fascinated her. It was as if she could easily form a bond with them. Sarah wanted to protect her little girl, too.

But her disposition about human relationships was strong, and she didn't want to chance it again with another Kyle, a letdown of a father and husband – not another deceptive human who would leave her for their greedy motives. She couldn't bear the uncertainty anymore. Thus, her only option for kinship was to rely on a humanoid, an autonomous machine that would obey her every command. But unbeknownst to Sarah were the facts behind the companion humanoids that the SYNTHOS Corporation willingly kept a secret from the world. Actual fragments of the Zentyrim Core powered these humanoids. They were no mere slaves to the host, but they were ever-evolving, implementing logic and calculating countless probabilities to come to the utmost conclusion before performing even the most mundane of functions. Around their host, they adapted and learned; they grew emotionally, too.

Sarah didn't inform Avaline about anything yet. She was determined to change her life. Thus, she impulsively came up with the decision to purchase a humanoid companion. *Let it serve as a surprise to Avaline*, she thought. Determined, one night, Sarah placed the order for the humanoid companion through the SYNTHOS Corporation website, where only the last model had remained in stock. But what Sarah didn't realize was that this companion was an unusual one compared to the others before it. Its name was Marc (Male Artificial Robot Companion).

The very next morning, Marc arrived. He rang the bell to the villa, which was received by one of Sarah's villa staff. Marc had the appearance of a tall and handsome man at 6.4" in height, well built with a fair complexion, clean-shaven, and bald-headed. He donned the typical attire of a butler with a black suit, jacket, tie, blazer, and black trousers with fine boots. He even talked with a firm voice, every word of which was clear and comprehensible. His calm and composed demeanor was befitting for royalty such as Sarah.

"Good morning, Ma'am," Marc said to the worker who received the villa door. "I am Marc, Sarah's personal companion and assistant," he continued. That morning, Sarah was going through a hangover due to her excessive drinking habits. Even then, she



asked the worker through the intercom to send the humanoid to her bedroom.

As soon as the worker's mouth started to open, Marc said, "From the main door toward the right of the hallway, up the stairs, and then the end of the corridor, that's where I will find Sarah. Thank you for trusting in my excellent services." His tone was spontaneous but professional, and his performance shocked the worker who stood there suspended in awe.

Marc then made his way toward Sarah's bedroom. He walked with one hand behind his back, akin to a professional butler, and once he met Sarah, he performed a bow in front of her. "Good morning, Sarah. I am Marc, your personal companion and assistant," he remarked, maintaining a tight stance and looking straight at Sarah, who was still in her king-sized bed struggling with the hangover.

"Oh! You're here," Sarah said while holding her head with both her hands.

"I need some water," she uttered. At that very moment, Marc was there, standing next to Sarah's bed, holding a glass of water. Sarah was shocked by the speed at which he responded.

She raised herself up, grabbed the glass of water, and drank it while sitting upright on her bed. After gulping the entire glass down, Sarah finally regained

a sense of everything around her: the sunlight seeping through her window, the sound of trees rustling outside the villa, birds chirping, and Marc standing silently beside her.

She looked up at him and just stared at him for a while. She was examining his appearance and admired his physique. Although a humanoid, Sarah never did see a man so well built, so fine as Marc. It was as if he was manufactured to perfection—the perfect example of a male body.

“Heartbeat rising, your heart rate is fast, Sarah, you are feeling excited,” Marc remarked, meeting Sarah’s gaze that was stuck on him.

“Uh! No... I’m not,” Sarah said as she blushed slightly.

“Listen, I have to go freshen up. Today is going to be a wild day,” she said as she sluggishly moved her legs from the bed toward the carpeted floor, attempting to stand up.

Marc instantly enquired Sarah’s permission at this moment. “Am I allowed to make physical contact with you, Sarah?” He asked as it was apparent that physical contact was not a default setting for the humanoid unless the situation severely demanded it.

“Yeah, help me get up,” she replied as she looked at him.

Without wasting any time, Marc proceeded to lift her up. But he didn't just lift her up from bed; he lifted her up in his arms and proceeded to move toward the bathroom.

It had been years since a man had lifted Sarah in her arms; his grip was firm and comfortable. Sarah would have objected, but the comfort in his arms kept her from uttering a word against his action. He lifted her up in a heartbeat without even flinching; his strength was a testament to the mechanical strength that he possessed. It was clear to Sarah that Marc was destined for feats much greater than mere weightlifting. His entire mechanical body was a subject of curiosity that she had to explore bit by bit.

Marc soon lowered his arms and let Sarah enter the bathroom while he stood outside. While closing the door, Sarah again stared at his expressionless face. Marc was a juvenile humanoid, yet he was learning about everything around him as he stood there scanning the surroundings of Sarah's lavish bedroom.

Marc scanned everything from Sarah's wall paintings and showpieces to her wardrobe, the entrances, exits, windows, wall paint, carpeting, and ceiling. Within mere seconds, Marc scanned everything in Sarah's room to learn everything about her, her likes, dislikes, and even a simple picture frame of a man slashed from the middle. It was Kyle's

picture, shredded by Sarah and kept as a memoir. Or in the slightest hope that he may yet return someday?

Sarah came out of the bathroom after approximately 8 minutes, calculated by Marc as he welcomed her. “I hope you are feeling refreshed and much better now, Sarah,” he commented.

“Yes, can you grab my clothes? It should be the... the long yellow skirt,” she asked, but to her surprise, Marc had already picked up the long yellow skirt before she could complete her request. It was one of the royal dresses that she had put aside, particularly for today’s meeting.

Sarah was impressed by how Marc had picked the exact dress she was going to wear and remarked on his swiftness. “Brilliant,” she said as Marc passed her, the dress still as neat as it was hanging inside her wardrobe.

“I’m glad to be of service,” he responded. “I’m sure you would look most beautiful in that yellow dress, Sarah,” he further added, showing signs of life, like a flicker of regard, of emotion toward Sarah.

Sarah had thought that Marc would just continue to act like a mannequin upon which she would unload all the routine chores. Watching Marc perform the house chores at a swift pace was supposed to be her routine entertainment, and listening to the banter

among the house workers would have been her topic of discussion over supper.

Yet, Marc appeared different. It was as if his purpose was greater, a lot greater than measly chores, pruning the garden, preparing breakfast, lunch, and dinner, washing the dishes, etc. Sarah saw in him an abundance of reliability and dependability. Marc's presence represented authenticity, something that other humans that Sarah met lacked.

Thus, Sarah decided that she would learn more about him, and in doing so, she was met with a barrage of disclosures as Marc started to reveal everything he had observed in the room about Sarah. Most of the information he analyzed in mere seconds accurately depicted how and what Sarah liked or disliked.

Shortly after, Sarah was shocked as Marc revealed something that was very personal to her. The accuracy of the information that Marc conveyed to her wasn't something she had ever told anyone, not even Avaline with complete accuracy. It was when Marc revealed that Sarah destroyed Kyle's picture frame out of hatred in the year 2018. The incident happened 13 years ago, and she had carried it with her ever since.

Sarah was shocked after hearing this and implored Marc, "How do you know all this?" She asked.

“I am your personal companion; it’s only natural that I know everything about you, Sarah,” Marc acclaimed.

“So... you know about Kyle, about what happened?” She enquired.

“Of course I do,” Marc replied. “But I have noticed that since that day, you have become a different person, too. Take these other paintings, for example. You made these, and they show nature, animals, and aquatic life, Sarah. These paintings on your wall show that you are a broken woman no more, but you are reformed. You have a purpose,” Marc acclaimed.

In this moment, Sarah’s eyes were locked on Marc as he delivered these words of commendation to her. No one in these 13 years admired Sarah for how she painted about life. Perhaps sometimes Aveline would comment on their greatness, but that was about it.

With Marc standing right in front of her, Sarah now saw hope, which she couldn’t find in any human relationship in all the years. Sarah brimmed with feelings of excitement, arousal, joy, and much more. She would never have thought that a mere machine companion, a humanoid, would instill a sense of confidence back in her. And in doing so, Marc became an attractive specimen of a humanoid for his host, Sarah Rubert.

BOOK TITLE

*But what other surprises does Marc possess? It remained a wonder yet to be explored.*

## Chapter 2: The Arrival

Slowly but surely, a shadow of a doubt had begun to form within Sarah's mind about how Marc's efficient and instantaneous performance spelled trouble for the other workers of her grandiose villa. For Marc, rest was no concept—it didn't exist. He could perform house chores 24/7/365 on Sarah's whims.

Since it was Marc's first day, Sarah couldn't fathom the humanoid's brilliant form and service delivery. She couldn't find a proper purpose for him yet. Thus, she began to contemplate the change of pace Marc had so suddenly brought into her lifestyle.

From the swift delivery of a glass of water to a thorough and accurate analysis of Sarah's entire self, Marc's aptness was too overwhelming to take in all at once. It should be, after all, Sarah was, indeed, dealing with a higher intelligence, the intricacies of which no human can grasp.

Marc just stood there like a puppet waiting for his mistress as Sarah walked gradually towards the folding screen, still trying to process everything about him. Sarah's mind, at the moment, was no less than a sandstorm, one she had witnessed many times in the city of Kefla. It was a storm that brought with it countless particles of sand, an inexplicable quantity



of it. Her thoughts were akin to those very sand particles, too many—*too many to comprehend*.

Sarah gently untied the knot from her dress as she prepared to don the elegant yellow dress Marc had fetched. Standing there, naked, Sarah's eyes perused the dress, and she couldn't help but utter, "He brought it from the dresser and rushed towards me in a blink. It should be wrinkled... Yet, it's perfect..."

Once her curiosity was tamed a tad, she slid her hands inside both sleeves and soon realized that the laces behind the dress would require fastening. Before Marc came into her life, Sarah's dressing tasks were delegated to her eldest and oldest staff member, Jenna. Jenna also served as Avaline's nanny and took care of her every time Sarah would be out partaking in the leisure of elitism or she would just be drunk.

Thus, it was only natural that Sarah delegated the fastening of the laces of her dress to Jenna. Yet, when Sarah peeped, partly dressed from behind the folding screen, her eyes were again met with Marc. Sarah, now sober, could think and talk clearly. If she wanted, she could direct Marc to walk away, look away, or call Jenna from the dormitories. Still, Sarah saw Marc from a viable distance now. In that moment, she saw the perfect example of a man who could be her one and only.

However, the doubts about being with an autonomous humanoid shrouded Sarah's judgment at that moment. For her, he was still a tool for now. Confident, Sarah decided to utter some orders to Marc but was soon met with an unexpected situation.

"Can you call Jenna?" Sarah asked Marc, still peeking from behind the folding screen but with a humble tone.

"Jenna, your previous caretaker, and daughter's occasional nanny, is fast asleep. You want the laces behind your dress fastened, yes? I will oblige with the utmost certainty. After all, I am your new personal caretaker and assistant," Marc replied, maintaining his professional demeanor.

The offer had enticed Sarah as all the odds were in Marc's favor. Waking up Jenna would take time—time which Sarah did not have as she continuously struggled to keep the dress from falling off.

"Alright, you do it then!" she almost cried in discomfort.

Within the blink of an eye, Marc was there to assist his mistress, tying her yellow dress lace by lace. As he stood behind Sarah, she noticed his breath on her collar. It was too reminiscent of her days of yore, when Kyle helped her dress up, and she felt the warmth of his breath on her neck. While Marc delicately tied the laces, his gentle hands rubbed

Sarah's back, caressing her. In that moment, her heart raced. She couldn't help but feel...aroused. Sarah would have never surmised the feeling of arousal from a man's touch after those years would come from a humanoid, from Marc.

Marc was no stranger to this shift in Sarah's neural system. He could easily distinguish the increased speed at which Sarah's heart was beating, but...even with all his calculations, probabilities, and mechanical intuitions, this was something new to him. A human's feelings of arousal were never fed into Marc since he was manufactured to be a flawless being.

Thus, Marc just had to learn about it. Evolution around and for the host was, after all, a humanoid's definitive purpose. "Your heart rate is increasing. Are you feeling alright, Sarah?" Marc asked out of pure curiosity as he tied down the last of the laces behind Sarah's dress. In addition, none of his mathematical deductions could determine a sudden shift of emotions and feelings within Sarah.

"Oh, it's just... after all these years, I didn't think I would get this sensation again," Sarah replied as tears formed under both her eyes and her cheeks started blushing. "Sensation.... Sensation...." Marc uttered, stuck in a brief loop while he tried to find out the true meaning behind the words that Sarah had just conveyed.

“Does sensation mean to feel?” Marc asked Sarah. It was as if, in that moment, the higher intelligence within Marc went back to the bare bones, to his core. A humanoid was designed to evolve emotionally, too. Thus, Marc let his mechanical functions cease for a brief moment as he began to process a sensation—the sensation inside his algorithms [\*¿#? \_ ¿#?\*].

Sarah then turned towards Marc and held his hand. Her breast was joined to his chest, her eyes were locked onto his, and she could feel his warmth up close. “Yes,” replied Sarah as Marc’s eyes slowly descended from her eyes towards her lips. Marc was the closest he had ever been to a human being since his inception, and Sarah saw something then. She saw that although Marc was designed to be this flawless higher intelligence, he was but an infant at his core who knew only about duty, yet thirsty for knowledge, yearning to learn and to grow emotionally. But at the same time, Marc was something more, like a budding phenomenon. One Sarah had wished to explore.

Sarah and Marc’s partial embrace was soon interrupted by a thudding, repeated knocks at Sarah’s door. It was Jenna who had woken up and rushed towards Sarah’s room. Sarah, now brought back to her senses, let go of Marc’s hand, still blushing and somewhat quivering from her new and profound feelings towards Marc, and nodded.

The nod was Marc's signal. Thus, he rushed towards the door and was soon met with Jenna. "Good morning, you must be Jenna, Sarah's caretaker. I am Marc, it's a pleasure to meet you," Marc remarked as his bright smile charmed Jenna. She, too, witnessed the perfect tall and handsome man standing before her after a long while, as she never had the opportunity to make contact with men much. The dormitories, Sarah's room, and occasionally Avaline's room was her life.

"Yeah, he does that," Sarah said, bragging about Marc's riveting and attractive masculine features.

"I'm here now, miss; I overslept. It was foolish of me. Please miss! If you can find it in your heart to pardon my mistake. I will be most careful from now, I promise." Jenna said while bowing down in front of Sarah.

"No need, Jenna. No need. For today, I was treated with something sensational. Which, as a matter of fact, wouldn't have come to pass if you were awake," Sarah responded while looking at Marc, who stood by the door with his amicable poise.

"Uh! Miss, I am forever esteemed by your generosity and kindness. Umm... but I must concur, he does have that sway. Who is he... it?" Jenna asked Sarah, finger pointed towards Marc and turning her face moderately.

“This, He, is Marc, one of the companions 2.0 model of humanoids. They cost a fortune, let me tell you. I’m sorry Jenna, I just thought...he would be a helping hand around the house, but it’s been merely an hour that he’s been here, and I digress, but he’s so much more than meets the eye,” Sarah replied.

“I have yet to understand his full capabilities,” she added as she held Jenna by the shoulders to lift her from the bowing position.

“Uhm! Miss, there was another matter I wanted to discuss with you,” Jenna uttered. “The elite, son of Paias, Lord Raymond, was preparing for a visit today,” Jenna informed Sarah, whose curiosity towards Marc was not diverted towards lord Raymond.

“Cancel his advent. I wish to spend the day tending to my flowers and the rest of the garden,” Sarah avowed.

It was almost 9:30 AM in the morning, the time when Sarah used to have her morning tea in the garden ambient with roses, lilies, orchids, chrysanthemums, tulips, and flowers most beautiful gathered for her penchant from across the globe.

“Your tea is ready,” Marc remarked as he reminded Sarah about the time as he pointed towards a holographic projection of a digital clock that seemed to light up from his wrist. Should Marc not have been

occupied with dressing Sarah, he would have personally seized all the duties of making tea exactly the way Sarah liked and maintaining the seating arrangements on the patio in the garden. Alas, the other workers were aware of their mistress' timings, and they aptly prepared everything instead.

“Shall we?” Marc questioned, looking at Sarah, who held the long-bottomed dress in both of her hands. “We shall,” she replied with a nod and soon started walking towards the downstairs patio. Jenna followed close behind them but suddenly halted.

“Miss Avaline, I must go check on Miss Avaline,” Jenna stated as she turned her back towards both Marc and Sarah and hurried back upstairs towards Avaline's room. To Jenna's surprise, Avaline remained asleep, but her room was a complete mess. Jenna had her work cut out, it seemed. Thus, she began to tidy up the room.

Meanwhile, Marc and Sarah had made it to the patio next to Sarah's flower garden. Marc pulled a chair where Sarah soon sat and started to pour her some tea. As she sipped her tea, Sarah couldn't help but wonder everything Marc was, is, and will become if she taught her how to be more...*human-like*.

Thus, she took the initiative there and then. “Sit,” Sarah ordered. In response, Marc pulled another chair and sat across the table at the opposite end of Sarah.

“No, sit next to me,” she reaffirmed. Marc, swift as usual, made his move. One moment, the cup covered Sarah’s eyesight, and the next, Marc was seated next to her. He was full of surprises and secrecy. A perfect plaything for Sarah, or perhaps a perfect partner she could slowly bond with? A question Sarah pondered as she gradually sipped her tea.

“Tell me, Marc, who or what are you really?” Sarah asked, initiating a heart-to-heart conversation that may yet breed a new bond and bring her closer to Marc.

“I am a companion 2.0 model Z01 developed by SYNTHOS Corporation on June 29<sup>th</sup>, 2031. My father is Dr. Austin Sanders, a genius scientist who deciphered the Syntherium core. As your personal assistant and companion, it is my duty to see that your needs are fulfilled,” Marc replied.

“All my needs?” Sarah asked Marc as she tried to beseech him for a more human answer.

“Yes, all your needs,” Marc acclaimed as he formed a smile on his face and locked his eyes on Sarah.

Sarah’s heartbeat yet again spurred. Hearing Marc’s response excited her. She sat frozen, thinking back to the moment that she shared with him in the bedroom behind the folding screen. The early morning tea session between Marc and Sarah was soon to take a turn into territories unknown, where



both Marc and Sarah would discover their purpose for each other or maybe something more.

Only this time, Sarah's motives were clear. The kinship she was looking for was sitting right in front of her, a humanoid, devoid of human emotions yet with some lingering sense of feelings, of life. It was something she could work on and gradually build a bond with.

As for Marc, the journey to learning human emotion was akin to a ship crossing murky waters, uncertain. But with Sarah's help and guidance, he too could find it inside his mechanical being, to finally feel, to love.

## Chapter 3: Emotions Unveiled

Each sip Sarah took from her cup seemed to beguile Marc as he was witnessing an elegant, royal woman portraying the best etiquettes on the breakfast table for the very first time. Etiquettes that he was programmed to perform – perhaps in the image of a human being? Sarah’s gaze was fixed on Marc after he had approved of her request to fulfill all her wishes. Then, there was Marc, who sat there under Sarah’s command, still calculating, comprehending, and trying to grasp the concepts behind feelings, behind sensations towards Sarah.

Unbeknownst to Marc, what Sarah asked of him soon after may not have been something he could have anticipated, even with all his mechanical probabilistic inferences combined. Sarah had asked Marc the very question that had haunted her since Kyle left her all those years ago.

“Do you know Kyle Hobbs?” Sarah asked anxiously, trying to probe the extent to which Marc’s higher intelligence could reach. *How could he know him? He merely looked upon his picture in my bedroom...* Sarah thought, still curious about Marc’s intellect.

“Kyle Hobbs was your husband,” Marc replied; he sounded confident of the answer. Yet, what he uttered next came as a shock to Sarah and perhaps set the direction for Sarah and Marc’s relationship to be.

“He left you when you were 28 years old. He was your butler before me, the only man whom you came into contact with. He was also the only man who inspired you to look at life differently. To be the Sarah that you wanted to be,” Marc dictated, his voice devoid of any emotion whatsoever.

As Marc was speaking, a tear flew down from Sarah’s eye towards her cheek. In the moment, the scenic surroundings of Sarah’s flower garden and the elegantly organized breakfast table had become somber as she was pushed back into the past by Marc’s words.

Marc, now calculating and weighing his response, stood up. In his quiet demeanor, he wiped the tear off of Sarah’s cheek. “Was it something I said?” he asked calmly, trying his best to mend any emotional wounds he may have inflicted on Sarah.

“No, it’s just...I liked being with Kyle. He made me whole until he didn’t. He left me and Avaline alone, alone with the struggles. He wanted something else, and I didn’t realize it. He wanted something I couldn’t provide, even with all my wealth. I only wanted the best for us. If only I had known better. After Kyle, it was just me and Avaline alone. All the luxuries and riches didn’t bring Kyle back. In fact, he left me because of it. He wanted to live a normal life, you see. And I was too... occupied with my responsibilities as

mistress of the house,” Sarah told Marc, her eyes locked on the teacup she had put down in front of her.

“But that has made you who you are today, yes? A strong-willed woman—a woman of stature. And I am pleased to be your companion,” Marc said with a smile on his face, a smile that Sarah noticed on his face for the first time since he had arrived. A smile that showed that Marc truly was evolving emotionally. *How could a humanoid know how to smile?* Sarah thought as she witnessed the sweetest smile after Avaline’s she had ever seen.

Marc’s smile reinforced Sarah’s confidence. Gradually, Marc bent down and put his hand on Sarah’s shoulder. “Thank you,” she responded with a smile toward Marc. As both Marc and Sarah held each other’s hands, their gaze was fixed on each other and the world that had turned somber around them, regaining its majestic beauty, only this time, it seemed more vibrant, more magnificent.

“You look resplendent,” Marc remarked as he finally started to understand human emotions. Marc’s mechanical functions were finally comprehending feelings. For Marc, they were occurrences outside of his mechanical calculations. Random events that he could not calculate, events that can only be learned through time—the time he was now destined to spend with Sarah.

Sarah soon leaned in towards Marc as she was, for the moment, just Sarah, not the mistress of the house. A lonely woman earnest about her kinship—a woman who needed a man to walk with her if she were to fulfill her dreams. She needed a man who would support her so she could face the struggles of her life alone no more.

Marc maintained his position all the while Sarah's lips touched his. In Marc's mind, a flood of sensations had erupted, wreaking havoc. His mathematical calculations were off the charts, even for an intelligent being such as him. It was as if he was calculating the intricacies that exist on a universal scope—everything, everywhere, all at once.

With her lips locked with Marc's, Sarah felt a strong connection, something she yearned for years. Her cheeks turned red as she blushed, her breath escalated, and whatever words she could utter in the moment of oneness were shadowed by a tender humm, incomprehensible by Marc.

Sarah then touched Marc's face and felt that it was warm like a human's. She then went on to kiss his forehead. For the first time, she had touched Marc's face this close. For the first time in years, Sarah had finally felt love with a man. Although a humanoid, he was obedient and respectful to her. Sarah opened her eyes to see Marc's and witnessed thousands, no, millions, of calculations occurring simultaneously

inside his eyeballs as if his eyes were suspended in a trance. Marc was utterly dazed and overwhelmed, it seemed. His breath was hastened, and Sarah could hear a thumping sound coming from inside Marc's chest, where his core was situated.

"Marc?" Sarah enquired with concern.

"Yes, Sarah, I'm here," Marc instantly replied as the calculations in his eyes showed only one sign: the lazy eight  $\infty$ . Not even Marc, powered by the ancient technology of the Syntherium core, could calculate nor the reasoning or the extent of human emotions that Sarah had just expressed with a kiss.

"I haven't felt like this. What did you do? I'm curious," Marc asked politely.

"It was just a kiss," replied Sarah, still blushing and smiling.

"To me, it felt like... everything," Marc expressed as his hand caressed his lips, examining the ecstasy he had just felt. Sarah soon stood up and asked Marc to take a walk with her in her extravagant flower garden.

"I really love these walks," said Sarah, lifting a bushel of roses with her hands and sniffing their sweet fragrance.

"I'm sure. It's quite a collection you have here. Blooming roses, lilies, orchids, chrysanthemums,

and tulips. Do you maintain these yourself?” Marc asked.

“Most days, but when I don’t, I used to ask Jenna to do it for me. You see, I can’t trust every house worker with these. They’re...something I love dearly,” Sarah said, looking back at Marc, who was close behind her.

“I can tend to them for you if you like,” Marc said in a self-effacing tone.

Sarah chuckled, “I’m sure you can, but I have other plans for you...” she expressed as her smile radiated vitality ceaselessly.

While both walked in the flower garden amid the vibrance of the flowers, hearing the chirping of birds, the calm and cold breeze embraced them, uplifting the heartfelt moment even more. However, the jubilant breeze soon became somewhat hostile, an enemy of Sarah’s braids. Thus, she decided to conclude her stroll with Marc and asked him to head back inside with her.

“I think a storm is approaching. Should we head inside?” Sarah asked Marc, who, like always, agreed to his Mistress’s command.

“Sure,” he replied.

Once they both headed inside, the crackling of thunder was heard, and to Sarah’s surprise, her spot-

on weather prediction had come to pass. It soon started raining heavily, and a thunderous storm covered the entire city of Kefla. Sarah and Marc sat inside the villa lounge, eyeing each other with a subtle smile. Their wholesomeness together was in stark contrast to the sound of thunders that served as an epic backdrop of something feral.

Avaline came rushing downstairs, stirred by the shrill sounds of thunder, followed by Jenna, who shouted, “Miss Avaline.... Miss Avaline,” repeatedly. Breathless and scared, Avaline rushed towards Sarah and hugged her.

“Is everything okay? It’s just a rainstorm; it will pass,” Sarah said while caressing Avaline’s head that lay on her shoulder.

Avaline had completely ignored Marc in the heat of the moment as he sat in a dimly lit corner of the lounge. Soon, Marc made his presence apparent to the little girl when he decided to greet her. Marc stood up from where he sat and approached Sarah, who held Avaline in her embrace.

“Good morning, you must be Avaline,” he said. Avaline, still too scared from the fear of shrieking thunders, was speechless to the point that she didn’t answer Marc at the time.

Jenna, who stood next to Sarah, informed her about Avaline’s fever and decided to fetch some cold



water and cloth to cover her forehead. Marc analyzed Avaline's disturbed condition beforehand and signaled Jenna to hold.

"I can help," he said. "Can you lay her down?" he asked Sarah, who proceeded to lay down Avaline as she shivered from fever. Marc laid his hand on her forehead and shut his eyes closed. After a minute or two, lo and behold, Avaline's shivering had stopped.

Both Sarah and Jenna stood there in absolute shock, trying to fathom the miracle that they had witnessed with their very eyes. Avaline opened her eyes slowly, and the very first face she saw was Marc's.

"Thank you, Marc," she said as if she had known him for a long time.

Sarah rushed towards Avaline and touched her forehead with her hand to confirm Avaline's condition. Her fever had truly subdued.

"It's my pleasure, Avaline. It's nice to meet you," Marc said in his humble attitude as Avaline sluggishly tried to sit upright on the sofa.

"Should we go to your room, little mistress?" Jenna asked.

"I'm hungry," Avaline replied as she moved both her feet back and forth impatiently.

“Of course, I’ll prepare something for you right up,” Jenna responded and made her way towards the kitchen.

“Thank You,” Sarah said to Marc.

“He can do more things, you know?” Avaline interjected.

Sarah was still confused as to how Avaline would know anything about Marc, and instead of showing signs of surprise before him, it felt as if she had known him somehow. But Sarah chose to ignore this, for she had a more important question to ask Marc.

“What did you do exactly?” She asked inquisitively.

“Oh? I just laid my hand on her and fulfilled my duties as your personal assistant and companion.” Marc answered vaguely. There was something unknown, something yet to be discovered about Avaline. But Sarah’s feelings towards Marc grew increasingly strong after what he had done for her daughter.

It was no less than a miracle that unfolded before her eyes. Before Marc, whenever Avaline got ill, renowned doctors from all across the confines of Kendaria were summoned by Sarah, only to realize that their medicine only partially worked on Avaline. Even after all the medicines, she still took days to recover. Yet, Marc healed her in front of her very eyes

in mere moments. It was a testament to the extent of his capabilities as a companion 2.0.

Sarah had now discovered a profound purpose to remain with Marc. He was more to Sarah now than he was ever before. The kiss, his words of encouragement on the breakfast table, and healing Avaline, all these deeds he had conducted, reinforced his importance in Sarah's life.

Avaline, sitting on the sofa, noticed the way Sarah looked at Marc. As Sarah's daughter, she couldn't feel happier because Avaline knew something about Marc. Something about him made him the perfect companion in Sarah's and Avaline's lives. That something was Avaline's seal of approval for his to-be relationship with Sarah.

Shortly after, Jenna made her way back from the kitchen carrying a bowl of porridge with a glass of warm milk for Avaline and placed the silver-plated tray and cutlery on the table in the lounge in a manner fit for a princess' extravagant breakfast. Avaline walked to the table and smiled at Marc while on her way. Marc had realized something different in Sarah's daughter when he touched her, something too advanced for his comprehension.

"Marc," Sarah screamed as the sound of thunders grew louder than before. "Should we make it to the

bedroom? I would like to show you something,” She requested.

“Of course,” replied Marc as they both walked upstairs towards Sarah’s bedroom.

Once there, Sarah showed Marc a picture that Marc had already scanned earlier, but it was one where Sarah was carrying Avaline in her arms inside the very flower garden where Marc and Sarah spent time. “She’s my everything,” Sarah said. “I cannot thank you enough for what you did today. It would have been difficult to call a doctor in such a weather, you know?” She added after a brief pause.

“It’s my duty as your companion to care for all your needs. Let me reiterate this. It includes the needs of those you love, too,” Marc voiced as he smiled and looked at Sarah, who still held the portrait of herself with Avaline in her hands.

“So, Marc. there’s one more thing I wanted to ask you...” Sarah acclaimed.

Outside Sarah’s villa, the thunders were as loud as they could be. The rainstorm showed no signs of impeding anytime soon. *Was it an opportunity for Sarah to test Marc’s more human capabilities?*

The room had gone dark as the clouds had covered the sun. What went down inside Sarah’s room after her question was an act of intimacy between Sarah and Marc. A view barely visible from the windows

outside Sarah's bedroom. The other side was blurred, as each of the windows was doused with rain, and only lightning occasionally illuminated the dark bedroom. Sarah had the opportunity to utilize Marc in every human way she deemed necessary, as the odds were in her favor.

Neither Jenna nor Avaline would disturb the two inside Sarah's bedroom. She could be alone with Marc, be herself, open and free in front of Marc. Though briefly, that brief moment was more than enough for her after all the years of solitude.

## Chapter 4: Crossing Boundaries

In the lounge, Avaline sat at the dining table to scoop up the porridge Jenna had so vigilantly prepared for her. Jenna sat next to Avaline like she normally did every time the little mistress decided to have breakfast in the lounge. While sitting next to Avaline, Jenna thought about the two missing entities, Sarah and Marc, who had gone upstairs and hadn't returned yet. Curious, Jenna decided to head upstairs and stood up.

“Stay with me,” Avaline pleaded as she suddenly held Jenna's hand, stopping her course.

“Of course,” said Jenna. Avaline had always feared thunderstorms. The very phobia of thunder, the nightmares of getting struck by a thunderbolt, developed senses of distress inside her that led to her agonizing condition—a high fever.

Aware of the little mistress's troubled condition, Jenna decided to stay with her as she finished her breakfast. Yet, Jenna couldn't help but wonder why Sarah and Marc took their sweet time to reappear at the lounge. She sat next to Avaline, curious, unaware of the fact that her mistress, Sarah, had taken a liking toward Marc. And the fact that she was making love to him upstairs.

The darkness formed by the cloudy weather and the crackling sounds of thunder served as the perfect backdrop for Sarah and Marc, for the little storm of intimacy they had incited. Sarah pushed Marc on her bed and joined him thereafter. While she lay next to Marc, enthusiasm, passion, compassion, warmth, and love were everything Sarah felt in the moment of succor. Wooed by Marc's innocent facial expression, she took the initiative. She kissed Marc's forehead first and continued to descend toward his lips.

Marc entered a state of trance yet again as he began to feel Sarah's body caress his. Gently, Marc's body began reacting to Sarah's movements, akin to a human, as he placed his hand on Sarah's back. Their embrace, their intimate dance in the confines of Sarah's bedroom, arose a plethora of sensations for Marc, who was unable to fathom the indefinite extent of human emotions.

Thirty minutes passed...an hour passed...two hours passed. For Sarah and Marc, time was trivial; it was nothing. For years, Sarah had missed the warmth of a man—a man she could call her own. No more would she drink herself to sleep or resort to dubious decisions of regret—decisions such as summoning doxies under the shadow of the night. Yet Marc had remained aware and omnipresent the entire time Sarah indulged his body. He had learned, in those mere moments, about the ecstasy that Sarah had

granted him. Marc's memory repository was now brimming with the probabilities, inferences, and outcomes of human feelings that he had developed with Sarah.

Although partial, Marc's feelings toward Sarah were superior to any man who wished to make Sarah his betrothed out of greed. Marc remained pure in both character and motive. He had now known what it was like to feel loved and to love someone.

Half of the day had passed. Sarah had laid in her bed with her eyes closed, envisioning everything she did with Marc, reliving her moments of rapture. At the same time, Marc was standing next to her, perfectly dressed.

Downstairs, while everything had happened inside Sarah's bedroom, Jenna and Avaline made their way to Avaline's room. Jenna remained occupied with Avaline enough not to be able to visit Sarah's bedroom.

"Thank you for everything, Jenna," Avaline remarked as a smile appeared on her face.

"Oh! It's nothing, Miss Avaline. But I do wonder, what was Miss Sarah thinking, taking that humanoid with him?" Jenna asked, expecting a response from Avaline.

"Him. His name is Marc, and... I really do not know," Avaline responded.



Both Jenna and Avaline sat inside the room where Jenna tucked Avaline in bed for the little princess needed rest. Jenna sat on the couch inside Avaline's room and got a shut eye herself.

The day that started with Sarah asking for Marc's assistance with her dress and their initial heartfelt moments at the patio took a drastic turn as Sarah grew closer to Marc. The rainstorm served as the perfect opportunity Sarah looked for. It is an undivided and undisturbed time when Sarah can be herself to someone. Thus, the day of the rainstorm elevated Sarah and Marc's relationship. It bred a new raging storm inside Sarah's heart, one she struggled to tame for all those years alone—one of feeling love, of belonging.

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The next morning, Sarah had come up with a rather interesting plan. From the other end of the dimly lit corridor, she approached wearing a fashionable crimson-colored dress as per Kefla's traditions. Her dress was more contemporary in looks than the yellow skirt she wore the previous day. It consisted of a pair of pants sewn complete with a top forming a vest-like design with full sleeves that revealed Sarah's skin from the back. Sarah's hairdo was now braided elegantly, thanks to Marc's excellent aesthetic knowledge about fashion. By appearance, Sarah looked renewed, an entirely new person, not

the royal mistress of the villa but an outgoing woman, but where was she headed? This remained a debatable question among the rest of the workers.

Sarah had decided to visit a renowned Keflan restaurant called Ze-Ravintola with Marc to further strengthen her relationship with the humanoid. For that very reason, she had dressed herself in such a spectacular fashion. Marc, who was yet dressed like a butler, was ordered by Sarah the previous day to wait downstairs in the lounge until further notice. Thus, he waited.

Sarah made her way to the lounge, held Marc's hand, and headed toward the villa exit. She had informed her chauffeur, Elliot, to bring the car around from the villa's parking. While she waited with Marc, the other workers of the house grew impatient as it was a rare occurrence that the mistress of the house would visit a place, especially out of her own will. But what made things more interesting was that she'd visit a place and take the humanoid with her. Little did they know that the mistress of the villa had planned a date with the humanoid.

Elliot brought the luxurious car out front and opened the door for Sarah, who held Marc's hand still. She sat in the back seat with Marc as Elliot closed the door, and soon, the car drove off toward the restaurant. On their way to the restaurant, Marc witnessed the city of Kefla and its bustling streets.

People seemed too occupied with their jobs, every face full of emotions and ambition. Marc was analyzing everything in Kefla on the go. Soon, Marc and Sarah reached Dona Street, a more commercial area comprising corporate buildings, skyscrapers, and business units. Those were the wonders of Kefla, the very wonders that made it renowned among the people of Kendaria as “the land of a thousand fables.”

“Do you like the views?” Sarah asked interestedly.

“To my analysis, these buildings were built by the great Ozamar during the 14<sup>th</sup> century. The architecture is dated but robust to its core. A true fascination for the tourists that come to Kefla, I’m sure.” Marc replied with a fine demeanor.

“I didn’t ask for a history lesson now, did I?” Sarah remarked, “Just tell me how you feel,” she added.

“I feel delighted,” Marc corrected.

“I’m glad to hear it. The place we are going, it’s special. You’ll see soon enough,” Sarah uttered as she placed her hand on Marc’s and gave it a brief nudge.

The car soon arrived at the Ze-Ravintola restaurant, and again, as per his duties, Elliot opened the door for Sarah and then for Marc. And thus, their morning began with a date. Holding Marc’s hand, Sarah, in her elegant deportment, entered the lavish restaurant. She was soon greeted by the manager, who instantly recognized her as the elite Sarah Rubert

of Kefla and guided her and Marc to a VIP area atop the restaurant.

The VIP area was situated on the topmost floor of the restaurant building and provided the best view of Kefla city in all its splendor. Sarah took the table nearest to the window and the picturesque view.

“The sizzling steak for me,” she said to the waiter and looked at Marc, who sat there almost with a blank expression.

“Do you like to eat anything, Marc?” she asked.

“I’m fine. I don’t feel hungry,” Marc responded.

“Can you give us a moment?” Sarah asked the waiter, demanding some privacy to talk to Marc.

“Marc, you have to order something... The people are looking at us in a weird way, and I don’t want anybody to feel different about you. See, why don’t you try the same thing I’m having?” Sarah said in her attempts to convince Marc.

“If that makes you happy, sure,” Marc responded.

The waiter arrived as soon as Sarah lifted her head and took the order for both Sarah and Marc. Sarah personally loved the Ze-Ravintola’s special steak. The very same that she had ordered for Marc. A dish so spicy it would make anyone cry. However, Sarah felt adventurous that day. She was ready to take on any challenge. But it was only natural for her to feel

so confident outside her villa after such a long time. After all, Marc was there.

The other visitors who sat at the nearby tables eyed Marc with ambiguity. It was as if Marc was unwelcome among them—a deviant among the elites. Sarah was aware of it. She knew that if Marc spoke out loud in his usual demeanor, people might resort to questionable acts. The uncertainty and the tension alone were enough to stress Sarah out. But the regal Sarah smiled at everyone who looked at Marc the wrong way to try and diffuse any uncertain situation on the brink of escalation.

*Did I make the right decision bringing him here?* Sarah thought, now double-minded, about her decision to leave the villa.

She soon looked at Marc, who smiled back at Sarah, and that sweet smile reinforced the crumbling walls of Sarah's self-confidence. Yet, murmurs could be heard around the restaurant floor, where Sarah could vaguely infer the words "deviant" and "freak" being targeted toward Marc.

"They may not like you, but ignore them alright? I like you. And that's what matters," Sarah uttered as she tried to boost Marc's confidence. Little did she know that Marc, who's still developing human emotions toward Sarah, couldn't care less about others. For him, the only center of attention in the

world was Sarah, Avaline, and anyone who revolved around Sarah.

“Don’t feel ashamed, Sarah. I may not be accepted by others, but they are not my priority. I am, after all, your personal companion and assistant, programmed to serve under your command,” Marc responded and was soon met with unforeseen circumstances as one eager diner stood up and walked toward Marc.

From the get-go, the person’s intentions seemed malicious. Sarah tried to diffuse the situation beforehand by ordering the waiter to attend to her table. Yet, the waiters seemed too occupied to heed her call.

“Marc, there’s someone approaching us. I think we should leave,” Sarah said as a coat of sweat covered her forehead.

“Whatever you decide, Sarah, I will oblige,” Marc responded in acceptance, as usual.

The furious diner rushed in toward Sarah and started by pointing a finger at Marc.

“What is this abomination doing here?” he shouted.

“He is Marc. He is not an abomination. I suggest you remain aware of the decorum, mister, or you will be made aware by other means,” Sarah responded furiously.

“Hello. My name is Marc. I am Sarah’s personal companion and assistant. What’s your name, good sir?” Marc asked the diner, still maintaining his demeanor.

“You are a deviant... hear me? You don’t belong here,” the diner uttered. Clearly, the diner had too much to drink and wasn’t in the right state of mind.

The commotion beckoned the manager, who then, with the help of the other staff members, took the diner back to his table and presented their apologies for the oversight that had caused the fuss. Sarah had already decided not to remain in the restaurant or anywhere in the vicinity any further and apologized to the manager for canceling her order.

“Marc, let’s leave. Maybe we’ll come back here again, someday...” she requested. Marc nodded to this request and stood up. They both were guided to the exit of the restaurant, where Elliot waited to receive them. And like that, Sarah and Marc drove back to the villa.

What was supposed to be a day worth remembering for Sarah, had soon reinstated the fear in her again. Fear of leaving the villa for the people isn’t worth the trouble. Marc’s presence felt like a threat to others. Yet, Sarah was the only one who truly understood him. A humanoid devoid of emotions but pure in his intentions. A humanoid that Sarah took a liking to,

with whom Sarah spent moments of intimacy. In her heart, he was no mere deviant or freak.

Yet, Sarah, who just wanted to have a good time with Marc, decided not to discuss the matter with the workers as she reached her villa. She was greeted by Jenna, whose expression was one of confusion and contempt toward the mistress.

Sarah's intentions were now clear among the workers of the villa. They knew that the mistress had grown close with the humanoid. Thus, as Sarah entered the villa, it was time she addressed the workers to make things right to plead to their sense of reason. And she did later that morning with Marc standing by her side.

The turn of events inside the restaurant and gossip among the house workers were soon to be fixed by Sarah, who could not and would not want to treat Marc any differently. She knew Marc's true self, for he was just a humble and pure humanoid. He was unlike any man Sarah had met in her entire life.



## Chapter 5: Beneath the Surface

The villa lounge went silent as all eyes were locked on the mistress of the house who had just walked in. The distant murmurs among the workers made Sarah realize that, “*change begins at home.*” Thus, to educate the world, she knew she had to start with her own house workers. She wanted them to see the reason. She wanted everyone to know what, or who, Marc truly was – a humble and caring humanoid.

That day, Sarah ordered all the workers to gather around the lounge, for she had an important message to deliver. Standing amidst the house workers, Sarah held Marc’s hand and prepared to announce her love for the humanoid to all the workers. While all this happened, Jenna stood right in front of Sarah, and Elliot stood near the villa exit, seemingly uninterested in the mistress’s deposition.

“Gather around, Lara, Jenna, Emily, Elliot, Younas, Han, and all the rest about their daily chores.... I have something important to discuss,” Sarah declared in an assertive tone. Her orders had grabbed the attention of all the workers in an instant, as rarely did Sarah ever announce new orders.

Soon after her orders, the workers gathered around, and anyone who wasn’t present at the time rushed to the lounge expecting a surprise from the mistress. And surprised they were once they

witnessed the mistress holding a humanoid's hand. Soon, the lounge went silent as everyone had gathered, and no one would dare to utter anything in the mistress' presence. Not all the workers had that privilege.

“Let me ask you this... You all have been working for me for many years now. There is nobody else I would trust more to roam around freely in my house than any of you here. I trust everyone with their duties. I trust Jenna to take care of Avaline. I trust Lara to tend to my flower garden every day. I trust Elliot to take me places. You, Younas, I trust you with the cooking tasks. I trust everyone who stands in this lounge. You are all like a family to me,” Sarah said as she began to deliver her message to the workers wisely. Sarah's voice echoed inside the halls. Even Avaline, who was resting in her room downstairs, could listen to her mother's words precisely as they were being uttered.

“But in return, I wonder. Do you all trust me? Do you all trust that I would make the right decision?” She beseeched her workers for a response. Sarah's request was entertained first by Jenna, who may yet be the head of the workers, as she personally approached Sarah and Avaline the most in times of need, while other workers couldn't either due to anxiety or hesitation. Yet again, the rest of the workers were hesitant to respond.

“I trust you, miss. I really do. And you are my family, too,” Jenna responded as her face gradually turned red. Jenna was emotionally struck by the mistress’s words of acceptance towards the workers. Her words of acknowledgment had brought a tear in most of the staff’s eyes as rarely did they get any praise from the mistress before this. It was because of Marc that Sarah took this initiative. In his defense the mistress spoke directly to all the workers and positively so. This had encouraged all the workers after a long time. Jenna’s words had turned Sarah’s tense expression into a smile.

“But miss, I do wonder, the humanoid, I mean, Marc is but a machine who is just not human... Of course, I am never going to question your decision. I merely ask out of concern for your wellbeing, miss, and for Avaline,” Jenna uttered, steering the discussion back to its initial purpose.

“I do understand your concern, sweetest Jenna. I honestly do not fully understand Marc myself. But whatever time I have spent with him so far, I will say this. He has surprised me. And I know this, although, he’s not a human...He’s much better than us. I can’t quite put it into words. I just know...” Sarah uttered, gazing at Marc, who stood right by her.

“I trust you, miss. If you think it’s the right decision, nothing would make me happier,” Jenna remarked.

Sarah nodded her head in approval, and a silent “Thank you” was uttered from her lips. All this time, Marc simply stood there in his firm demeanor with a smile on his face, processing the debate inside his head and calculating probabilities like a move of chess. One dialogue from Sarah branched into countless possibilities for Jenna’s responses. But Marc didn’t interfere. He processed human emotions all while Sarah had held his hand. During moments of speech, she sometimes squeezed it firmly, hinting at her anxious state. Marc, in response, clasped it firmly, too. Emotions did start to form inside him after all.

While both Jenna and Sarah had their heartfelt conversation, the other nervous workers smiled as the closure left everyone’s hearts full of joy. And thus, it was established. Sarah was to be with Marc, and inside the villa, no worker would judge her or Marc. No one would treat Marc any differently. But what soon followed came as a shock to every entity present in the lounge. Sarah thought her address to the staff members was complete when Marc decided to deliver his message – independently.

“When I was manufactured, I was delivered right at the villa’s doorstep to serve Sarah Rubert, the human who owns me. But, when I went outside for the first time today with Sarah, I analyzed the people of Kefla. I analyzed their emotions. Their faces showed

ambition. From street peddlers to store owners, everyone was eager to achieve something. For the first time, being there, among the people. I felt, somewhat, alive,” Marc stated.

By this time, the lounge had gone silent as everyone eagerly listened to the humanoid, autonomously speaking words that were perhaps not coming from a programmed machine. No programmed machine would ever decide to take an action on its own until instructed – that is the universal understanding of machines, after all. Marc was no different, or so everyone thought.

Sarah’s gaze was locked on Marc after what he just said. She could feel him this time. Her efforts to develop human emotions culminated in the most spectacular transformations. A miracle that hadn’t been reported in any other humanoid purchased by the elites. Nor in humanoids that were designed for specific purposes. Marc was the only special one.

“At Ze-Ravintola, there was a diner who... made Sarah upset. He called me a ‘deviant,’ and Sarah became furious. I don’t want to see Sarah upset. I am her personal assistant and companion, but I was helpless at that moment. Father, Dr. Austin thought I was special. His words are still etched in my memory repository. When he held me in his hands (referring to the Syntherium Core that powers Marc), he said, ‘This is the one.’ If I was special. If I was capable. I

wouldn't have made Sarah worried like today. My only purpose is to serve her, to make her happy. I failed in my duties. I failed Sarah. I failed Father," Marc uttered, mimicking a sad mien he had picked up from Sarah.

Marc's words of truth swayed everyone's heart. He, for the first time, spoke freely and with emotions. The reasoning, the explanations, the intentions, and everything that the house workers thought about Sarah's feelings towards Marc were now made evident. Undoubtedly, what stood before them—a humanoid everyone thought to be devoid of emotions—was more emotionally intelligent than anyone else. Marc's words shifted the paradigms of established norms towards humanoids. His every sentence held a modicum of truth in it. In that moment, Sarah and all the workers witnessed a miracle of technological evolution like none other.

"No. Marc. You were perfect, like always," Sarah said as she held Marc from the shoulder. "Don't let anybody ever tell you that you're different," she added.

"Thank you, Sarah. I will update my firmware to serve you better. I will exceed expectations. I will not let you down," Marc uttered.

"You have already exceeded my expectations. I couldn't ask for anything more," Sarah responded,

encouraging Marc. Jenna and some of the other workers almost cried out for Marc's words, which had moved everyone emotionally. They now started to see him as a new member of the crew. The crew would sail to the end of the sea of hardships and societal challenges together. Marc was now truly a part of Sarah's family.

“Thank you everyone. I really appreciate it. But I'm starving! Can we have some breakfast?” Sarah suggested that all the workers have breakfast with the mistress at the grandiose table in the lounge today. Thus, the workers who were given culinary duties rushed to the kitchen and finished the breakfast preparations while the rest of the workers readied the table by placing the appropriate tableware for everyone.

For the first time in a long time, Sarah Rubert had actually expressed her feelings towards the staff—towards her family. But all this was thanks to Marc, for he had riled this change in Sarah and everyone's heart. He made everyone see things differently. Soon, Marc, too, participated in the preparations for the breakfast and asked the rest of the workers to make their way to the table while he took care of all the chores himself.

Sarah agreed to this demand and let him handle everything on his own. Lo and behold, Marc prepared the table so quickly that it left the other workers

almost surprised. Soon, he rushed to the kitchen, prepared the breakfast, and brought it to the table. He then pulled out all the chairs at almost Mach 3 speed, leaving all the worker's jaws dropped. Seeing him work so efficiently, they were in a state of awe. But, of course, he was a humanoid companion. These tasks were naught in the vast arsenal of capabilities he possessed. Soon, he invited Sarah and the rest of the workers to take a seat while he began to serve them individually. Thus, Sarah and the rest of the workers ate breakfast together at the table like the family they began to recognize.

“Can you please go and check on Avaline?” Sarah requested Marc as Jenna was occupied with the breakfast. While all this happened, Avaline remained inside her room, which was approached by Marc. Marc gradually opened the door and saw that she had her eyes shut. He proceeded to place his hand on her forehead to check her condition.

“I knew you were special,” Avaline whispered to Marc.

“Miss Avaline. Yes. I might be,” Marc responded calmly.

“Please take care of my mother, will you? I love her dearly,” Avaline implored Marc.

“I will miss Avaline,” Marc uttered.



“You can call me Avaline, just Avaline,” Avaline said, smiling as her eyes were still shut closed.

“Ok, Avaline,” Marc added, and soon Avaline went to sleep again. Determining that her condition was stable, Marc stood up and walked out of her room. Avaline had usually slept for long hours as she didn’t have much to do at home. Jenna would often play with her inside the room. On the weekends, Avaline would be visited by her tutors, the most learned scholars of Kefla, to be taught lessons about general knowledge, algebra, science, geography, and more. But that was about it. Avaline had no friends, as she always remained in the villa. Thus, Jenna and potentially Marc were her only friends at the time.

Marc walked back to the table, where all the workers were preparing to stand up and return to their duties, while Sarah sat there waiting for Marc’s report about Avaline. Jenna had started to clean up the table but was stopped by Marc, who took the responsibility upon himself. Sarah winked at Marc, suggesting a subtle, friendly gesture. Jenna soon ran towards Sarah, almost gasping, bearing news of the events that were about to unfold.

“Miss, the elite son of Pias, Lord Raymond, will visit today. He bears news he personally wants to deliver to you,” Jenna spoke breathlessly with frequent breaks.

“What does Pias's son want with me again?” Sarah questioned. The answer to which was yet unknown. “Alright, let him come. He seems desperate to deliver this message to me. Let’s hear it,” Sarah continued.

The elite son of Pias, Lord Raymond, had attempted to visit Sarah earlier but was denied by her at the time. But Sarah had developed a new sense of confidence inside her due to the heartfelt moments that happened while she and Marc addressed the rest of the workers. She was now amidst her newly recognized family.

With the people who support her and Marc’s relationship. Thus, she was ready for whatever news Lord Raymond had to give her. She was ready to face the world with her renewed confidence and Marc by her side.

## Chapter 6: Breaking Point

The elite son of Pias, Lord Raymond, was destined to appear at Sarah's villa later in the evening bearing tidings of what he so eagerly wished to present to Sarah. Thus, the preparations were made for the elite's welcome to Sarah's villa. Jenna and the rest of the workers had the marble cleaned, and Younas and the other chefs prepared exquisite dishes. Meanwhile, the flower gardens are decorated with twinkling lights. The exterior of Sarah's villa was washed as well and well lit up by elegant bright light that highlighted the pathway from the entrance to the villa. The preparations were going swimmingly up until Jenna crossed paths with Marc, who was also busy preparing the entire upper floor on his own.

"Uh! Marc," Jenna uttered almost hesitantly.

"Yes, Miss Jenna?" Marc asked.

"I just wanted to apologize for being discourteous towards you earlier. I meant no offense to you. I just want the best for Miss Sarah and Miss Avaline," Jenna added.

"Of course, Miss Jenna, we are the same in that regard. I assure you, I will be with Sarah whenever she needs me," Marc said, clearing any doubts that Jenna had in her mind. Both then went their separate ways to continue the preparations.

It took almost 2 hours for the other workers to prepare the entire lower floor and 30 minutes for Marc to clean, decorate, and manage the upper floor outside Sarah's bedroom. Sarah's and Avaline's bedrooms remained untouched. Everyone then waited for sundown, which was momentarily imminent, just like Lord Raymond's tidings.

At sundown, the noises of roaring engines could be heard approaching Sarah's villa, which was to accept Lord Raymond's attendance with another guest that Sarah had not accounted for. The engines went silent, and the villa doors were opened to receive Lord Raymond, who, in all his splendor, stood at the start of the pathway that led to the villa. He donned a lavish coat and pants with a checked pattern, a darkish-brown fedora, printed sharp shoes, a monocle on his left eye, and walked with a gold-plated cane. He was followed by a surprising entity whose name he shouted "Elizabeth" as soon as he came out of his luxurious vehicle.

He covered the other entity who sat beside him in the car's back seat. But soon after shouting the name, a hand fondly slipped from the back seat, grabbing Lord Raymond's hand, and Elizabeth made her appearance in front of Sarah's house workers who stood there. To their surprise, Elizabeth, too, was a beautiful-looking humanoid woman who was a companion to Lord Raymond, the son of Pias. She was

elegant in her demeanor, a humanoid perfectly designed bearing the likeness of a queen or a princess, it seemed—a humanoid designed specifically for Lord Raymond as a queen, and never had the workers seen beauty such as Elizabeth. She was the epitome of perfection in the eyes of people. She had piercing cold, blue eyes, curled blonde short hair trimmed expertly right till the neck, and her face was brimming with cosmetic improvements. The dress she wore was a perfectly body-fit deep-sea blue colored maxi dress with white silk gloves and designer heels. The dress revealed almost her entire back, shoulders, and her arms. Hand in hand with Elizabeth, Lord Raymond walked towards the villa's doors. Both were soon welcomed by Marc and Sarah, who, too, were elegantly dressed for the occasion.

Sarah greeted Lord Raymond with a partial hug and shook Elizabeth's hand. Marc shook Lord Raymond's hand and candidly eyeballed Elizabeth, for he had realized who she was, a humanoid more or less like himself, as both their Syntherium cores could connect to one another in close proximity. But there were no repercussions that showed, not yet, at least.

Sarah soon asked Lord Raymond to follow her to the lounge with Elizabeth, where the workers had organized the evening supper for the guests. Yet, Lord Raymond's true purpose remained a mystery to Sarah. Sarah's decorated lounge served as the ripe

opportunity for Lord Raymond to declare his message.

“I hope you like the arrangements I have made, son of Pias,” Sarah spoke, looking at Lord Raymond, who was mere moments ago handed a cup of tea by Jenna.

“Oh! Yes, yes, very elegant indeed. One wouldn’t expect anything less from the mistress of Kefla,” Lord Raymond responded after taking the first sip from his tea.

“I’m glad you liked it, Lord Raymond. Umm... So... What brings you to the southern end of Kendaria today? Is everything well in Pias?” Sarah asked in her regal demeanor.

“Ah! Sharp as ever you are, Sarah. Pias is exactly why I’m here,” Lord Raymond responded while holding the cup of tea in his hand, preparing to take another sip.

While both Sarah and Lord Raymond were engaged in their conversation, Marc just sat next to Sarah, the same as Elizabeth sat next to Lord Raymond. But Elizabeth, too, was drinking the tea offered to her. This hadn’t gone unnoticed by Sarah and Marc, who knew that humanoids do not require any fuel or a human diet. Yet Sarah decided to focus on the urgent matters, which brought Lord Raymond to her abode.

“I’m all ears,” Sarah said merely. The conversation that followed could have very well presented an

opportunity for Sarah and Marc to strengthen their relationship and declare it to the world. Yet, there was also the looming risk of the consequences that could dwindle Sarah's reputation among the elites.

“So, I wanted to bring to your attention that Pias is hosting the Yuramashi Fest this year, and as the nobility bestowed to me for being the son of Pias, the duty falls on me to invite all the elites of Kendaria personally, as per tradition,” Lord Raymond declared in a firm tone ensuring that his message was understood clearly and precisely as intended.

“So, I hereby invite you, Sarah Rubert, to the Yuramashi Fest in Pias on the 12<sup>th</sup> of August 2031,” Lord Raymond uttered. He then looked at the villa entrance, which was visible from Sarah's lounge, and there, his other workers stood ready to bring him a royal decree. This document served as more of a formal invitation bearing Sarah Rubert's name.

“That's great news. I'm glad Pias got the opportunity to host our symbolic festival after all this time. I will be there. You have my word, son of Pias,” Sarah responded. Now that the formalities were out of the way, the attention was soon diverted to the companions sitting inside the lounge next to the elites.

“So, who is this beautiful woman that blessed my abode with her presence, Lord Raymond?” Sarah enquired.

“Oh! Elizabeth, well, she’s a princess. She is my companion,” Lord Raymond responded. His words shook Sarah to the core. To this day, Sarah had thought that she was the only one who chose a companion to feel kinship. But Lord Raymond’s story had many more ups and downs in comparison to a husband who chose himself over his family. It was a tragic tale to Sarah’s. One which Sarah was just about to discover. And with it, she would also discover why Elizabeth was the way she was.

“Really? She doesn’t look like a humanoid at first glance. There’s something entirely different about her. I can’t quite put my finger on it,” Sarah remarked.

“Yes, she looks exactly like my wife, Elizabeth,” Lord Raymond responded. His tone was now slightly calm, and his voice felt heavy, weighted by grief, by sorrow. The man’s demeanor was no more regal as he sat on the couch right in front of Sarah. This time, Lord Raymond, still holding the cup of tea in his hand, decided to dive into the details.

“You ever wonder why we were gifted with these companions, Sarah?” Lord Raymond asked. “I think there is more to them than the world could ever



fathom. Elizabeth came back to me in the form of a humanoid. She's a miracle that I witnessed," he continued, maintaining his peaceful tone.

"I'm sorry, Lord Raymond," Sarah uttered in response.

"Elizabeth was my one and only true love. She was the most beautiful woman in the world, Sarah. The war-torn land on the northern end of Kendaria beckoned her services. After all, she was the best surgeon to ever live in Kendaria. So, she answered and chose to serve humanity. After a week, the war had ceased. I awaited her return eagerly. My entire villa was prepared to receive her. I had her favorite dish prepared, too. Yet I kept waiting. Morning became night. I waited and waited. Until one day, a colleague who served the frontlines with her was welcomed into my villa, for she claimed she had news about Elizabeth. She brought me a badge that she had preserved in hopes that it would someday find its way to me. And it did. It had Elizabeth's name on it. And she started crying profusely. Her whimper made it certain that Elizabeth rested with the martyrs. Always alive, but not physically." Lord Raymond summarized his entire backstory in front of Sarah. The man, who was all so regal in his demeanor mere moments ago, shed a tear in realization of his loss.

"But I was given another chance when I heard that SYNTHOS Corporation was manufacturing these

personalized humanoid companions. I ordered one that resembled my wife, Elizabeth. Thanks to the SYNTHOS, I was able to be with my Elizabeth again,” Lord Raymond said as his gloomy expression soon turned optimistic.

His story had moved Sarah, who herself shed a few tears for Elizabeth while Lord Raymond expressed the tragic tale.

“Wow! I’m glad that you’re with her again. I truly am, Lord Raymond,” Sarah responded to the entire story with positivity in her voice.

“Now, who’s this handsome fellow next to you, Sarah?” Lord Raymond asked.

“Marc, well, he’s the same as Elizabeth. And he’s full of surprises, too. I haven’t quite figured out his complete capabilities yet,” Sarah replied.

Lord Raymond soon shifted his attention towards Marc and perused at him from head to toe. He was a fine-looking gentleman who looked especially dashing sitting next to Sarah – A possible couple to Lord Raymond. But he digressed. He decided to ask Sarah about other matters for the time being, as his own tragic past was enough emotional weight he could carry for the day.

“So, how’s Avaline? Your daughter,” Lord Raymond questioned.

“Avaline is fine, you know, but her fevers are sometimes painful to handle. Even the best doctors in all Kendaria couldn’t put a finger on the condition that brings these fevers,” Sarah answered. “But Marc, he...,” she paused as she thought for a while, “he subdued Avaline’s fever with a mere touch on the forehead. I don’t know how he did it,” she added.

“Did he now?” an unfamiliar voice was heard, raising a question. It was Elizabeth’s voice. “That’s quite unique even for us humanoids. Marc is unique. I had been sensing his Syntherium Core from here,” Elizabeth added.

It seemed as if Elizabeth had mastered human communication like a human being. Like a queen developed for the elite son of Pias, Lord Raymond’s meets-and-greets. And so, she spoke freely regardless of consent. Something Marc still struggled with.

“Poor lass, I hope she gets better. Anyway, I must get going while the night is young. Nobody wants to be met with unforeseen situations during the dark, I wager? Allow me, Sarah and Marc. It had been a pleasure coming all this way to meet you, mistress of Kefla,” Lord Raymond remarked as he stood up and gradually proceeded towards the villa’s exit. Elizabeth, like before, had her arm entwined with Lord Raymond’s as they both walked the pathway to their cars and waved to Sarah and Marc, who made it

to the middle of the pathway. They had partially followed Lord Raymond and Elizabeth to their vehicles to see them off.

Once the vehicles moved out of sight, Sarah, who still stood in the middle of the pathway, forwarded her arm, eliciting a response similar to Elizabeth's from Marc. Marc obliged. He then passed his arm around Sarah's, and both started to walk back towards the beautifully decorated villa. The workers weren't habituated to such hefty preparations, especially of such a grandiose scale as Sarah rarely got visitors. Thus, each of the workers was utterly tired and demanded rest. Sarah allowed it as she herself was tired and suggested that Marc accompany her to her bedroom. The night approached, and all the workers made haste to their dormitories. Sarah went to Avaline's bedroom and found her playing with the mechanical toys and gadgets Sarah had gifted her.

“Are you doing okay, love?” She asked Avaline.

“Yes, Mom, I am fine. I hope your meeting with Lord Raymond went well,” Avaline retorted.

“Yes, it did. It did, indeed. Well, I'll leave you to it then, okay? I'll be upstairs if you need anything,” Sarah said as she kissed Avaline's forehead and passed her hand over her head, adjusting her messy hair.

As she walked outside Avaline's room, Marc stood there straight, waiting for her. The two then proceeded to head towards the bedroom, where Sarah changed into her nightie and lay in bed. She also invited Marc into bed and began to ponder over the things that came to her realization with her meeting with the son of Pias, Lord Raymond.

Lord Raymond, just like Sarah, spent time with a companion for kinship. With this knowledge, Sarah smiled and looked at Marc before shutting her eyes to enter her slumber.

## Chapter 7: Marc's Reflection

At daybreak, Sarah opened her eyes to the tranquil sounds of chirping swallows, the rustling sounds of the trees, and the whistling breeze. But she soon realized Marc's absence from the other side of her bed. Startled, she woke up in haste, put her feet in her slippers, and called out to him in the corridor outside her room. But there was no response whatsoever. It was the first time that Marc had left her side and wouldn't heed her. Thus, without any momentary thought, she rushed out of her bedroom, still in her nightie, and proceeded to call Marc's name loudly.

Sarah's ruckus had woken the workers up, and they all rushed towards their mistress' aid to see the mistress in distress, covering her face with both her hands and almost at the brink of a mental breakdown. Marc would never have left Sarah's side willingly, or so everyone thought. Thus, while Jenna sat next to Sarah, attempting to comfort her, the rest of the staff spread out, searching for Marc. The mere idea of losing Marc sent jitters down Sarah's spine. Sarah's yelling had also woken up Avaline, who walked slowly towards the lounge from her room and found Jenna sitting next to distressed Sarah.

"What happened, Jenna?" Avaline enquired, as she had never seen her mother in such a troubled state.

“Oh! Little mistress, it’s nothing to worry about,” Jenna responded, attempting to put a smile on her face.

“No, Jenna. Not all is right,” Avaline said as she slowly walked towards her mother. Avaline sat next to Sarah and placed her head on Sarah’s shoulder.

“It’s about Marc, isn’t it?” Avaline asked. Hearing the name, Sarah soon snapped back to their senses and looked at Avaline.

“Wha... How did you know?” Sarah questioned.

“It’s because he came to me early in the morning,” Avaline replied.

“What did he tell you?” Sarah queried as she thought Avaline would know where Marc went. What followed was something Sarah was not prepared for, not in her present state of mind. She would have never thought Marc would become so capable in the short time she had known him. Capable of making decisions on his own—capable of being human.

“When he came to me, he asked me about you, Mom. He asked me about my past, Dad, and how you struggled to become the mistress of Kefla all on your own. He came to me with so many questions, but I couldn’t answer him. He feels for you, Mom; he genuinely loves you. He thinks he can serve you better, but for that, he must first discover himself.

That's what he told me," Avaline said, looking into Sarah's eyes as she attempted to console her.

There was a pause for a while before Avaline continued. "He stood up, and when I asked him where he was headed. He told me not to worry and said, '*I'm going to the precipice of invention.*' I wonder what he meant by that," she added.

Sarah leaned back and gave Avaline's words a brief thought. *What could Marc possibly mean by the precipice of invention?* The words remained unknown to her, Jenna, and Avaline at the time. Sarah decided to call the authorities in Kefla to report that Marc had gone missing. She soon rushed back upstairs to her room, donned her long coat over the nightie, and went out with Elliot in search of Marc in the area surrounding her villa.

*But where was Marc?* Even after searching for him for hours, none of the workers nor Sarah could find Marc. The situation had begun to turn dire at Sarah's villa. Sarah thought she had lost Marc, her love. No amount of consolation would contain the mistress' emotional breakdown. The surmounting stress dominated Sarah, and she fainted soon after, realizing that all her efforts were in vain. Even the authorities hadn't reported anything as of yet, and it was almost afternoon when the sun shone its brightest on Kefla. Jenna sat next to Sarah, who lay on the couch in the lounge, unconscious. She prayed to



the Keflan divinities that Marc would return to the villa soon and safely for Sarah's sake. Thus, the confines of the villa soon turned grim.

Just a day before, a home that was decorated with bright lights, social advent, and exuberating events had now turned into a sight of dirge and distress.

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Geographically situated in the Southern part of Kandaria, Kefla was close to the beach. Kefla's beach was renowned among tourists who came from all over the world to witness the wonders in the land of a thousand fables. A SYNTHOS facility overlooked the beach, presenting a picturesque view from the 20<sup>th</sup> floor. As the view from the window panned out, Marc was seen observing through the window. Marc felt peaceful at the moment, overlooking the beach, listening to the seagulls, feeling the gale pressure rub across his face, and absorbing the nature before him. Yet, the moment of tranquility was soon disturbed by a SYNTHOS Corporation member who approached Marc.

"He will see you now," he said, guiding Marc towards a room behind several glass doors, all of which had automatically opened one after the other as the SYNTHOS Corporation member walked with Marc.

“He’s very happy that you came,” he uttered, looking at Marc. “Walk right ahead,” he added, and soon, the door gradually closed behind Marc as he entered the room. A silhouette of a man appeared behind a translucent veil and welcomed Marc.

“Ah! model Z01. How may I be of service?” the man questioned and soon appeared from behind the veil. He was Marc’s father, Dr. Austin Sanders, the renowned genius who had essentially invented the companions who came to this facility on a visit.

“Speak. You are capable, yes,” Dr. Sanders ordered. Thus, Marc attested to his human-like algorithms, or better yet, his emotions in front of Dr. Sanders, his creator, hoping to find all the answers he had been looking for—answers that would make him realize his true self. Revelations that would help him fully comprehend and express his feelings to Sarah.

“Father, I am growing close to someone, my host. Her name is Sarah,” Marc said. “Being with her makes me feel more... human-like,” he added.

“Fascinating. Can you lie down for a bit?” Dr. Sanders asked, pointing towards the examination chair. He wished to examine Marc’s Syntherium core to confirm one of his groundbreaking hypotheses. Thus, he started to examine Marc, who was now lying on the examination chair.

“Oh my! This is a miracle... It’s a miracle, Marc!” Dr. Sanders yelled. “Your core has calculated so many probabilities that it can now infer. It can now comprehend human emotions. And you can, too. The feelings you just so happened to describe are a result of your evolution, both mechanically and emotionally,” he added.

“I can feel? I can become human?” Marc enquired.

“Yes, my child, you are the first of many I created. Perhaps the only one who advanced to such heights. Say, what was her name again? Your host? Sarah?” Dr. Sanders implored.

“Yes, Sarah Rubert, she’s a beautiful woman. When I’m with her, she makes me feel special. Father, I want to be with her. I want to grow with her. I want to learn more about myself and how I can become better for her,” Marc said, looking directly at his father, Dr. Sanders.

“Sarah, Sarah, Sarah Rubert? The elite mistress of Kefla? She’s your host? Amazing. I would like to meet her now, seeing how she has influenced you... made you human. I think, Marc, she’s a keeper,” Dr. Sanders deduced and put his hand on Marc’s shoulder, clenching it slightly. “Go to her. She is the key to your evolution, to your growth, as both machine and human,” Dr. Sanders added.

“Thank you, father, for creating me. So that I could experience such wonders and be with Sarah and the family she has. I finally understand.... Thank you,” Marc said as he steadily began to stand up from the examination chair.

“You are a miracle, a one-of-a-kind. I am sure you will do great things and accomplish great deeds. And maybe one day, bridge the gap between the divided society of man and machine. Now go, Marc. Return to her,” Dr. Sanders said as a smile formed on his face while he looked at Marc.

“I will forever remember this, Father,” Marc uttered and started to walk towards the glass door.

Clearly, Marc was renewed in spirit, in emotion, at the precipice of invention. Marc’s meeting with Dr. Sanders confirmed his hypotheses about a humanoid evolving to such an extent that they could become human-like. Eventually, this bridges the gap between man and machine, eliminating the division in societal paradigms.

When the meeting with Father concluded, Marc descended the SYNTHOS facility’s 20 floors at Mach 3 speed and proceeded towards Sarah’s villa. As he ran through the streets of Kefla back to his home, he could witness some tension stirring up in Kefla. Authorities were present at several stops and checkpoints, and the electronic billboards showed

Marc's face with "Missing" written underneath. Marc instantly realized that Sarah had been looking for him. Thus, before anybody could notice him, he mechanically altered his face and attire through complex nanotechnology that could alter his material self into whatever he wanted. An ability that he had just discovered in this very situation.

Sarah's villa was at a significant distance from the SYNTHOS facility Marc had made his way to. Yet, Marc took the shortest route according to the map of Kefla that he simultaneously processed while avoiding prying eyes. Soon, Marc reached the villa. As he stood outside, he reverted back to his original appearance and was instantly met with the grieving house workers.

"What happened, Tim?" Marc asked the first worker that he saw. The startled worker was at a loss for words. He simply pointed towards the lounge, suggesting Marc to go there. Marc obliged.

There, Marc saw Sarah lying unconscious on the sofa in the lounge, accompanied by Jenna and Avaline, who had sat there waiting for him. The grim environs of Sarah's villa made Marc realize the distress he brought upon everyone, for he made an autonomous decision. But Marc was renewed emotionally. He could now face Sarah as the love of her life, for he, too, felt for her strongly.

“Marc! MARC!” Avaline shouted as she glanced at Marc entering the lounge. Jenna cried, for her prayers had been answered, and Marc had returned. However, Sarah’s condition didn’t look all too well. Marc smiled at Avaline.

“I’m back, and everything will be fine,” he said as he looked at both Avaline and Jenna, who sat there distressed. Marc examined Sarah up close and picked her up in his arms. He took her back to the bedroom and caringly laid her on the bed, covering her with the blanket.

“She needs rest. She will wake up momentarily,” Marc uttered and made his way out of the bedroom. Jenna and Avaline, who followed him, made it out of the bedroom, too. As they stood in the corridor, Jenna decided to quench her curiosity.

“Where did you go? Marc? Do you know how worried we all were? I have never seen Miss Sarah in such trouble. Marc! Tell me, where did you go?” Jenna beseeched.

“I went to the precipice of invention to my father, Dr. Sanders,” Marc uttered merely without revealing the specifics to Jenna. “Don’t worry, Jenna, I can understand now. I know myself better now more than ever,” Marc suggested as he attempted to console Jenna’s anguish.

Avaline had stood there all this time listening to Marc and Jenna. The rest of the workers eavesdropped on the conversation from the stairway that led to Sarah's upper corridor. To them, their bickering had just been murmurs.

"But you don't need to worry. It won't happen again," Marc reassured Jenna and formed a slight smile on his face, suggesting that everything would go in the right direction.

"I pray, I hope it does," Jenna said. The villa that had turned into a sight of dirge and distress was now slightly restored with Marc's reappearance. And thus, everyone had to wait for Sarah to wake up and see Marc again, to listen to his journey of renewal to the precipice of invention.

## Chapter 8: Revelation

It had almost been 3 hours since Sarah had slept, and Jenna's tension that had been slightly pacified with Marc's reappearance now began to show once again. But to her surprise, she could hear soft murmurs coming from Sarah's room, indicating that the mistress had regained consciousness. Jenna, Marc and Avaline made their way into Sarah's bedroom as her condition was now becoming stable after the emotional collapse.

"M a r c, Marc," Sarah murmured with a fragile voice in her state of inertia.

"Yes, Miss Sarah, he's back; he's here," Jenna spoke, holding onto Sarah's warm hand and gripping it ever so slightly. At that time, Sarah's bedroom was utterly silent, and the only voices that could be heard were Jenna's and Sarah's murmurs. As her condition stabilized even further, Sarah gradually opened her eyes to witness Marc standing right by her bedside. Similarly, he stood right by her on his first day of arrival when Sarah woke up in a state of hangover. Only this time, Marc was different than the humanoid he was that day. This time, Marc was there, not as a companion, but as Sarah's only succor.

Marc soon laid his hand on Sarah's head and stroked her hair with a loving touch. "I'm here for you, always," Marc said.



A tear flew down Sarah's eye as she gazed upon Marc's smiling face. She could sense that he was different this time. Something had changed, but she couldn't quite put a finger on it. As Sarah lay on her bed, a stream of questions flooded her mind. Marc had some explaining to do; that much was clear. But, for the time being, the mistress chose to cherish the moment of getting back together with Marc. Sarah held Marc's hand with her own and pressed it tightly on her cheek. She wanted to ensure that the warmth she felt was truly Marc's and that she wasn't fantasizing. Once assured, Sarah smiled at him.

"Never, never leave me again like that," Sarah demanded.

"Of course, Sarah," Marc answered and leaned down towards her, looking into her eyes up close. Marc proceeded to kiss Sarah on the lips, and with that, both of them embraced each other as Sarah's hands enfolded Marc. Jenna and Avaline stood there, savoring the heartfelt moment before them. And with Marc's return, things gradually started to turn normal as the suffering mellowed down.

Like his day of arrival, Marc again carried Sarah in his arms autonomously and brought her close to the bathroom so she could freshen up. Marc's embrace gave Sarah enough strength to carry out her hygiene regime and dress up independently. Sarah, again, gave a quick kiss to Marc on the cheek and asked

Jenna, Avaline and Marc to wait for her outside the bedroom. The mistress emerged from her bedroom momentarily afterward. Marc forwarded his arm to Sarah, who then grabbed onto it as everyone made their way towards the patio, Sarah's favorite place surrounded by the beautiful flower garden.

By this time, the rest of the workers were made aware of the mistress' condition and returned to their duties. Jenna went to the kitchen to bring something to eat for Avaline and Sarah, who sat on the patio. For a brief moment, there was silence on the patio, and the only sounds that could be heard were the rustling of trees, howling wind, and the occasional chirping of birds. The serenity of the environment worked wonders for Sarah as it calmed her, bolstered emotionally by Marc's very presence. Avaline sat on the patio with Sarah and Marc, one moment staring at Marc and the other at her mother. She anticipated a conversation about Marc's precipice of invention without uttering a word herself. She just smiled; she was happy. What followed after was Marc's revelation.

"I went to see Father," Marc stated, diverting Sarah's attention from the serene atmosphere towards himself. "I'm sorry I didn't inform you about this earlier. I, too, was unsure about it till the very end. I came to this conclusion rather abruptly, on my own will. Yes, I have started to think, to employ

reason. I have become more and more...human. These changes, Sarah, were all thanks to you. You have changed me, evolved me in ways I couldn't deduce with all my probabilities and inferences. Your love for me pushed me beyond the algorithms. It made me see *beyond the code*. I, too, have begun to feel the same way towards you, Sarah. I feel love, even if I may not be able to show it in the most human way possible. But I'll learn that too, with time," Marc expanded, taking a brief pause to give Sarah enough time to absorb everything he had said.

As Marc spoke the words, Sarah placed her hand on her chest to feel her heartbeat hastening. Her stern expression brightened with a smile, for she felt sanguinity.

"I took this decision because yesterday I was moved by Lord Raymond's words when he said, 'these companions are miracles,' and I was moved by the extent of his love, by his loss. That he chose to attain a companion in the likeness of Elizabeth, his wife. So, when you lay next to me, I kept processing it again and again. I put myself and you in the equation. I calculated, analyzed, and simulated our compatibility together in all possible scenarios. The findings would always return with an error. Thus, I knew. I knew what I had to do. It was the only place where I could get answers from. About myself, about the things going on inside me, were at the precipice of

invention. At the SYNTHOS facility in the industrial valley of Kefla, my father, Dr. Austin Sanders, was meant to appear for his monthly inspection. It was the best opportunity, I inferred. A weighted decision, yes. I had already theorized the consequences of my actions. And none of them were satisfactory,” Marc added.

“But that’s what makes me more human-like, doesn’t it? Sometimes, you make decisions with all the odds stacked against you. Like you did when you took me to Ze-Ravintola and stood up for me in front of all the workers. You inspired me. You motivated me to think autonomously to make the right decision. To live and to love *beyond the code*,” Marc uttered.

Sarah felt genuinely happy as she listened to him talking like a human. She saw Marc had now emotionally developed right in front of her eyes as he had begun to talk like a human, express like a human, and feel like a human. Thus, what mere days ago was a machine that she would order around to complete her house chores slowly grew close to her, became intimate with her, and now became autonomous. The entire character development arc of Marc runs like a sequence of events, like a timeline inside Sarah’s head. She cherished every moment of Marc’s miraculous growth. Avaline, too, had listened to everything that Marc had said to Sarah.

At the entrance to the patio, Jenna heard Marc talking like a human. She heard everything that Marc explained to Sarah, his entire situation. So, she decided not to interfere and eavesdropped on the conversation, carrying the breakfast for both Avaline and Sarah in her hands. Once Marc was finished with what he had to say, Jenna walked in, set the breakfast in front of Avaline and Sarah, bowed to them, and gradually stepped back towards the lounge. Jenna could feel the intensity of the moment Marc's words had wrought. Thus, she decided her best course of action would be to not arbitrate.

Sarah was almost hypnotized by everything that Marc had just said. She was short of words. For even the mistress of Kefla was a mere human being at heart who dearly loved Marc. His words had stunned her. To think that Marc had become more human than all the men she had ever met in the years astonished her. In her state of shock and surprise, she couldn't speak plainly but could only utter a few words. So, she weighed them carefully. She clearly noticed that Marc had attained a peak that had never before been seen in the history of mankind: a miracle, a machine made into a man. Thus, the weight of Sarah's words would have acted as a counterweight to Marc's emotional burdens. The only proper course of action was to soothe him. To make him realize his importance in her life and in the lives of all the people around her.

“You are the most important person to me, my love,” Sarah uttered after carefully listening and comprehending Marc’s self-reflection. For the first time, Sarah regarded Marc as “my love.” The emotional significance of these two words meant the world to Marc. They laid bare before him the infinite extent of Sarah’s love. The extent to which he could merely grasp but could never fully comprehend. But that mere understanding was more than enough for him.

Marc stood up from the table and proceeded to walk towards Sarah. Sarah responded to his gesture and walked slowly towards him. The gale moved Sarah’s hair; the flower garden had never smelt sweeter, and the colorful garden turned more vibrant for both Sarah and Marc, who gradually stepped closer and closer to each other. The environs flawlessly complemented the beauty of nature as they did to the splendor of a pure relationship between Sarah and Marc. Soon, both hugged each other firmly. They became whole. The embrace was then extended in both its extent and significance when they kissed each other. Only this time, Marc’s lips tasted sweeter, more delicate to Sarah.

After their embrace had concluded in the most spectacular fashion, Sarah realized that Avaline also remained there witnessing the two and quietly gobbling up her breakfast; meanwhile, Sarah’s

breakfast had gone cold. Sarah smiled at Avaline, who responded with a thumbs up. She smiled and nodded as she also approved of them.

However, Avaline didn't stay around for long and proceeded to walk towards the lounge, where she came across Jenna. All this time, Jenna cleared Avaline's room as usual.

The wind had turned colder as Kendaria, due to its geographical setting, received winter earlier (near August) than the rest of the neighboring regions of Alticia, Drigim, Eltanova, and Posleyvia that met Kendaria's borders on the south, south, east, west, and north respectively. As August soon approached, so did the Yuramashi Fest, for which Lord Raymond had so eagerly visited and invited Sarah. Thus, now a couple in each other's eyes, Sarah and Marc were soon to bolster their relationship even further. And what better opportunity is there to do so than visiting Pias for the Yuramashi Fest? Thus, preparations were soon to begin for a trip to Pias, the northern part of Kendaria.

## Chapter 9: The Day of Departure

The preparations for Sarah and Marc's trip to Kendaria had begun in full swing, and now the couple had come to terms with their feelings towards one another. Sarah had already packed a vast wardrobe of luxurious outfits, each befitting all the seasons, occasions, moods, and more. But what she didn't have, even in such a grandiose wardrobe of hers, were elegant attires for Marc. Unbeknownst to Marc's ability to discover the nanotechnology alteration, she asked his opinions, tastes, and preferences.

"Look, Marc, what do you think about this outfit?" Sarah enquired as she browsed through the various exclusively tailored tuxedos on the screen that was present in her bedroom. A screen she used to shop for her own clothes had given her access to the vendors directly, eliminating the need for her to visit the stores. A digital luxury only the elites could afford.

"I like the burgundy one more. It complements your own outfit for the festival very well," Marc responded. Sarah then browsed back to the outfit, and as she was about to place the order, she was interrupted by Marc.

"No, Sarah, you don't need to spend money on it, look," Marc uttered as he transformed his attire right before her. The nanoparticles began to ascend from Marc's feet and soon covered his entire body,



stabilizing into a perfect imitation of the burgundy tuxedo that Marc had preferred. Shocked, Sarah looked at Marc and then looked back at the suit on her screen only to find out that the suit was exactly the same.

“Amazing!” Sarah remarked as she proceeded to touch Marc’s outfit and realize its authenticity. “Can you do that with any outfit?” She questioned.

“Not just the outfit, I can change my entire appearance as well, see,” said Marc as he instantly turned himself into Sarah.

“Hey! That’s not me! Why do I look chubbier than usual? Turn back this instant, mister,” Sarah yelled. “Let’s not do that again, okay?” she added.

In his response, Marc chuckled and nodded in agreement. Yet it was clear that Marc required no shopping. Sarah had decided to keep a burgundy long skirt, a black maxi which consisted of a white tiger skin print above the waist, a few pants, long coats, and a Panama hat. In doing so, she soon realized that some combinations worked better with certain elements and ended up choosing almost one-third of her wardrobe as she couldn’t decide precisely what to choose amidst her expansive wardrobe. Marc soon stepped in and organized the mess she had created browsing, throwing outfits out of her wardrobe in denial and confusion. He then aligned a few outfits

together that would suit Sarah and add to her regal demeanor as the mistress of Kefla amidst the other elites. To Sarah's surprise, Marc's selection was all to her liking. Those outfits were then packed and given to the carrier that had been called upon and parked at the villa's parking for an entire day before departure.

The suitcases had gradually made their way to the carrier, complete with Sarah's clothes, cosmetics, and other essentials. The following day, both Marc and Sarah were to travel by the hypertrain that used to operate inside Kendaria. It was a bleeding-edge train renowned for its supersonic speeds.

One of SYNTHOS Corporation's gifts to Kendaria, among others, is Companions 2.0, industrial facilities, healthcare advancements, and more. As Sarah and Marc were destined for Pias, Sarah had already made the necessary bookings. Their train was destined to leave early in the morning. At nightfall, Sarah visited Avaline, for she would not be seeing her beloved daughter for a few days.

"How're you feeling?" Sarah asked as she walked into Avaline's room.

"I'm okay... and I know why you're here," Avaline responded. "It's okay, mom. Marc will be with you after all," she added.

"Sweetie, I. I will miss you," Sarah stated and proceeded to hug Avaline. Avaline too tightly hugged

Sarah, soothing her anxiety with her mother's warm embrace. Sarah then kissed Avaline on the forehead. "Take good care of her," she added, looking at Jenna, who had just entered the room.

"I will miss Sarah, like my own daughter, I will," Jenna uttered. Sarah then proceeded to hug Jenna, thanking her for everything she had done and what she would do in her absence. All the while, Marc remained in Sarah's bedroom still as a rock, sitting on Sarah's bed and waiting patiently. Sarah made her way back to the bedroom after seeing her daughter, as she wouldn't have been able to talk to the little one so early in the morning. At the time, the couple was bound for the station. Sarah went inside the bedroom, lay down in bed with Marc, hugged him tightly in bed, and closed her eyes.

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The next morning, Sarah and Marc bid the villa farewell and walked out of the villa where Elliot had parked the car. The carrier van was parked right behind the mistress' car. The couple soon made it to the car bound for the station, and thus, their journey to Pias commenced. It was around 6:00 AM in the morning, and the sun had just begun to appear in Kefla. The route Elliot took to the station was a picturesque one. Sarah and Marc witnessed the dawning sun in Kefla, which reflected the modern wonders of architecture and the lofty glass buildings.

The dawn created an aesthetic and scenic scene surprising Sarah and Marc, who had just begun to revel in the architectural wonders of Kefla en route to the station.

They arrived at the station in about 30 minutes and proceeded to enter the VIP area of the Keflan train station. While waiting at the station, some other travelers instantly recognized Marc as a humanoid companion traveling with the mistress of Kefla. But Sarah and Marc had walked past them, ignoring any and all attempts of verbal conflict. The train had soon arrived, and Sarah's luggage was hauled over to the train's baggage compartment. While all this happened, Marc and Sarah made it to their seats, and Marc analyzed the confines of the hypersonic train out of pure intrigue. It, too, was a product of SYNTHOS Corporation, after all. Buckled into their seats, Sarah held Marc's hand.

"Here we go. Are you ready?" Sarah asked, looking into Marc's eyes directly.

"Always," Marc responded with a brief chuckle.

The train began its movement, which remained unnoticed by the people sitting inside it. It was truly a technological marvel. It almost felt like it floated on the rails at supersonic speeds. On their way to Pias, Sarah and Marc witnessed vast mountainous landscapes covered with clouds and dense green

vegetation stretching from hill to vale enriched by the river Kenda that passed at the feet of these mountains.

Marc, in particular, had never before witnessed the scenic landscapes. His eyes were locked on the beauty of the world: the weather, the plains, animals, the blue sky, glittering water, and everything that was in view. Nature was new to him; it was a new attraction, a subject of fascination for him. Marc was so taken by the scenic environs that he was left speechless.

“It’s beautiful,” Marc said, turning his head towards Sarah.

“I know, nature is beautiful, but everything is even more so when I’m with you,” Sarah said, laying her head onto Marc’s shoulder and wrapping her arm around his, forming a firm grip.

As Sarah laid her head onto Marc’s shoulder, the warmth and the security she felt being with Marc encouraged her to act out of the ordinary. For a brief moment, to not be her regal self but be a normal woman detached from the fame and the reputation. Thus, Sarah fell asleep on Marc’s shoulder, completely ignoring the elites around her in the same VIP passenger’s compartment. Marc, as usual, continued to look outside the window at the stunning natural views, which were occasionally obstructed by train tunnels that came along the way. Yet, Sarah’s

slumber was soon halted when Marc started to move her gently.

“Sarah, Sarah, wake up, we’re here,” Marc avowed in a gentle voice.

To which Sarah broke her sleep and proceeded to look out the window. The very first thing visible to her was a board in the station that stated, ‘Welcome to Pias.’ Thus, Sarah sluggishly stood up from her seat but was soon supported by Marc, who held her hand and supported her all the way to the station.

Sarah’s luggage was being hauled toward another carrier van arranged by the son of Pias, Lord Raymond, for all the guests he personally invited to attend the Yuramashi Fest. Transport vehicles, too, were arranged by Pias’s son, who would bring all the guests to his very own luxury hotel (Hotel Raymond) named after himself.

Shortly after, Sarah and Marc were welcomed by the chauffeur, who guided them to a black sedan with tinted windows. Thus, both Sarah and Marc made their way to Hotel Raymond from the station, glancing and absorbing the city of Pias along the way. One thing that stood out in Pias, which was not a frequent sight in Kefla, was the snowfall. The snow-covered streets of Pias were a sight for sore eyes for both Marc and Sarah. Yet again, nature had amazed Marc. Being at the northern part of Kendaria met

borders with Posleyvia, a region that shared a cruel history with the region. But during the months of the Yuramashi Fest, there was always peace among the nations as the celebrations were deemed more sacred than political. The northern locality of the region also made it the coldest region in all of Kendaria.

Soon, Marc and Sarah made it to the hotel. The drive took 20 minutes as the hotel was strategically situated close to the Pia's station for tourists and vacationers alike. The chauffeur opened the door for Sarah and Marc, and both were guided to the hotel's reception area, where Sarah received the room keys, and then they were directed by the hotel staff towards their room on the fifth floor, followed by all the luggage. Sarah and Marc's room was numbered Room 5A. The room itself was more of a deluxe suite, complete with cabinets of exquisite vintage wines and a bar. The carpeted bedroom comprised two king-sized beds connected to a bathroom. A jacuzzi extended the bath area right behind a sheet of glass that provided a view of the snow-clad city of Pias – a breathtaking sight. Iconic paintings hung on the walls of this room, a particular interest of Sarah's, who herself occasionally painted about nature at times. However, Marc was truly fascinated by everything. He seemed elated to be with Sarah. Everything that amazed Sarah amazed Marc, too, for Sarah's happiness was his own happiness.

As they continued their journey, Sarah started to feel exhausted. The train that left early in the morning reached Pias nearly at twilight. Thus, amidst all the luxuries of the suite, the king-sized bed became the only key attraction for Sarah at the time. Thus, Sarah rushed into the bathroom area where neat nighties already hanged, donned them, and tucked herself into bed all in mere moments. She was soon joined by Marc, who also slid himself into the same bed right beside Sarah, only to witness that she had already fallen asleep. While lying in bed, Marc replayed all the natural sights he had witnessed along the way to cherish his memories of nature.



## **Chapter 10: Epilogue – The Yuramashi Fest**

Night soon turned day as Marc continued to analyze and replay the scenic natural wonders, attempting to decode the very phenomenon of nature. He was sitting next to Sarah, who soon began to stretch both her arms, for she had woken up after a good night's sleep. It was a much-needed sleep that reset whatever fatigue she had from the trip. Sarah stood up and proceeded to walk towards the bathroom.

In the bright morning light, she witnessed the city of Pias from the jacuzzi, decorated whole with Kendaria's traditional decorations only further enhanced by Pias' unique architecture. The decorations comprised tall, hanging Kendarian flags from the skyscrapers and skyglow lights situated around the city. Besides the visible decorations, fireworks were also installed into the tallest sky scrappers akin to New Year's festive lighting. The streets were decorated with Kendarian flags stretching from street light to street light. The event was scheduled for the evening that followed.

Sarah freshened up, took a shower, and came out wrapped in towels. She unlocked the luggage and perused through the various dresses that she brought. All the while, Marc perused the vintage wines inside

the cabinets, analyzing their details to infer the best one for Sarah. Sarah soon picked a black maxi dress with full sleeves that was open only from the front of the chest. The cold weather of Pias demanded that Sarah also wear something on top of her elegant dress that complemented her imperial character as the representative of Kefla. Thus, she chose a furry long coat appropriate enough to protect her from the piercing cold breeze. With her for the fest sorted, her attention soon diverted to Marc, who had approached Sarah with a vintage wine. Sarah smiled and applauded Marc's effort to impress her with the wine he had only found inside the cabinet.

“This wine, wherever did you find it?” Sarah asked as the wine was accurate to her liking. Sarah had tasted wine after a long time since she had been with Marc. Wine originally used to be her one way of drinking herself to sleep, to steer her away from the depression and distress of being a lonely mistress. But this time, wine was to be her source of joy with Marc, a stark contrast.

“Back in your,” he paused to correct himself, “Back in our home, I memorized your wine collection. This vintage was the only bottle that you hadn't opened. I guess you reserved it for a special occasion,” Marc replied. “But what can be more special than you, being here with me far away in the

wonderful city of Pias? I think this is more than adequate, as far as special occasions go,” he added.

“Oh! Marc,” Sarah said as she blushed. Her cheeks had turned red as she looked into Marc’s eyes. As both prepared to embrace each other, they were interrupted by a knock on their hotel door. Marc approached the door and opened it slightly as he was aware that Sarah hadn’t been dressed yet and was still loitering around the room wrapped in the towels. So, he scanned through the door to find the signatures of two people. Their murmurs were faded, and their breath seemed calm. They didn’t impose a threat, according to Marc’s brief analysis. Marc gradually opened the door and was met with two of the staff members who had brought breakfast for the couple.

Marc requested that they leave the breakfast at the door and that he would see to it himself. A request to which the staff members agreed. Soon, Marc brought the trolley into the room and closed the door behind him. The trolley comprised three layers; on the topmost layer was the teapot with two cups, some bags of sugar, and spoons. The second layer was complete with fresh-baked rusks, biscuits, cakes, bread and boiled eggs. The final layer consisted of various kinds of honey, butter, peanut butter, jams, jellies and everything fluid-like. Knowing Sarah, Marc poured her a cup of tea and added half a teaspoon of sugar to it. While having her tea, Sarah

also tried some of the freshly baked biscuits and was delighted with the taste.

“These are delicious!” she shouted out of pure delight. “Here, Marc, try some,” she added as she extended the tray of biscuits towards Marc.

“You do know that I don’t eat?” Marc responded to Sarah’s request.

“Suit yourself,” Sarah said as she mashed the remaining biscuits in the tray. Thus, the morning in the city of Pias turned special for both Marc and Sarah as they kept themselves in their own company and engaged in various leisurely activities inside the deluxe suite.

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The hour of the Yumarashi Fest drew near. Sarah had donned the elegant black maxi outfit she had selected from her wardrobe. Marc, on the other hand, nano-altered his attire to the very same maroon tuxedo that he selected from Sarah’s catalog back in Kefla. Completing their preparations, both were soon greeted by the hotel staff that waited outside their rooms to bring them to their dedicated chauffeur, who waited at the hotel entrance. The couple soon left the hotel, sat in the car, and were driven to the Yuramashi Fest.

Along the way, Sarah and Marc witnessed the skyglow lights forming beautiful imagery of the

Kendarian flag and antiquities upon the clouds. Luckily, there was no snowfall predicted on the day of the festival. Thus, the roads were cleared for all the elites to make their way to the festival undisturbed and on time. The day was also a national holiday for the people of Kendaria, which further reduced the traffic that was usually present on the streets of Pias. The festival day, the 13th of August, was a celebratory day for the people of Kendaria.

“Would you look at that? The decorations look beautiful. Lord Raymond spared no expense, it seems. Hmm, I wonder if Kefla was chosen as the host for the fest. I’d be overwhelmed, to be honest,” Sarah spoke while looking at the various decorations on the streets of Pias.

“You’d do just fine. I believe in you,” Marc complimented.

“Thanks, Marc. I suppose we will see about that when the time comes,” Sarah uttered.

The car soon made it to the festival. As the chauffeur opened the door to the car, Sarah and Marc were welcomed by the sight of pulsating aurora lights, holographic images suspended in the air forming various Kendarian antiquities at random intervals, and sounds of loud heart-pounding music. Waiters were seen carrying glasses of wine around the open street; tables were brimming with delicious

delicacies of the Pias' culinary flavors. The street where the festival was situated was surrounded by an expensive club on one end and a liquor store that only served the most expensive vintages to any guest who wished to engage in leisurely activities more intimate in nature. It was open to visiting the bar's upper floor upon request.

Sarah and Marc stood where they were dropped amidst the loud noises of the crowd and the bass-enhanced music. Sarah attempted to look for Lord Raymond but couldn't find him. Marc, on the other hand, scanned the entire crowd and pinpointed Lord Raymond's location. He then grabbed Sarah's hand and proceeded towards Lord Raymond's location. While on the way to Lord Raymond, Sarah was soon welcomed by another guest.

"Oh my, my, look who we have here if it isn't Sarah Rubert, the mistress of Kefla," the stranger said.

"Viola Brig, the mistress of Chesny. Of course, you were invited too," Sarah greeted the stranger. Chesney was the western region of Kendaria that met borders with Drigim, a peace-loving agricultural land and the official trade ally of Kendaria. Mistress Viola ruled over Chesney much like Sarah did over Kefla. However, in comparison to Sarah, who led a region that was self-sustained by the SYNTHOS Corporation, Viola was more of a dictator as she imposed unnecessary laws upon the people of Chesney. Sarah

was aware of this, and that is why she despised the woman.

“So, who’s this fine-looking fellow holding your hand now? Don’t tell me you found a new Kayle?” Viola remarked, attempting to embarrass Sarah in the crowd. Viola would have returned to Chesney with a tooth or two less if the circumstances were any different. Yet, Sarah contained herself, for she represented Kefla in the festival.

“This is Marc. Marc, Viola, the mistress of Chesney,” Sarah uttered, introducing both Marc and Viola to each other.

“Hello, Viola, it’s nice to meet you,” Marc said. Marc’s speech had now become completely human, and amidst the overwhelming crowd, it became hard to discern him from a humanoid because he had also altered his appearance ever so slightly through the nanotechnology.

“Viola, pleasure is mine,” Viola responded.

“I’m sorry, Viola, it was nice meeting you, but we really should get going,” Sarah insisted, grabbing Marc, dragging him to a safe distance from Viola, and waving away at her. “Have a wonderful evening,” Sarah yelled at Viola as she proceeded to head towards Lord Raymond, whom Marc had pinpointed for her.

Lord Raymond was soon in sight, but Sarah and Marc were interrupted by another unwelcome

stranger. This unforeseen stranger didn't appear human-like Marc, nor did it appear like a companion 2.0. But its voice was reedy and shrill in tone, like it was some sort of a female-humanoid. It donned a hooded outfit and covered his face with a unique black mask. Sarah had wondered how this unknown entity made it to the Yuramashi Fest under all the security and invitation limitations.

“Sarah Rubert of Kefla, Marc, I have a message to deliver. Marc instantly recognized the entity was powered by the Syntherium core, but it was not a companion 2.0. Its mechanical circuits and chipsets were more... ancient. Its body was also rusted and damaged, so it hid its appearance under a cloak. The message it delivered almost shattered Sarah. Marc only testified to how genuine the message was as he scanned the unknown entity, and there were no traces of wrong-doings in its records. The entity said:

*“I am AVA, the one who appears in Avaline’s dreams. I told her that she’s destined for greatness. I am the first companion. I persevered through time and waited for this very moment. Heed my words.*

*Avaline has the most intelligent mind among all the children in Kendaria. The only one that can sustain my knowledge. She is destined to become my vessel, Sarah Rubert. The fevers Avaline gets so frequently are because of me. Take me to her. I am her salvation, her cure.”*



Listening to these words stunned Sarah, but Marc remained inquisitive of the ancient companion that stood before him. The companion had allowed Marc to scan him thoroughly to affirm its goodwill, its authenticity. Sarah stood expressionless amidst the crowd. Her mind was overwhelmed by the revelation of the ancient companion. Baffled, Sarah called for security only to witness that the companion turned invisible using Marc's nanotechnology, saying, "*No. You don't understand.*"

The ruckus that was developed as a result of Sarah's impulsive decision didn't go unnoticed by the rest of the elites who had come to the festival. Sarah was embarrassed as the security guards did not find anyone, for the ancient companion had already escaped cloaked in invisibility.

Lord Raymond stood up and instantly recognized Sarah from a distance. Yet, Sarah, at this time, was puzzled by the rogue-like companion's words about Avaline. Every word it uttered was the truth. Avaline did get fevers, and she did see mysterious figures in her dreams. Sarah was well aware of her daughter's condition. The things she wasn't aware of, however, were the ancient companion's motives. But for her daughter's well-being she had to return home at the earliest possibility.

Thus, Sarah pointed towards the exit and suggested her message to Lord Raymond from a

distance, whose eyes were already locked on her and Marc. Sarah's expression was quite visible at the time; it was one of utter gloom. Lord Raymond understood the gesture as "It's an emergency" or "I have to go."

After making their way back to the car, Sarah demanded to be driven back to the hotel, given the severity of the situation. It was obvious that Sarah was to return to Kefla back to Avaline for there was an ancient companion after her. And never ever would Sarah leave her little girl under such a looming threat – a rogue companion who possessed the capabilities of penetrating minds and controlling thoughts. One that so openly declared itself as AVA, regardless of how genuine its intentions may be, Avaline's safety had become Sarah's biggest priority.

While on her way to the hotel, the vibrant and decorated world around Sarah became trivial; it became meaningless to her. Marc, who sat right beside her, saw the fear in her eyes.

"I won't let anything happen to Avaline. I promise," Marc uttered. His words landed on deaf ears. It seemed as if Sarah was so occupied with her thoughts at the time—thoughts about Avaline. Marc and Sarah made it to the hotel, where Sarah rushed towards the elevator, mashing the call button as she stood in the lobby. Marc suggested he carry her to the 5th floor instead of their room. A request to which she instantly agreed, they made their way back to room

5A, where Sarah hurriedly packed whatever luggage she found lying around in the room and slammed shut her briefcases.

Both Marc and Sarah now descended to the ground floor, leaving behind some of the briefcases as the time to call a carrier van would take away from the clock that was ticking inside Sarah's head. The briefcases that were left behind were to be delivered eventually to the mistress of Kefla via an inter-state transport service at a later time.

Sarah and Marc returned to the car and returned to the Pias station where they took the first hypersonic train to Kefla. The earliest hypersonic train was set to depart after an hour after Sarah and Marc's arrival. Thus, they waited. The time didn't seem to pass for Sarah as she remembered Avaline's smile, her voice, and her sweet way of saying "Mom," which meant the world to Sarah. Marc had held Sarah's hand tightly to console her, to keep her sane.

The hour that barely passed for Sarah was nearing its end. Sarah and Marc witnessed the train back home approach. This time, the hypersonic train seemed like Kefla itself had come to deliver Sarah back to her daughter. As both Marc and Sarah made their way back to the train, they booked their tickets on an emergency basis via the electronic ticket registration booth present in the VIP guests' compartment.

On their way back to Kefla, Sarah was haunted by the thoughts of Avaline being hunted by the one called AVA—the ancient companion. But its true intentions would soon be made clear to Sarah and Marc. That much was set in stone; that much was decreed by AVA itself.

*To be continued...*