

“Lively enough?” Jose repeated back across the counter. He let shine through his eyes as much incredulity as he’d learned he could get away with over the ten years he’d owned the shop. Yssa would’ve told this clown to kick rocks by now. Maybe that’s why business picked up so much after her death. Customers had been uncomfortable dealing with a female technician to begin with.

“Yeah, you know?” the man, whose name was Gary, asked. Jose did not know. “When I’m... using her, I just feel like she’s not, lively enough. Yeah, not lively enough. That’s the best way I can put it, like her processor is defective or something.”

Gary was nervous, and spoke with his hands. His hair shot straight up to about an inch above his head, and his glasses made his eyes look too big for his face. Next to him on the counter sat Delia, last year’s fall model, Gary’s edition of which wasn’t *lively enough*.

Jose performed a visual inspection.

“Well, do you mind firing ‘er up?” he asked.

Gary nodded and reached for the two power buttons. One was on the bottom of her right foot, and the other was behind her left knee. He triggered both simultaneously, bringing Delia to life.

“Hi dear,” Delia said on startup, “who’s this?”

“My name is Jose Suarez, LiveFlesh certified technician. Tech ID: A001398. Do you mind looking up and to the left for me?”

“Oh, of course,” Delia answered, rolling her eyes into the back of her head.

Jose turned to Gary, “I’m just gonna grab her serial number and run some brief tests.” He scanned Delia’s eye with the camera on his watch, linking her up to his toolkit server. He kept an eye on his wrist to ensure the tests started before looking up at Gary again.

“What have you done so far to try and change the behavior?”

“Nothing really. I’m not so technically inclined.”

Jose threw the readout up onto his tablet and checked Delia’s purchase records. Gary had bought her two months ago, give or take. That put her one month outside LiveFlesh’s return/exchange period, but well within her five year manufacturer’s warranty. Normally, that would make an appointments like this one easy enough, but Jose had been at this for too long. He knew better. He saw, in Gary’s miserable fidgets, a man who would push for an exchange.

His watch tapped him on the wrist to say the tests were finished.

“How’d I do,” Delia asked. Jose looked at his tablet. A clean bill of health. Boy, what a shock.

“Well, nothin’s comin up here,” he admitted.

“*Something’s* wrong with her.”

Jose glanced up at Delia, who shot her own gaze to the ground.

“I can certainly take a look, run some stress testing over the next couple of days or so,” he offered.

He knew nothing would come up in testing, but wanted Gary out of his shop.

“Can’t you just exchange her?” Gary asked. Point: Jose.

“Would if I could for ya, but LiveFlesh has a strict 30 day return or exchange policy. She’s under warranty, so barring any physical damage nothing I do’s gonna cost ya, but the manufacturer won’t let me just switch her out. Maybe if you called them directly—”

“I already tried that,” Gary interrupted.

*Then you already knew the answer to your question, asshole.*

“So is there a charge for these diagnostics?”

“Nope, you’re in warranty.”

“Fine. How long?”

“Up to you. I can call you as soon as tomorrow, even if just to say nothing comes up and we can decide to keep testing or have you pick her up from there.”

“So I’ll hear from you tomorrow?”

*Boy this guy is thick...* “Sure thing.”

Gary waited to make sure his copy of the work authorization popped up on his watch before leaving. Jose showed Delia where she could power down for the night.

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Jose hadn’t scheduled any appointments for the morning, so he could start Delia’s testing first thing. Thankfully, since the latest toolkit update that LiveFlesh put out, he could run Delia’s tests while she was in sleep mode. It used to be that they’d have to be fully conscious the whole time, being probed and surged. That got freaky.

With a grunt, he hoisted Delia into the shop’s diagnostic bay. LiveFlesh had changed their data-port design between this model and the last, and Jose spent an hour just looking for the new cables. When he finally had them, he made the small incision in Delia’s calf necessary to reveal her i/o wall. It always bothered him that they designed the bots to bleed. LiveFlesh was in the business of pleasing its customers.

Two hours later her results came up clean. Jose rolled his eyes and finished the repair he had his hands in. He booted her up again. Maybe *she'd* have something to say about what Gary thought was wrong with her.

“There’s nothin wrong with you, is there?” he asked.

“No,” Delia answered, “but if I didn’t know any better I’d say you were falling for me.”

“Here, catch,” Jose ordered. He tossed a handful of junk cables at her. They dispersed in the air, each in a different direction. Delia caught them all, with four separate reaches of one hand. That seemed lively enough. Nothing thing left to do but see her in action for himself.

“You want to have sex with my robot!?” Gary asked.

“No, *I'm* not gonna do it, I just—”

“You don’t expect *me* to come down there and have sex with her while you watch?”

Jose barely covered his laughter with a cough. “No, I don’t think either of us would enjoy that. We use another bot for this type of test—”

“This bot you’re gonna use with mine, how many... how many times has it been used for testing?”

“I’m gonna have to pull a new unit out of the box. I personally almost never—”

“Oh,great! That’s perfect. Yeah, that’s fine by me. This Delia unit’s just not... She’s almost unresponsive. You’re sure you can’t just exchange her for a new one?”

Jose broke out a brand new Cillian unit. “What kinda man you like Delia?” he asked, booting the Cillian up and starting to run through through initial setup preferences.

“Oh I just *love* a man with glasses. And I do prefer short hair. Not too picky on the body...” Jose realized she was describing Gary. Of course she was. He hadn’t wiped her. That, Jose noted, might be a good way to placate the guy. It wouldn’t really accomplish anything, but then, Gary’s problem was *fake*.

He did his best to set Cillian up to resemble Delia’s owner. Not that it mattered for testing purposes, but it gave him something to shoot for. What came out, of course, was some kind of Super-Gary. Cillian shot up to 6’5”, deeply bronzed and lightly muscled, like an aging swimmer with better proportions. The hair took after Gary’s, short and grey, but fell more naturally and seemed to have a better sheen. Jose searched around in the drawers of his tool chest for an old pair of glasses.

“Put these on,” he instructed, handing the spectacles to Cillian.

“Sure sure. Do you want me to adjust to them, or would you like for my vision to be blurry?”

“Go head and adjust.” Jose turned to Delia, “What do you think?”

Delia giggled, taking care to hide her open mouth behind her hand.

“Delia meet Cillian, Cillian, Delia. We’re gonna run Delia here through functional test zero.”

“Oh, I don’t know if Gary will like that very much,” she objected. Jose played back his most recent conversation with Gary, clearing her of any reluctance. Silent seconds passed while Jose looked back and forth between the two droids.

“Wait, right here in the shop?” Cillian asked.

“Is that a problem?”

“It’s not exactly an intimate setting,” Delia chimed in, still giggling.

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As soon as he opened the door, Jose realized what a slob he'd become, living alone all these years since Yssa's passing. His guests wouldn't eat or drink, so it was impossible to distract them while he ran around straightening up.

"You have a lovely home," Delia lied.

"Can I help you with anything?" Cillian asked, watching Jose collect pizza boxes and wipe dust with a dirty shirt.

"No no, just... talk amongst yourselves."

When the living room looked passable, Jose slipped into his bedroom and shut the door. He changed the sheets, piling the old ones on the floor in his closet. Closing his drawers, which had been hanging wide open, his eyes caught the framed picture on top of the dresser. It was one of him and Yssa, a gag shot they'd used for a holiday card. She had him in a headlock, her free arm wound back to deliver a punch, but they'd been caught laughing. Embarrassed, Jose tucked the picture into the top drawer.

He found Delia and Cillian on the couch. They sat at 45 degree angles, half facing each other, and half facing the room. Stripes of light poured onto them from between the vertical blinds. They were conversing, flirting, posturing. As they were designed to. Delia faked having her guard up, keeping a pillow on her lap with both arms.

"Check this out," Cillian said.

With a graphic shimmer, he shape-shifted into someone wholly unlike Gary. Someone shorter, swarthier, with dark hair and a closely trimmed beard. Jose looked impressed. He must've missed that in the update notes. Cillian smiled at Delia through his new face. "What do you think?"

“Whoa! You can do that?” Delia asked.

“Yeah, you can too.”

“Shut up.”

“Is your software up to date?”

Delia glanced at Jose. Jose nodded, she was up to date. She concentrated. A shimmer started at her head and fell to her toes like a waterfall. Her hair caught fire from blonde to crimson. She grew taller by three inches.

“How do I look?” she asked, playing with her new hair.

Cillian laughed, and changed shape again, into a male that matched Delia’s new appearance. He wore the same red hair and white skin as Delia, and adjusted to be only a few inches taller than she was. Together, they looked like something out of a VR game, a perfect pair, both impeccable on their own, and perfect for each other. Then they made a game of it, Delia assuming whatever shape and size she could think of, and Cillian coming up with her perfect counterpart. She made him turn black, blue, green, and orange. They descended into endless fits of laughter as their images became more and more absurd.

“Oh!” Delia exclaimed. “Do Jose!”

“Who’re you gonna do? Who’s Jose’s perfect match?”

“Jose! What’s your perfect woman look like?”

Jose froze, blushing. Suddenly he felt brave, seeing these two enjoy each other so thoroughly. Or maybe loneliness had finally got the better of him. He didn’t know. He knew only that he was about to do something he shouldn’t.

Slipping back into his bedroom, he reached into the top of his dresser for the picture he'd just put away. "Think you can do this?" he asked, returning to show the picture to Cillian and Delia.

Cillian went first. Shimmering, he came to radiate a perfect facsimile of the man in front of him. Delia took her time. She studied the picture carefully, knowing her projection had to be flawless.

"How's this?" she asked when she was done, voice quavering.

Jose fell speechless. It was perfect, like Yssa was there! Even the way the light bounced too brightly off her forehead. He felt himself choking, but he fought to bring words up. Tears welled in his eyes, but he smiled. Delia got nervous, thinking she'd made a mistake. She spread Yssa's arms and legs to look herself over.

"I'm sorry," he offered, clearing his throat, "It's... it's like she's here."

"Don't be sorry," Cillian said. He reached for the picture still wrapped tightly in Jose's hands. He and Delia put an arm around each other and studied the portrait.

The comedic pose was a regrettable one, but for Jose, watching himself and his wife try to assume it was *perfect*. The two laughed. They fell into each other. They struggled to hold the frame up so they could both reference the details. And he could feel it. Watching the two of them he could feel, in the most vivid sensations, Yssa's arm around his neck, the strain of bending over in the muscles of his back. He smelled her perfume, felt the oil from her lotion.

Then they separated, smiling meekly at each other, glad of the service they were able to perform. Jose escaped into the kitchen, trying to put himself back together. He tried in his mind to list the tasks remaining in front of him for the day. His thoughts returned to Gary, sinking his

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heart like a bowling ball in water. Anxiety shrink-wrapped his stomach. What to do about *that* guy?

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“Hello, Gary? It’s Jose down at Live Repair. Yeah, listen, I’ve had some time to go over this Delia unit, and I think it’s probably gonna be best if we do go ahead and exchange her for another, if you’re still okay with that...”