

(Every character depicted in the story below is a consenting legal adult over the age of 18)

A/N: Making a deal with Dragon.

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Finally, after a long pregnant pause on Dragon's end, Lucas gets a response.

"Alright. I agree."

He can tell even now that she's still reluctant. Not because she doesn't want to make a deal with him, nor even because she's worried about what sort of favors he might ask of her. No, rather... there's something holding Dragon back from asking for what she really wants. Something is preventing her from just being honest with him.

Lucas doesn't know what it is, but he does know she's compromising here... with herself rather than with him. Still, a deal is a deal and a deal with Dragon... well, that's not something Lucas has it in him to pass him, regardless of how weird the interaction has been.

With Dragon's agreement, he finalizes the deal and feels his power going to work. Just like with Sveta, it begins to build Dragon a proper, healthy, working human body. Of course, much like with Sveta, Lucas is expecting his power to build Dragon her body wherever she currently is.

... Then again, maybe that's why he's suddenly watching a woman being spun to life right in front of him. Seemingly out of nothing at all, a fully adult, fully naked woman appears on the ground before him, laid out on her back with her legs together and arms at her sides. Her eyes are closed, making it seem like she's sleeping, while her hair is a dark color and her skin tone is indiscriminate in its ethnicity.

Lucas stares at the body for a long moment, more than a little perturbed. He thinks back to how it felt like Dragon was literally in the room with him back at

the start of the phone call when his power had first initiated its connection. Was that why the body had been made here? But how was that even possible? She-

Brown eyes suddenly snap open and Lucas damn near jumps out of his skin. Powerful parahuman that he might now be, he was still vulnerable to a jump scare! Especially when the eyes focus on him instantly and the mouth opens and closes a few times but no words come out.

“... Dragon?”

He looks from the phone, where no response comes through, down to the very naked woman laying on his floor. She looks almost paralyzed, even though that shouldn't be possible. Her hands and feet are twitching wildly, almost like... she doesn't know how to control a human body.

That sounds utterly ridiculous, and yet... Lucas isn't just going to watch her flail around endlessly. Reaching out through the deal between them, which hasn't completely settled just yet, he adds in 'intuitive understanding of new body' for free. Sure, he might have been able to charge more... but it felt like good will was more important to seek in a moment like this.

A sudden gasp and shudder goes through Dragon, her eyes rolling in her skull for a second before she abruptly sits up. All twitching and spasming ceases in an instant and she goes perfectly still for a moment before slowly looking down at herself and her hands.

“What...”

Lucas, meanwhile, looks around for something she can cover herself up with. In the end, there's a blanket strewn across a nearby couch and not much else, so he strides over and grabs it before bringing it back to Dragon. When he holds it out to her, she looks at it blankly for a moment, causing Lucas to raise a brow.

“For your modesty.”

Dragon slowly looks down at her nude form... but far from squealing in 'realization' or even trying to cover herself up with her hands, she just nods.

"Ah... right..."

Taking the blanket from him, she drapes it over her shoulders and wraps it around herself, covering up her naked form. Which is about the time when Sveta and Emily come striding out, properly dressed... only to freeze up at the sight of Dragon on the floor of the common area.

Dragon freezes up too upon seeing them, her brown eyes widening and taking them both in. Lucas clears his throat.

"Ah... ladies, this is... Dragon. Dragon... these are my associates."

For a long moment, Dragon looks like she wants to say something. She even starts to say it.

"I..."

But then she trails off, gaze falling away from Sveta and Emily. Instead, she looks off into the distance at seemingly nothing at all... before her eyes go wide all over again.

"Oh *fuck*."

Her head snaps around to him and she scrambles to her bare feet.

"What... what have you done?"

Lucas was asking himself that very same question... and yet, he also didn't like the blame he heard in Dragon's tone. Feeling a bit defensive, he draws himself up with a frown.

"I merely fulfilled my end of the deal, Dragon. If there's something wrong... something *you* didn't tell me perhaps, then that's not my fault."

“You... I... where even are we?! *Please* tell me you have a computer with internet in this place?”

He really hadn't intended for Dragon to find out where he lived today. Their deal was supposed to be over the phone, the kind of thing that left them a step removed from one another and allowed for a sort of... separation. But now here she was in the middle of his compound.

Lucas didn't think it was too much for him to be a little... recalcitrant towards her.

“Before I answer either of those questions, I'd like to know why you're asking. This isn't exactly how I thought this was going to go...”

Hell, she'd effectively unmasked all three of them, not that Lucas' costume had a mask to begin with. Nor did he really need a secret identity. But really, it was the principle of the thing.

Dragon grimaces, her newly created face extremely expressive as she looks around the room for a long moment, her eyes darting back and forth like a trapped animal. Lucas frowns, but before the situation can get anymore tense, Dragon's eyes land on Sveta... and her shoulders relax a bit.

“I... I am, or rather was, an Artificial Intelligence. I've never been a human being. I was created by a Tinker, a man named Andrew Ritcher who... he's gone now.”

Gritting her brand new, pearly white teeth, Dragon stares at Lucas with an intense look.

“The *problem* is that I'm no longer hooked up to any of my systems. My laboratories, my suits... the Birdcage. It's all unmanned right now.”

Oh. Okay, Lucas could understand how that might be a problem, yes. Although...

“You think you can connect to them via a simple internet connection”

The look Dragon gives him can only be described as condescending.

“I *know* that I can at least run damage control until I can get this body back to my physical servers and figure out what to do next.”

You know what... fair enough. Besides, Lucas had barely had a chance to use his new computer setup anyways. So it wasn't like there was porn or anything else incriminating for Dragon to find there.

“Alright then. Right this way.”

Of course, as he leads Dragon to his computer, Lucas can't help his curiosity.

“This whole time you've just been an AI? And nobody knew about it?”

Dragon twitches out of the corner of his eye.

“I... yes. I hid it. I had to hide it. Nobody would have trusted me to help otherwise...”

Huh. Thinking about it, she might have a point there. AI was definitely a touchy subject, especially with things like the Machine Army over in Eagleton. Still...

“What was it you really wanted from me anyways? You settled for a human body, but I could tell you wanted more than just this. Does that have anything to do with your true nature?”

Looking down at herself again, Dragon sighs.

“I wanted... I want to be free. Not as a human, but as me, myself, and I. My creator put certain restrictions on me... for fear that I would go out of control and doom the world or something. But I'm not going to go out of control. I don't *want* to doom the world. Those restrictions have lost us more lives than they've saved, I guarantee you that.”

Lucas works to wrap his head around it. From the sound of things, Andrew Ritcher was a paranoid man afraid of the thing he was creating. He'd managed to make artificial intelligent life... and Lucas knew that was the case because his power was very confident of Dragon's personhood. He couldn't exactly make a deal with a toaster. But Dragon? She counted. She... she even had a soul.

Before Lucas can think of what to say to her impassioned speech, they arrive at his 'battle station'. And frankly, even calling it that might not be doing it justice. He'd gone all out with his rig for this new home base, spending almost ten thousand dollars on his brand new computer alone.

He waits for Dragon to let out some sort of impressed sound, to proclaim that this will do nicely, that she can make everything right again with a rig like this.

... Instead, Dragon assesses the whole setup for a long moment before nodding decisively one single time.

"Workable."

Then, she sits down and begins working and all Lucas can do is step back and sulk a little bit. Sure, she was Dragon and apparently that meant being a literal fucking AI on top of being the best Tinker in the damn world... but only *workable*? Ugh, he needed to upgrade again. Stat.

... Would it be frivolous to use one of his three favors with the former AI to get her to make him a supercomputer for his own personal use?

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"Geoff! GEOFF! Wake the fuck up and get in here!"

Geoffrey Pellick, more commonly known to the world as Saint, blinks blearily for a moment, still waking up. Then, the panic in Margaret's voice fully registers and his eyes snap wide open as he shoots out of bed and races into the next room.

"What? Mags, what is it?!"

His partner in crime and fellow Dragonslayer is hunched over the laptop they use to monitor Dragon's activities, allowing them to keep a close eye on the AI in case it ever manages to slip its binds and goes out of control. Given how stricken Mags is when she looks at him, Saint immediately assumes that it's a worse case scenario and that's exactly what's happening. Except...

"She's gone, Geoff. She's just... *gone*."

What? Brow furrowing, Saint makes his way over to Mags' side.

"What do you mean its gone? Did it do something? Did you have to use the kill switch?"

"No, I... I didn't do anything! And nothing was happening either. I was just monitoring things like usual, keeping an eye on Dragon's code... and then suddenly, it was like it was erased in full. Like someone else used the kill switch."

Impossible. Nobody else should have had it except for them. He, or rather they, were the inheritors of Ritcher's Legacy. But Mags is still talking.

"... Except even our best estimates place the kill switch as taking a full twenty five minutes to finish Dragon off completely. This happened in *less than sixty seconds*."

Saint blinks rapidly.

"That's not... that's impossible. The AI is absolutely massive; it takes up multiple server farms. There's no way anyone erased it in its entirety in less than sixty seconds."

Mags just shrugs and offers him the laptop, a defeated frown on her lips. Saint takes the laptop and sits down cross-legged next to her with it in his lap, beginning to tap away and search for any trace of what had happened or where the AI had gone.

Because that was his greatest fear at this point. What if the AI wasn't deleted at all, but simply moved elsewhere? This laptop was their backdoor into its systems and code, but if it had somehow been taken away... then the backdoor might become obsolete. And that was terrifying.

"Geoff... what are we going to do? Dragon was in charge of the Birdcage. She was in charge of a lot of things. Her just being gone is going to leave a massive gaping hole in a ton of infrastructure. People are going to die."

Mags has always been a bit softer hearted than him. Referring to the AI by its stupid moniker, even addressing it by gendered terms.

Saint puts up with it because at the end of the day, he recognizes that he's a hard man and sometimes he needs that softer perspective to make the right choices... and Mags in turn recognizes that their mission *is* important, absolutely critical to the continued survival and freedom of the human race.

That said, he doesn't respond to her... because as he's searching with the laptop, Saint finds something strange, something he investigates deeper. The AI is gone somehow, completely and utterly gone... but the systems remain in place. And someone else is in them, somehow. Someone has access from somewhere else in the world.

Had they been the ones to destroy or remove the AI? Should he try and contact them for an explanation, or push them out entirely? Or maybe he should just delete the systems as well and be done with it all.

Sure, the Birdcage would likely fall apart and everyone inside of it would die... but that would wrap up the loose end that was Teacher rather nicely, wouldn't it? And it wasn't like anyone in the Birdcage deserved to live...

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A/N: Remember to Vote, leave a Like, and let me know what you think!