

LOVE Has NO Boundaries



Don't Read in the Closet Event 2013

A.S.H.E.R.

Kallysten

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Love Has No Boundaries

An M/M Romance series

A.S.H.E.R.

By Kallysten

Introduction

The story you are about to read celebrates love, sex and romance between men. It is a product of the *Love Has No Boundaries* promotion sponsored by the *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* and is published as a free gift to you.

What Is Love Has No Boundaries?

The *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* invited members to choose a photo and pen a letter asking for a short M/M romance story inspired by the image; authors from the group were encouraged to select a letter and write an original tale. The result was an outpouring of creativity that shone a spotlight on the special bond between M/M romance writers and the people who love what they do.

A written description of the image that inspired this story is provided along with the original request letter. If you'd like to view the photo, please feel free to join the [Goodreads M/M Romance Group](#) and visit the discussion section: *Love Has No Boundaries*.

Whether you are an avid M/M romance reader or new to the genre, you are in for a delicious treat.

Words of Caution

This story may contain sexually explicit content and is **intended for adult readers**. It may contain content that is disagreeable or distressing to some readers. The *M/M Romance Group* strongly recommends that each reader review the General Information section before each story for story tags as well as for content warnings.

This story is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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A.S.H.E.R.

By Kallysten

Photo Description

A human-like robot, apparently naked, lies on a bed of packing peanuts. He has just been unboxed, and waits for his new owner's first orders.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

Tell me about a day in the life of this sexbot. Maybe it's the day he's first been unpacked and settled into his new home! Maybe it's sometime after he's settled into a routine. And what IS that routine, anyway? Is he privately owned? Is he on staff at a sexy high-tech brothel? Has he become self-aware enough to run away from the sexy high-tech brothel and follow his heart circuits in search of a better life and someone who can love a synthetic man?

I'm really flexible about tone here—if you want to give me what-are-humans-even-about comedy and sex misadventures, go for it; if you want to give me creepy dystopia and what it means to be built for someone else's pleasure, go for that, too. Just give me something with this hot android as a main character. Yum.

Sincerely,

Laylah

Story Info

Genre: science fiction, paranormal

Tags: futuristic, writers, vampire, robot/artificial intelligence, non-explicit, grief, depression

Content warnings: use of overly precise numbers

Word count: 12,673

Dedication

With my thanks to Laylah for offering this prompt and giving me the chance to write outside my usual lines. I only hope you enjoy the end result!

A.S.H.E.R.

By Kallysten

Day 1

If Asher had been capable of dreaming, he might have called his memories from *before* dreamlike.

A dream, his databank told him, consisted of sometimes-disjointed images, events, and sounds, possibly blurry, imprecise or surreal, with an occasionally non-linear timeline. His memories were exactly like that.

Of course, they weren't memories any more than they were a dream. Instead, they were the remnant of impressions left by electric current, random data bits and bytes that hadn't been cleaned as thoroughly as needed when he was taken off the assembly conveyor and boxed.

Those memories, dreamlike as they were, kept his mind turning as the box traveled across the country—two thousand, nine hundred and seventy miles, in a roughly north-eastern direction, or so his internal GPS informed him. Thirty-two hours passed before the box stopped moving.

Asher did not stir, did not blink, did not become impatient, but his programming allowed him a modicum of curiosity as he waited for his owner to open the box. He knew the man's name, and he had a message for him, but almost everything else was standard programming for an A.S.H.E.R. unit—an ArtLife SynSkin Humanoid Erotic Replacement.

The first thing he saw when the sides of the box were finally tugged open and the packing material tumbled out, was a pair of dark-blue eyes. The color and shape as well as the rest of the features matched with the holopix in his databank: strong face, square jaw, brown hair and eyebrows that were currently set in a frown, lips that were certainly a deeper pink color when they weren't pinched together so tightly, a small diamond stud in the right earlobe. The first-contact protocol initiated at once.

Asher stepped out of the box and folded himself down to his knees, crushing a few of the soft, white packing nuggets under his bare legs. The information registered as inconsequential, and the protocol continued.

“Good afternoon, Wyatt Hillford. I am A.S.H.E.R. 75-932 or Asher. You may rename me at your convenience. I have a message for you from Lance Hillford. Would you like to hear it now?”

Wyatt Hillford took a step back, then a second one, putting three feet and eight inches of distance between himself and Asher. His eyes widened by twenty percent. Seven seconds passed before he asked, “Is this a joke?”

Asher remained still as he analyzed the message and came to a negative conclusion. “I know many jokes, but the message from Lance Hillford does not appear to follow any traditional humor pattern or style. I do not believe it is a joke, although some forms of sarcasm or irony escape my understanding. Would you like to hear it now?”

Wyatt Hillford’s eyebrows lowered by three millimeters. He looked away, then nodded.

“Go ahead. What’s the message?”

Asher’s vocal box switched to different settings, and he started to recite the message.

“Please don’t be mad, my lov—”

“Stop.”

The word was at a low decibel range, outside what a human could hear, but Asher obeyed at once, falling silent, awaiting further orders.

“Use your voice. Not... not his. Not ever again. Do you understand?”

The vocal settings returned to default. “I understand, Wyatt Hillford. Would you like to hear the rest of the message now?”

“No. But go ahead.”

At the conflicting directions, Asher’s decision mechanism engaged and concluded that the latter direction took precedence. He started the message over in his default voice.

“Please don’t be mad, my love. This is the only way I found to save you from yourself. You told me what your life was like the last time you lost someone. I’d have done anything to stop you from cutting yourself off from the world again. Some people would say that living with an ArtLife is not much different from living alone, but think of it this way, Wyatt. He won’t grow a day older, and you won’t have to ask him to let you turn him. I wish I’d said yes the first time you asked. I wish I hadn’t waited for the right time, only to let it pass me by until all I had to offer you was a broken body you’d have needed to take care of forever. It was my fault you ended up alone. I had to try to do something about it. He’ll be there for you until you’re ready to meet other people again. Please let me do this one thing for you. And please, love, don’t be mad.”

When Wyatt Hillford did not react to the end of the message, not any more than he had reacted during it, Asher asked, “Would you like me to repeat—”

“No.” Wyatt Hillford stepped forward. His fists were closed. “How do I send you back?”

The question was ambiguous; Asher’s databank tried to fill in the missing information, and he asked, “You wish to know how to send me back to the ArtLife factory, Wyatt Hillford?”

A muscle twitched in Wyatt Hillford’s cheek. “Yes.”

“The retirement department can be reached through holocall during regular business hours. They dispatch a retrieval unit within twelve hours and proceed to the ArtLife unit retirement with the briefest delays.”

Wyatt Hillford made a snorting sound that Asher didn’t know how to interpret. “Retirement, huh? So they get you out to some fancy retirement community until your batteries run out or something?”

“This ArtLife model does not require batteries, Wyatt Hillford. Retirement in this context refers to the disposal of an unwanted ArtLife. The bio elements are incinerated, the plastic parts recycled, and the scraps of metal are sorted,

then melted to be reused in a different unit. Would you like me to connect you to the retirement department?”

Asher had comprehensive data on human features and how they changed according to a living being’s emotions, desires, and needs. However, he had no idea what his owner was feeling at that moment.

“You’re programmed to do what I say, right?” Wyatt Hillford asked after two minutes and twenty seconds had elapsed.

“Correct, Wyatt Hillford.”

“All right. Pay attention, now. Stop calling me by my full name. Wyatt will do. You don’t kneel. You also do not walk around naked. There are clothes in the last room.” He pointed down a corridor. “Get dressed. And here’s the most important part, stay the hell out of my way.”

He left before Asher could acknowledge the orders or ask for clarification.

Day 2

Asher's databank covered four-hundred seventy two possibilities for his owner's basic behavior, not counting minor variations. Had Wyatt required from him to dress and act as a pony, Asher would have made an excellent mount. If Wyatt had wanted him to be shy, innocent, and to call him "Daddy", Asher possessed the perfect voice register and demeanor to make that persona satisfying—just like he'd have adapted the way he sounded and moved if Wyatt had wanted to call him "Daddy" instead. Human preferences for sexuality were varied, but to Asher they were mere data; he knew the social or moral taboos attached to some practices, but only as a point of reference should his owner exhibit guilt or shame. Asher himself carried no judgment. He existed only to please his owner.

Pleasing Wyatt, however, was not as easy as it should have been. Given Asher's extensive knowledge of the many ways that led to pleasure, none of those ways worked from five feet and two inches away, which was the closest Asher could approach Wyatt before a stern reminder to "stay away" was issued.

Asher could only hope that obeying that order satisfied Wyatt in some way, but the probability of that was only eight point two nine percent.

Fifty minutes past six on the second evening, when Asher heard noise in the bedroom he wasn't allowed to enter, he figured that Wyatt had finished his nap and would have dinner now. Maybe he would be pleased if Asher cooked dinner for him. Something classic would be best. Asher was well versed in twenty-eight types of local cuisine, but he had no reference as to what Wyatt's tastes might be. He went to the kitchen and opened the refrigerator. Data on the available food products would help define the possibilities for dinner.

Except the refrigerator contained only medical blood bags, each labeled with a date, blood type, and other information.

Asher was still trying to analyze the function of the blood bags when Wyatt entered the room.

"I thought ArtLife units didn't need food," Wyatt said, his voice now an octave lower than his normal tone.

Asher turned to face him. “They do not, Wyatt.”

“Then what are you doing poking your head in my fridge?”

He reached past Asher into the still-open refrigerator and pulled out one of the bags before closing the door.

“I intended to cook dinner for you, Wyatt. I can cook food according to twenty-eight types of local cuisine, or combine flavors to satisfy your individual tastes. Is there a particular kind of food you enjoy?”

For eleven seconds, Wyatt considered Asher without a word. Asher’s analytic system filed that delay along with their first interaction the previous day and computed hypotheses. Wyatt might be taciturn, he might have slow reactions or brain activity, he might be extremely careful about he said and therefore take his time before speaking, or it just might be a coincidence. More empirical data was needed.

“Are you allowed to repeat what I tell you to other people?” Wyatt finally said.

“I am not, Wyatt. As my owner, my only loyalty is to you. Standard protocols require me to destroy my databank if I were ever forcibly removed from your possession, sold, lost, or if you were to die without giving me a different directive.”

Five more seconds of silence. It was definitely a pattern.

“This,” Wyatt said, raising the blood bag in his hand, “is the only food I need. I am a vampire. Vampires feed exclusively on blood. Those twenty-eight cooking styles you know? You’re not going to use them with me, so you might as well forget them.”

“Would you like me to do that now, Wyatt?”

Wyatt frowned briefly. “Do what?”

“Delete my knowledge of cooking techniques. Under normal circumstances, I am required to ascertain your permission before erasing data permanently.”

Shaking his head, Wyatt let out a laugh, though he didn't smile. He turned to the sink, removed a porcelain mug from the drying rack, set it on the counter, and filled it with blood.

“You are very literal, huh?”

Asher observed Wyatt's actions very carefully: how high he filled the mug, the precise spot in the microwave where Wyatt set the mug, the heat intensity and time he programmed.

“I am to obey your commands to the best of my abilities, Wyatt.”

Wyatt turned and leaned back against the counter, his arms crossed over his chest. “Are you? When exactly did I tell you to cook dinner for me?”

“That is part of my basic programming, Wyatt. Unless instructed otherwise, I am to provide you, to the best of my abilities, with basic human needs such as food and sexual gratification.”

The microwave dinged quietly. Wyatt turned toward it to retrieve the mug. “Well, as you can see, I can cook my own food, so you won't need to do that.” He took a sip before adding, “Or anything else.”

He did not, however, order Asher to erase his data on cooking—or on “anything else”.

Day 5

Asher needed more data.

He'd acquired nineteen point seven petabytes of information since stepping out of his box into Wyatt's home. He'd learned, for example, that Wyatt lived alone, although there were reasons to believe the person who had purchased Asher—Lance Hillford—had at some point resided in the house. There were pictures of Wyatt and Lance Hillford in the same bedroom where Wyatt had indicated Asher would find clothes. Without confirmation, the probability that the clothes were in fact Lance Hillford's was eighty-five percent.

Compared to the rest of the house, that room was cluttered and dusty. It contained a medical bed, stripped of its sheets. There was an IV stand in one corner of the room, next to a wheelchair and an exoskeleton walking device. The pictures were on the walls: Wyatt and Lance Hillford smiling at the camera, dressed in tuxedos and holding champagne glasses, Wyatt and Lance Hillford on the deck of what looked like a cruise ship at night, the two of them in various well-known places around the globe. There were also two pictures of Lance Hillford on his own; in one of them, he sat astride a horse, wearing a uniform not featured in Asher's databank, while in the other he stood beside the horse, petting its head and smiling brightly.

Accessing his news databank, Asher performed a basic search on Lance Hillford and learned about his equestrian victories—and his life-changing accident.

Asher had also learned some things about Wyatt himself. His schedule ran contrary to a typical human day: he retreated to his bedroom in the morning, between nine and eleven AM, and remained there—sleeping, Asher extrapolated from comparable human behavior—until, on average, six forty-five PM. After dining on blood, he sometimes accessed the news of the day on his personal holotablet or made online transactions, then sat for an average of four and a half hours in front of an antique computer with a physical keyboard, using retrograde word-processing software. Or at least, he opened the software; he averaged six hundred keystrokes per hour, three hundred of which were the delete key. He usually had a glass of alcohol in the middle of the

night, between three and four AM, then either returned to the computer, watched 3D entertainment, or read—not from his tablet, but from actual paper books.

Nothing Asher had observed, however, helped him understand Wyatt's statement that he was a vampire. Asher's databank included a section on fairytales, lore, mythology, and pop culture, but nothing to suggest that myths about vampires had any truth to them. Moreover, different interpretations of the vampire myth contradicted each other; in some of them, vampires did not sleep, while in others they did so in coffins. In some stories, they drank warm blood from humans exclusively, while in others they could drink animal blood, or even eat the same food as humans. Some stories claimed that they turned to ashes when exposed to sunlight, while others said they scintillated in the sun. Also, some myths depicted vampires as impotent, whereas others painted them as capable of great sexual prowess with matching appetites.

Asher wasn't sure which version to accept as truth, if any. He had to know, however. How could he serve his owner if he didn't understand his needs?

When he heard noise in the bedroom at six forty-nine PM, he made his way to the kitchen and accessed his databank. He removed blood from the refrigerator, filled a mug with exactly as much blood Wyatt had, then warmed it in exactly the same way.

"What are you doing?" Wyatt asked behind him one second before the microwave dinged.

Rather than answering, Asher pulled the mug out and offered it to Wyatt. After two point seven seconds of hesitation, Wyatt took it. He looked into the mug before taking a sip.

"Is it to your liking, Wyatt?" Asher asked.

The sound Wyatt made did not match any known form of communication in Asher's databank. "It's just the two of us in here," he said rather than answering. "You don't need to punctuate everything you say with my name. I do know you're talking to me."

The courtesy protocol, which Wyatt had altered as one of his first orders, changed again. It was no trouble for Asher; if anything, he was concerned he might have displeased his owner.

“May I ask a question?” Asher asked.

Wyatt took another sip before hoisting himself up to sit on the counter. “Go for it,” he said with a small sigh.

A hundred different computations brought Asher no answer. “Where do you want me to go?”

A smile flickered on Wyatt’s lips, soon hidden behind the mug. “Ask your question,” he said.

“I have extensive data on vampires,” Asher started, “but only as folktale creatures. Is there anything you wish me to know about what it means that you are a vampire?”

With one last, long gulp, Wyatt emptied the mug, then set it down on the counter next to him. “Does it bother you that I am not human?”

The answer required no thought. “It is not up to me to be bothered by anything you are or do,” Asher said. “And as for not being human, neither am I.”

Wyatt’s eyebrows shot up. “Did you just make a joke? I didn’t know ArtLives had a sense of humor.”

Asher wasn’t certain which part of his reply could be construed as a joke. “I apologize if my words have offended you. It was not my intention to do so.”

“I’m not offended. Humor is good. Hell knows I could use a good laugh.” He pointed at the mug. “Will you warm me another one?”

Asher did so at once, listening attentively as Wyatt spoke.

“What does it mean that I’m a vampire? It means I drink blood rather than eat food. Most of my peers drink straight from the vein, but I find that hunting humans is too much trouble. It also means I can’t go out in the sun or I die. That’s one of the few ways I can die, actually. Anything else you want to know?”

The second mug was ready. Asher presented it to Wyatt, who immediately started sipping from it.

“Do you enjoy sexual intercourse?”

Wyatt sputtered, spraying blood all over. He wiped his face with his arm and gave Asher a wide-eyed look.

“What?”

“I apologize if this is a sensitive topic,” Asher offered. “Some myths claim vampires are incapable of experiencing arousal or erection. I do not ask out of prurient interest. One of my primary functions is to provide sexual release.”

Setting the mug down, Wyatt slipped off the counter. His expression registered as displeasure in Asher’s facial-recognition system.

“Well, I don’t need you to provide anything to me,” he said, his voice twenty percent louder than it had been so far. “I can take care of my own needs.”

He left the kitchen without a look back. As Asher cleaned up the splatters of blood, he analyzed Wyatt’s words, and the fact that Lance Hillford, who presumably had known Wyatt’s species, had purchased Asher for him. The corollary was simple enough to infer: Wyatt was capable of experiencing sexual pleasure.

That was good. Only warming up blood in porcelain mugs would have been an inefficient use of programming.

Day 6

For the second day, Asher warmed Wyatt's dinner.

Was it still dinner, however, considering the nature of the food? Or should it be called "breakfast" instead, since it was consumed after sleep? Those questions ran through secondary computing systems while Asher's attention remained on his task.

When Wyatt came into the kitchen, he said nothing but accepted the mug with a nod.

"I know twenty-three different fellatio techniques," Asher then informed Wyatt.

Wyatt, who had been raising the mug to his lips, froze and looked at Asher.

"What?" he said in a toneless voice.

"I thought it might be of interest to you to know, should you wish to take advantage of my talents."

Shaking his head once, Wyatt drank from the mug, then said, "Like I said yesterday, I don't need your 'help', not for that and not for anything else."

Asher inclined his head as he considered the mug Wyatt was drinking from. "As you say."

Wyatt didn't say anything again until he had finished drinking. Then he cleared his throat and asked, "Did you... practice, then? Who taught you those twenty-three techniques?"

"They are part of the A.S.H.E.R. standard programming. The data was gathered from experts in the art of providing pleasure. I have not practiced on anyone. You, as my owner, are to be the only recipient of my skills, unless you decide otherwise."

"Experts." Wyatt sneered at the word. "You mean prostitutes. Is that what you are?"

Asher considered the question. "By most definitions, prostitutes are paid in one form or another for the services they render. I do not require payment. I was created for you on Lance Hillford's specifications and am your property."

Wyatt's expression changed minutely, his eyebrows drawing closer together by twenty percent and his lips thinning by twelve. He turned to the fridge and refilled his mug. "Property, huh? So you're a slave?"

"Would you call the microven a slave? It is your possession, and it does as you bid."

"The microven," Wyatt said, setting the mug inside it, "doesn't question me. It doesn't act of its own accord either. It doesn't tell me how well it can do its work to entice me to use it. It doesn't want me to use it. But you want me to... use your skills, don't you?"

"It is my purpose for being. If I do not satisfy my purpose, then am I not a waste of materials and programming?"

"Is it also part of your programming for you to question your reason for being?"

That question required longer for Asher to answer. Where had the thoughts come from? Not from his primary programming, he realized. Instead, they were an extrapolation from books and poems in his databank.

"It is not," he replied at last.

Wyatt drank from his mug slowly, considering Asher over the rim the entire time.

"So," he said after putting his drink down. "You're capable of independent thought. What about feelings? Emotions?"

Asher examined definitions and data as well as his own actions and thought patterns; the results were inconclusive. "I do not know."

"All right." Wyatt crossed his arms. "Then tell me this. How would you feel if you turned out to be a waste of materials and programming?"

This, too, required four point nine seconds of thought before Asher had to admit, again, that he didn't know.

"I do not understand what feelings are well enough to recognize one."

"Thought so," Wyatt said, then left the room.

Asher followed him. "Won't you teach me?"

When Wyatt glanced back, his expression was one of surprise. “Teach you what? To be human? I’m not, remember?”

“But you feel emotions,” Asher countered. “You can teach me that.”

“Even if I had the slightest idea how... I wouldn’t wish that curse on anyone.”

He went to his computer then, and Asher left him to his work. This night, Wyatt poured himself alcohol much earlier than usual and didn’t stop at one drink.

Curse. One of the definitions in Asher’s databank was “a cause of great harm or misfortune”. How could emotions be a cause of great harm?

Every moment since Asher had come out of the box played through his analytic system, every word, every expression. Only when he added in that first message from Lance Hillford, did it start to compile.

Lance Hillford was dead.

He had called Wyatt his “love”.

He had mentioned Wyatt staying away from people.

His passing had affected Wyatt because of the feelings Wyatt had toward him. Apparently, it had affected Wyatt enough for him to call it a curse.

Wyatt didn’t want Asher to provide him with pleasure, but maybe Asher could devise a way to at least ease his pain. Only as a means for him to achieve his programming goals, of course. Nothing else.

Day 11

Asher waited until Wyatt had settled down on the sofa with a book. Then he made his now customary nightly request.

“May I borrow one of your books?”

Wyatt looked like he had been expecting the question. Rather than giving Asher permission as usual, however, he set his choice for the night—an anthology of poems by Pablo Neruda—onto his chest and observed Asher.

“You asked once,” he said. “You don’t need to keep asking every day.”

“I wouldn’t want to presume,” Asher replied. “You might change your mind about letting me touch your books. Or you.”

Wyatt snorted, which, Asher had learned, meant he was annoyed.

“Is it in your programming to be so damn stubborn? Yes, you can read my books. No, you can’t demonstrate how good you are at providing pleasure to your owner. No, I’m not going to change my mind about either thing.”

The question, Asher decided, must have been rhetorical since Wyatt hadn’t stopped to wait for an answer. He focused on the rest of Wyatt’s claims instead. “When I was delivered, you asked about sending me back. But you didn’t. What changed your mind?”

Wyatt pressed his lips so tightly together that they turned white.

“I didn’t want you to be destroyed,” he said after seven seconds had passed.

“Why not, if you won’t use me for the purpose for which I was created?”

Shaking his head, Wyatt picked up the glass of alcohol he had set on the floor and drank deeply from it. He put it down again, held up his book, and opened it. “You wouldn’t understand.”

“What wouldn’t I understand? That I am a gift from your husband to you? That sending me to be retired would be destroying the last gesture he made toward you? Or that some of Pablo Neruda’s poems relating to love and loss might resonate with you because of your experiences? Just because I do not

experience emotions of my own, it doesn't mean that I cannot understand them in others."

Very slowly, Wyatt lowered the book again and turned his gaze to Asher. Somehow, his eyes appeared thirty percent darker than their usual color.

"This book," he said, enunciating each word with precision, "has been in my bedroom. Have you been in there?"

"I have not," Asher replied.

"Then how do you know what these poems are about?"

"I have an extensive library of literature, essays, and poetry in my databank. Pablo Neruda is one of the authors included."

"Why do you keep asking to read my books if you've got your own personal library?"

"You read physical books when you have access to them on your computer or personal tablet. I thought emulating you would help me get closer to you." As Wyatt's eyebrows drew together, Asher amended his words. "Not physically. By 'closer' I mean understanding you better."

"What if I don't want you to understand me any better?" Wyatt asked, standing from the sofa with the book in his hand.

Asher couldn't come up with an acceptable answer—not before Wyatt had left the room to retreat to his bedroom, where Asher was not allowed to follow.

Rather than picking a new book from the shelves that lined the den, Asher sat down, his hands resting on his knees as he perused the book files in his data bank. Accessing a poem and reading it in its entirety took no more than a thought, but he made the text of one of the poems that seemed most appropriate appear in his visual field and read it with his eyes, rather than simply his memory.

Beauty was a human concept, and all the programmers who'd worked on the A.S.H.E.R. line had been able to do was provide a frame of reference about what humans considered to be beautiful, whether it was in written form, music, performing or plastic arts. The inclusion of an internal library in an

A.S.H.E.R. unit's databank was not standard, but had been requested by Lance Hillford. He'd also provided a list of the volumes to be included.

As Asher read the poem again, he hypothesized that beauty might also come from the truth inherent to a piece of art, whatever its form; a truth that made it relatable to the human condition—or the vampire one, as the case may be. Surely Lance Hillford had not requested these inclusions for Asher's personal enjoyment.

Reading the whole of it also confirmed what he'd known when he talked about these poems resonating with Wyatt: none of the poems' circumstances matched Wyatt's in the slightest. Still, Asher couldn't help but feel that the sad tone of some poems matched Wyatt's behavior. He mourned his lost love, and it did not matter what gender his lover had been or whether they'd separated or been broken apart by death.

Asher had told Wyatt that he read to understand Wyatt better. Tonight, he thought he did.

Day 18

For a full week, Wyatt did not utter a single word in Asher's presence.

When Asher said hello to him in the evening, asked him whether he'd like a second mug of blood, or asked for his permission to borrow another book, Wyatt's reaction was always the same. He acted like he couldn't see or hear Asher.

Asher understood he had displeased Wyatt somehow, but he couldn't figure out how. Surely, his admission that he was trying to understand Wyatt better couldn't have brought such a response. It wasn't logical.

Then again, humans were not always logical, and even if Wyatt was a vampire, except for his dietary needs and his allergy to sunlight, he was no different from a human—or at least, not as far as Asher had observed.

After a full week, however, a meaningful period of time by human standards according to Asher's databank, it was time for him to do something. His purpose was to please his owner; he could not do that if he wasn't able to converse with him, let alone touch him.

Sifting through dozens of possible scenarios, Asher decided on an option modified from submission play. On his first day in this house, Wyatt had ordered Asher not to kneel; he'd been adamant about it. Asher would be breaking that order today, but his actions wouldn't endanger his owner or any human or ArtLife unit, himself included, so his decision mechanism deemed the transgression acceptable.

Today, Asher decided, he would kneel at Wyatt's feet and ask for forgiveness, then decide on what to do next depending on Wyatt's reaction.

However, rather than drinking his dinner/breakfast in the kitchen as usual, Wyatt took the mug to the den and sat in front of his computer, breaking his usual sequence of daily actions. Asher approached quietly and tried to analyze what the change might mean. Maybe his attempt to apologize should be postponed until further data was available.

As he remained seven feet away not to be intrusive, Asher noted that the speed of Wyatt's typing had increased to twenty-seven percent above his

average. Of course, that average had been skewed in the past three days with much lower speeds and keystrokes than usual. Wyatt had also seemed frustrated by whatever he was typing, while tonight his enthusiasm appeared renewed.

Or at least, it appeared so for eight minutes and thirty-nine seconds. At which point the typing stopped and Wyatt muttered, “Fuck, this is crap.”

He stood from his desk so abruptly that his chair, although heavy and quite stable, tumbled backwards. With his mug in hand, he started toward the kitchen, throwing Asher a narrow-eyed look as he passed him, still without saying a word.

Asher analyzed whether following him or proceeding with the initial plan were good ideas; both options received negative values. Wyatt seemed upset, and to date Asher had been unable to communicate effectively with him despite his best efforts. Humans—and vampires—were complex and unpredictable creatures. It made them interesting, but also difficult to interact with. The exchange of bytes was so much more precise.

A complicated chain of equations and probabilities led Asher to his new plan. He also calculated the risk of displeasing his owner versus the potential understanding to be gained. The risk was worth it, he decided.

Establishing a connection with the antique computer took merely a second; its Wi-Fi capabilities were obsolete, but Asher could work with them. The security protocol was even easier to circumvent. With little more than a thought, Asher was linked to the program Wyatt had been using. Instead of just viewing the screen, however, he could access the entire file, along with a dozen other text files.

Asher soon realized they were books. The one Wyatt had been working on was incomplete, but the other manuscripts appeared to be in their final state. As soon as Asher made that assessment, he corrected himself. The manuscripts were not only completed, eight of them had been published and were part of Asher’s databank. He had also seen them on Wyatt’s bookshelves.

All together, the books had been published under three different names, none of them “Wyatt Hillford”. A quick comparison of the texts, however,

revealed similar stylistic and narrative choices, and the probability that they had been written by the same person was ninety-two point seven percent.

Nonetheless, when Asher factored in the last file, the one Wyatt had claimed was “crap”, the similarities decreased, and the probability went down to sixty-two percent.

There was another interesting thing about the last file. While every other book was categorized as fiction, the main character in this one was named Lance, and his meticulous description seemed to match the pictures of Lance Hillford that Asher had seen. Moreover, a large part of the book dealt with the character’s appreciation of equine sports and his success despite adversity. There was, however, no mention of a character comparable to Wyatt; instead, the main character had a romantic relationship with a woman.

Was the book fiction or biography?

Asher would have liked to ask—more data was always good—but as he watched Wyatt return to his computer with his shoulders hunched and his head low, he decided the question could wait. Asher went to the living room, whose walls were lined with bookshelves, and quickly located one of the books he’d found on the hard drive. He’d already absorbed the digital information, but in the past few days he’d continued to borrow physical copies of books. Reading the words on a page seemed to imbue them with additional value, an unquantifiable enjoyment factor that his processors failed to fully comprehend but existed nonetheless.

Asher sat down on the chair in the corner, out of Wyatt’s way should he abandon his typing for the night, opened the book to the first page, and found a handwritten dedication.

To Lance,

May neither fair Guinevere nor wily Merlin ever steal your affections from me.

Love,

W.

The book was a retelling of the Arthurian cycle set in modern times and centered on the character of Lancelot. Asher recalibrated his reading speed to match a human's and turned to chapter one.

Day 22

On the second day, Wyatt noticed what books Asher was now choosing to read, but Wyatt only spoke up after Asher started to read the third one.

“What are you doing?”

After more than two weeks of not saying a word, his voice sounded rough from disuse—or that might have been from the four glasses of alcohol he had ingested so far tonight. His question puzzled Asher since it was obvious what he was doing.

“I am reading,” he said, holding the book a little higher for Wyatt to see.

“I see that.” Wyatt’s teeth made a low sound when he gritted them together. “Why are you reading that book in particular? And the one you were reading yesterday?”

“I am reading these books because you authored them. Reading them is another means through which I hope to understand you better.”

Wyatt didn’t seem surprised. “How do you know I wrote them?”

Asher could tell that Wyatt was already displeased and that revealing he’d accessed the memory of the computer was unlikely to improve Wyatt’s mood. However, an ArtLife was only permitted to lie when within the setting of a sexual game, and only with the explicit assent of his owner. Hiding facts was taboo.

“I accessed your computer,” he said plainly. “You seemed upset, and I wanted to know why. Your computer was a new source of data.”

Wyatt’s nostrils flared. He did not, as a rule, appear to breathe, which was consistent with most vampire myths, but at the moment, maybe under the influence of stress or anger, his body reacted more like a human’s.

“Who gave you permission...” He cut himself short. His voice level had risen by thirty-seven percent. “All right. Here’s a new rule. You are not allowed to touch anything whatsoever that belongs to me. Or access anything that belongs to me. As a matter of fact... do you have an off switch?”

Asher was already rising from the chair. It belonged to Wyatt. He set the book back on the shelf, being very careful not to touch anything else as he did so.

“ArtLife units do not have an off switch,” he informed Wyatt. He would have preferred to stop there, but it was in his programming to give as complete answers as possible. “However, if you give the command, I can take my main circuits offline until such a time as you want me to be operational again.”

Asher had never experienced fear, but he knew of the concept, both from basic definitions in his databank and from his reading. Two of the three novels from Wyatt he had read dealt heavily with the fears the main character felt and ultimately triumphed over.

When Wyatt said with a toneless voice, “Do that. Shut yourself off,” Asher only had the tiniest of instants to wonder if he would ever be brought back online. His last thought was that this was what fear must be like.

Day 37

The first thing Asher saw when his circuits flared back to life were deep blue eyes, just like when his box had first been opened. He had no immediate memory of being told to come back online, but Wyatt must have given the order.

As he performed routine system checks, Asher became aware that fifteen days had passed since Wyatt had asked about his “off switch”. He’d also been moved a few inches, his body folded down to a sitting position in an armchair. He stood at once and remained silent, waiting to be told what to do, not wanting to be ordered offline again.

“Are you fully on?” Wyatt asked.

“Yes,” Asher replied.

Another moment passed. Wyatt continued to sip from a mug, frowning.

“You’re awfully quiet. Did taking you offline hurt you?”

“No. My circuitry is not damaged.”

“So? Why so quiet?”

Asher’s programming required him to answer thoroughly. The probability that doing so would cause him to be shut down again was high enough to give him pause, but in the end he had to answer.

“I have displeased you in the past by talking. I do not wish to displease you and be taken offline again.”

When Wyatt tilted his head to one side, his expression resembled confusion.

“You wish for things? Is that part of your programming?”

“The desire to please my owner is one of the basic laws that govern me, yes.”

Wyatt’s thumb tapped the side of the mug.

“How about not wanting to be switched off? Is that part of your programming? When you first came here, you were ready to make that call to ArtLife and be destroyed. You never even blinked.”

“I have no physiological need for blinking. ArtLife units only do so to appear—”

“I mean,” Wyatt cut in impatiently, “you weren’t bothered by the thought that I might want you to be destroyed. But now you don’t want to be switched off. How come?”

As Asher answered, his redundancy thought processes analyzed this desire; he’d never felt discomfort before, but he wondered if this might be what discomfort felt like.

“ArtLife units have learning capabilities,” he said. “By default, learning is set at a minimum so units can adapt and serve their owner better. Lance Hillford required my learning settings to be fully open. I have learned from everything I heard, saw, touched, or read since being unboxed. Your novels in particular have themes that revolve around fear and death, and—”

“I know what my books talk about,” Wyatt snapped. He turned around and strode away, his feet striking the floor in the manner that meant he was irritated.

Before Wyatt had disappeared into the kitchen, Asher asked, “May I ask a question?”

Wyatt stopped and glanced back. “What is it?”

“Why did you reactivate me?”

Nine seconds elapsed before Wyatt answered in a low voice. “You were just sitting there, and you looked... dead. I didn’t like that.”

“May I ask another question?”

A corner of Wyatt’s mouth twitched into what had a forty-three percent probability of being a smile. “Ask.”

“Why didn’t you simply put me where you wouldn’t see me?”

The possible smile faded. “You ask too many questions.”

“Do you wish me to stop?”

Another six seconds passed before Wyatt turned away. As he did so, he said a single word. “No.”

It wasn't the first time Wyatt had offered contradictory statements. As he settled down at his computer with another full mug at his side, he hardly seemed to invite more inquiries, but his questions about Asher's silence and his last answer indicated that he might not mind having someone to talk to; from the message Lance Hillford had left for him, he might even need it.

Asher decided he would ask one question a day, since asking two was apparently too many. Having already asked his quota for today, he set about making a list of what to ask in the future.

Day 38

Asher's new restrictions were no physical hardship to him, but they did leave him with little to do. For most of the day while Wyatt slept, Asher stood out of the way, near the wall though not touching it. Reading from actual books was now forbidden to him, so he summoned holographic versions from his memory and read them at the same pace he would have used had he been holding paper pages. He believed it gave him a better appreciation of Wyatt's skill with words, but while humans reported that reading made time pass faster, that wasn't the case for him.

When at long last Wyatt came out of his room, Asher put the texts away so that he would be alert. He approached and gave his usual greeting, receiving an absentminded nod in reply. He waited until Wyatt had drunk his dinner before he asked his question for the day. Its answer would not provide the most crucial data, but he didn't want to upset Wyatt by being too abrupt.

"May I ask a question?"

Wyatt made a little sound in his throat and looked back from where he was rinsing his mug. "You don't need to ask if you can ask a question every time you want to know something."

Asher took this as assent.

"I assume you took the name Hillford upon marrying Lance Hillford. What is your birth name?"

Wyatt's body tensed when Asher said Lance Hillford's name. He had not noticed this before, but a quick review of his memory bank revealed that Wyatt had reacted to the name in a rather adverse manner every time Asher had spoken it. Asher made a note not to use the name again if he could avoid it.

"What does it matter to you?" Wyatt asked, shutting off the water with an abrupt gesture.

"It is simple curiosity on my part," Asher said. "You have published books under several names, although none under 'Hillford'. I was wondering if any of them was your birth name."

His arms crossed, Wyatt considered Asher for five seconds before answering. “No. They’re all pen names. But Wyatt is my actual first name.”

Asher inclined his head. “Thank you.”

Wyatt gave him another nod before stepping out of the kitchen. For the next five and a quarter hours, he sat in front of his computer, occasionally standing and pacing through the den. Asher remained at a distance and did not try to read the screen, but he could see that, the entire time, Wyatt typed seventy-three words, and deleted one hundred and five. When Wyatt finally gave up and retrieved a book from the living room shelves, Asher identified his expression as what, in several of his books, Wyatt had described as “thunderous”. Asher remained out of the way.

Day 39

This time, Asher waited until Wyatt had finished his dinner, but he didn't ask if he could ask a question.

“How long have you been a vampire?”

Wyatt's expression was briefly surprised before he answered.

“Two hundred and thirty-odd years. Why do you ask?”

“Your first books were published more than a century ago. That's what brought up the question.”

A small curve appeared on Wyatt's lips, so thin Asher wasn't sure it could be classified as a smile.

“Actually, my first book was published two hundred and five years ago. I guess you don't have that one in your personal library, huh?”

Asher inclined his head. “It appears not. Or if I do, it's under a pen name that I do not know is one of yours.”

He added two more questions to his list: What were all of Wyatt's pen names, and what were the titles of his books. Although the answer to the latter question might be so lengthy that Wyatt would lose patience or refuse to answer, in which case—

“Aren't you going to ask what it was called?” Wyatt said, and the not-quite-smile was gone.

Asher considered breaking his one question per day protocol, but in the end did not and said instead, “If you would wish to tell me, I would very much like to know.”

Wyatt shook his head and headed for the door. “Sometimes, I think I understand you, and then you prove me wrong. It's called *Blood and Fire*. It's on the shelves somewhere.”

With that, he returned to his computer and appeared to experience the same hardship again.

Asher didn't need much time to locate the book on the shelves. Unfortunately, he did not have it in his databank, or any other volume under

this pen name. Wyatt had told him where it was, which could be interpreted as an invitation, but his order not to touch his things had been much more unequivocal. Asher did not touch the book.

Day 40

This night, when Asher joined Wyatt in the kitchen with a question on his lips, he did not have time to voice it. Before he could say a word, Wyatt asked, “Why don’t you warm my dinner for me anymore?”

Two conflicting messages flashed to the front of Asher’s mind. He’d displeased his owner, which was not good. But he’d only been following his orders, so how could he have displeased him?

“You ordered me not to touch your things anymore,” Asher explained. “The microven, the mug, the refrigerator, the blood... These are all your things, and therefore I cannot touch them.”

Wyatt frowned before taking a deep drink from his mug.

“I wonder what I’d have to do for you not to take everything so literally,” he said as he lowered it again.

Asher wasn’t sure whether the question was rhetorical or not. Did Wyatt truly not understand that his words were law as far as Asher was concerned?

He’d had an important question ready for tonight, but instead he asked, “Do you wish me to start preparing your dinner again?”

Wyatt sighed. “Sure. Why not. It’ll give you something to do other than just stand there. Don’t you get tired of it?”

The first reply that came to Asher was a reminder that, as an ArtLife, he did not become tired. A second analysis of the question, however, indicated a different meaning.

“I am here to please you, my owner,” he said. “As long as you wish me to remain standing, I will follow your orders.”

Wyatt’s frown deepened by ten percent. “I never ordered you to... Oh. The armchair is mine and you can’t touch it, is that it?”

“Correct.”

“And let me guess. The books are mine too so you didn’t touch *Blood and Fire*.” He snorted and shook his head. “So much for wondering what you thought of it.”

“If you wish me to read it,” Asher said, “I would be happy to do so.”

Wyatt refilled the mug and set it back in the microven. “Would you?” he asked. “Be happy, I mean. Can you even experience happiness? I thought you said you don’t know what emotions are.”

Only when Wyatt pointed it out did Asher realize he’d used the word “happy”. And had meant it, too. He searched his data and memory banks, and easily found a source for the concept, so new when applied to himself.

“From my readings,” he said, for the first time finding it awkward to put his knowledge into words, “I have gained a better understanding of ‘happiness’ and ‘sadness’. I do not know if my experience of happiness is anything like yours, but I do believe I experience satisfaction when I am able to follow my primary order.”

“And your primary order is?”

“To satisfy you in any way you require from me, sexual or otherwise.”

Wyatt grimaced. “So they programmed you to want it. Lovely.”

With a huff, he left the kitchen. The mug and its warm blood were still in the microven.

The order not to touch his things had not been rescinded, but inferences could be made from Wyatt’s agreement that Asher prepare meals for him. Asher brought him the mug, setting it next to the keyboard.

“If I were human and wanted to make you happy,” Asher said as he took two steps back, “I do not believe you would be questioning my motives. Does it really matter why I do what I do?”

It was his second question for the night. When Wyatt looked at him but did not answer, Asher retreated out of the way.

Day 45

For several days, Asher prepared Wyatt's dinner and asked small, inconsequential questions that were of low importance in his internal list. When he realized what he was doing, he identified the reason behind it. There was a forty-seven to fifty-two percent chance that asking the first question on his list would result in his being deactivated again. The possibility was unpleasant; Asher was rather certain by now that this was fear.

Fear, however, he had learned from his readings, was something to control, not something that should control a person. Asher wasn't technically a person, but he supposed it still held true. He pushed past his reservations and asked, "Is the story you are currently writing the true narrative of Lance Hillford's life, or is it fiction centered on a character that resembles him?"

The mug in Wyatt's hand slipped from his fingers and fell, shattering on the tiled floor and splattering blood everywhere. Wyatt barely seemed to notice.

"I told you not to access my computer files," he said in a low, growling voice.

"I haven't done so since you gave the order," Asher assured him. "This question is based on my access to the files prior to that."

Wyatt's nostrils flared. Asher braced himself; the probability of being shut off was now eighty-six percent.

Yet, Wyatt left the kitchen without a word. He'd only taken one sip of blood, but he didn't come back for more. When Asher finished cleaning the kitchen, he went to look for Wyatt but could not find him. Was he in his bedroom? The door was closed, and Asher was not allowed open it. Should he try knocking?

In the end, he didn't. He went to sit with another one of Wyatt's books—he'd made sure to gain permission the previous night.

An hour and fifty-three minutes later, the front door opened and Wyatt came in. He dropped keys on the table in the entrance and kicked off his shoes. He was holding a paper bag to his chest; the small clinking when he stepped

forward—rather unsteadily—revealed that the bag contained several glass bottles.

“Come with me,” he demanded, slurring the words a little.

Asher stood and followed him into the den to the computer desk. Wyatt’s movements were less coordinated than usual, which Asher attributed to alcohol intoxication. Wyatt sat at the desk, set the bag down next to him, and pulled a half empty bottle from it. He proceeded to drink straight from it while he waited for the computer to boot up.

“Want to show you something,” he muttered as he opened his word-processing program, then the file with the incomplete story. With jerky motions, he set his cursor at the end of the document, then pressed the backspace key. In one second, he’d erased a full line. Soon, a page had disappeared. Then two. Wyatt’s finger did not lift from the backspace key. He did not say a word until the entire document had been deleted. Asher ran through his decision models, trying to decide what to say—and how to stop Wyatt—but no possibility was acceptable. It was not up to him to decide what Wyatt should or should not do.

“There,” Wyatt said at last, saving the blank file and finalizing the deletion. “Now it’s not fiction and it’s not a biography. It’s not a damn thing.”

His voice dropped in volume by seventy percent on the last two words. At a loss as to how to react, Asher rested his hand on Wyatt’s shoulder. Wyatt’s entire body started to tremble under that small touch. He turned gleaming eyes up to Asher.

“What, no more questions?” he asked. “Don’t you want to know more about me and him so you can understand?”

He sneered at that last word, the connotation being that the idea of Asher understanding him was ludicrous.

The thing was, Asher thought he understood Wyatt rather well by now. He understood how lonely Wyatt was. How desperate to cling to a being who was dead by putting his name and likeness in a story he was unable to finish and asking Asher to wear clothes that must be a constant reminder of Lance

Hillford. He also understood that alcohol might dull pain and heartache for a time, but would not erase it or heal it. Wyatt's own words had taught him that.

Still unsure what to do, Asher defaulted back to his primary programming. He leaned down and pressed his closed mouth to Wyatt's.

Wyatt stilled instantly against him. He didn't kiss Asher back, merely remained as he was, frozen, his eyes wide in shock. After two and a half seconds, his eyes fluttered closed. His hand fisted in the front of Asher's shirt and pulled him even closer. Asher's center of balance called out a warning, and Asher threw out his hands, catching himself on the armrests of the chair before he toppled onto Wyatt. Their mouths had come apart, and Wyatt's face was now pressed to Asher's chest. He was breathing in deeply—no, not breathing, Asher corrected himself. Smelling.

Did Lance Hillford's scent still cling to the clothes? Could Wyatt smell it? Some folk tales claimed vampires had very keen senses.

"How many blow job techniques did you say you know?" Wyatt asked, mumbling the words against the fabric of Asher's shirt.

"Twenty-three."

Wyatt was shaking again.

"Go ahead, then. Show me."

It was the order Asher had been waiting for since coming out of his box. And yet...

"I'm afraid that is not possible at the moment."

Wyatt pushed Asher back and stood. His eyes were darker than their usual color by fifteen percent.

"I gave you an order."

"You did," Asher replied. "But you are intoxicated. In such conditions, doing something you previously forbade—"

"Oh, for fuck's sake! Now even the damn bot is afraid to take advantage of me."

Wyatt leaned down to take hold of another bottle in the paper bag. When he straightened up again, he nearly lost his footing and fell. Asher started to reach for him to help him maintain his balance, but Wyatt pushed his hand away, glowering. Without another word, he stumbled back to his room, the bottle hanging from his fingers. Asher wished he could have followed.

Day 46

Asher waited in the kitchen for the first sounds from Wyatt's room to begin preparing his dinner, but Wyatt woke up much later than usual that evening. When he finally entered the kitchen, his skin was five percent paler than usual, and rather than standing while he drank the dinner Asher handed him, he sat down at the small table and supported his head on his open hand.

"Thank you," he said after taking a few slow sips. "Not for the blood but for... for last night. For not letting me make another mistake."

"I apologize for asking an intrusive question," Asher said in reply. "It was not my intention to upset you."

Wyatt started to shake his head but stopped with a wince. "It wasn't your fault. I was upset before you even said a word."

Asher thought he knew why, but his probability of being correct was only seventy-two percent, so he asked, "May I ask why you were upset?"

Wyatt finished his drink, tilting his head back as he did so. When he was done, he held the mug out toward Asher. "More, please."

Asher took the mug and turned to the fridge to fill it again. While his back was turned, Wyatt spoke slowly and quietly.

"I've been working on that story for more than six months. And getting nowhere with it. Last night, when you asked... I was upset because you saw what I couldn't see for myself. I set out to write about Lance, but I didn't want to share his life. That was private. So I started writing a story with him as the hero, but that didn't feel right either. Because it wasn't him. He never said or did those things. He probably wouldn't have. I was just betraying him."

The microwave dinged. Asher removed the warm mug and set it in front of Wyatt.

"Is this why you deleted the story?" he asked.

Wyatt nodded without looking up.

"Would you like me to delete it from my databank as well?"

Wyatt closed his eyes for two seconds before meeting Asher's gaze.

“You... you have a copy?” he whispered.

“Not of the latest version,” Asher said. “Only of the text as it was when I accessed your computer twenty-eight days ago.”

Wyatt focused on the contents of his mug and sighed softly. “What do you think? You’ve read the rest of my books. Is this one worth saving?”

Asher’s first reaction was to deny he was qualified to pass such a judgment. Like Wyatt had noted, however, Asher was familiar with his writing. Besides, with Wyatt being so despondent, Asher didn’t want to refuse to answer.

“The plot was interesting,” he offered. “And it made me curious about what would happen next. But the style did not resemble you. It didn’t have the same...”

To his own surprise, Asher found himself struggling for the right word. How could he not know what he had meant to say?

“The same what?” Wyatt asked, looking at him again.

Asher shifted slightly in the hopes that it would help adjust his speech center; it did not.

“The words I want to use are ‘fire’ and ‘life,’” he finally said. “But I do realize they make no sense in this context. I apologize for this lapse in my programming.”

For no reason Asher could conjecture, Wyatt smiled. He rose from the table, approached Asher, and—also for no apparent reason—pressed a kiss to his mouth. Asher was still trying to understand after Wyatt had left the kitchen.

Day 50

Over of the next four nights, Wyatt's number of keystrokes increased by an average of thirty-seven percent each night. There were still moments when he sat in front of his computer with his brow furrowed in concentration, but when it happened he didn't jump to his feet and walk away with muttered curses or reach for one of the bottles Asher had asked permission to put away in the liquor cabinet.

Wyatt had rescinded his command about not touching what belonged to him, but not his order for Asher to stay out of his computer. He hadn't said anything, however, about remaining within sight of the screen, and since Asher was allowed to read Wyatt's books, he chose to interpret that permission in its widest possible sense.

Which was how he found himself in trouble again. His prediction circuit had given a sixty-three percent probability that this very thing would happen, but he deemed the risk acceptable.

"How good is your eyesight?"

Wyatt didn't turn away from the computer as he asked; he didn't even stop typing.

"Better than a human's," Asher replied.

"Meaning you can read the screen from across the room?"

"Correct."

Now, Wyatt stopped and turned. His expression was very similar to the one he'd had the night he had told Asher to shut himself off.

"You're reading as I type, aren't you?"

His tone sounded accusing.

"Correct. I believed I was allowed to read your books. Was I wrong?"

"You're allowed to read published books," Wyatt said, standing and approaching Asher. "Not works in progress that will change a hundred times before they end up as actual books."

With each step he took, the probability that he would shut off Asher again rose a few hundredths of a percent.

“My apologies,” Asher said quickly. “It is in my programming to be inquisitive about my owner’s interests and—”

The probability of Wyatt’s mouth pressing against Asher’s had been so low, it hadn’t even registered. And yet, there it was, gently coaxing Asher’s lips further apart before Wyatt’s tongue slipped in for the briefest of instants. Before Asher’s kissing program could engage, Wyatt was already pulling back.

“Wyatt?” Asher said. Half a dozen questions presented themselves, but he couldn’t decide which one to voice.

Wyatt’s hands rested on Asher’s shoulders. Gently but firmly, he pressed and pulled, forcing Asher to turn around and then marching him back into the living room.

“I’ve never liked people watching over my shoulder when I write,” he said, letting go of his hold on Asher. “And blaming your programming is rather lame. Just admit you want to read it.”

“I do,” Asher said as he turned to face him again. “May I?”

“Sure.” Wyatt gave him a crooked smile. “When it’s finished. And published.”

He started to walk away, back toward his computer. Asher asked, “Wyatt? Why did you kiss me?”

Wyatt stopped for a moment but didn’t look back. “You reminded me of someone I knew, long ago. He’d always try to sneak glances at what I was writing. Or try to bribe me into letting him read it early.”

While Wyatt returned to his work, Asher analyzed his words and voice. The pain that filled him every time the subject of Lance Hillford came up had not emerged. Furthermore, he’d said “long ago,” which was unlikely to refer to a man who had only passed away a few months earlier. It had to be someone

else, then. Maybe a previous lover. Someone Wyatt could think of fondly, without pain.

Someone Asher thought he might want to emulate.

Day 51

Asher's question tonight caused Wyatt's eyes to widen by thirty-three percent. He blinked five times, then said, "What?"

Asher dutifully repeated his inquiry.

"Would fellatio or an offer of anal intercourse be successful forms of bribery?"

Wyatt blinked a few more times. There appeared to be a communication issue. Asher decided to explain his question.

"Last night you mentioned someone had tried to use bribery to read your work early. I was wondering what kind of bribery might work."

Asher's prediction mechanism had put the possibility that Wyatt might take offense from such a question at fifty percent.

Instead, he laughed.

"You're impossible!" he said after calming down, and without another word of explanation—or an answer to Asher's question—he took his dinner from the kitchen and straight to the den.

Asher followed, though he did not enter the room, remaining in a spot such that his view of the computer screen was blocked.

"I can perform other acts," he tried. Such explanations were usually given during the first contact or soon thereafter, but Asher had never had the chance. "I have extensive knowledge of human sexuality. I can become whoever you want me to be, act in whatever way pleases you, say whatever you want to hear, touch you for pleasure or comfort. Nothing you ask me—"

"I thought I'd already told you," Wyatt interrupted, and there was no trace of amusement left in his voice. "I'm not interested in prostitutes. Or slaves. I don't care what you're programmed to do. And I'm more interested by the fact that you want to read books, and not just mine, than by your offers of blow jobs."

"I'm not programmed for bribery attempts," Asher replied.

Wyatt turned in his chair and gave Asher a long look. “Why do you even want to read this thing? It might not be all that good.”

Asher opened his mouth, but no answer came out. Why did he want to read Wyatt’s work? There were dozens, hundreds of books on the shelves in the living room, and just as many in his internal library. Why did he want to read that one?

“Well?” Wyatt insisted.

“I... just want to,” Asher said, and it was the only answer he could offer.

Wyatt turned back to his screen, but not before Asher caught a slight smile on his lips.

“Do you know how to give a massage?” he asked, his fingers already playing on the keyboard.

“I do. I have extensive knowledge of the human body.”

It occurred to him as he said the word that Wyatt was not, in fact, human, but it didn’t seem to matter in this instance.

“I’ve got a knot in my back from sitting for so long,” Wyatt said, reaching over his shoulder with one hand to point at a specific spot. “Can you help with that?”

“I can try.”

Asher stepped forward to stand behind Wyatt. When he put his hands on Wyatt’s shoulders, he expected to be told not to read what was on the screen. Wyatt said nothing, however, and continued typing as Asher worked his muscles as thoroughly as he could in this position.

Was he allowed to read? The fact that Wyatt had made him stand right behind him after they’d talked about bribery and Asher’s desire to read the story certainly implied as much. If there were arguments against this interpretation, Asher did not try to come up with them.

He read as Wyatt typed.

Data had always been interesting to him; the more data he held, the better he could perform his duties. This was different, though. There was nothing for

him to gain from knowing which words Wyatt chose, how he went back, after every couple of paragraphs, to fix typos, add a word here, delete two other words there, then move on. Watching the story being born before his very eyes, however, was a fascinating experience.

For two hours and forty-nine minutes, Wyatt typed, and Asher massaged his shoulders gently. When Wyatt finally saved his work and shut off the computer, Asher removed his hands, allowing Wyatt to stand.

“Thank you,” Wyatt said, rotating his shoulders.

“Thank you,” Asher said in return.

It seemed to have been the right answer. Wyatt smiled, then leaned in to kiss Asher again. This time, Asher was ready and kissed him back. Wyatt’s eyes closed as he deepened the kiss. Asher stepped closer, close enough that his skin sensors could detect Wyatt’s cock hardening against his thigh. His own body reacted—and Wyatt pulled back, his eyes snapping open. His gaze dropped to Asher’s crotch, where the bulge was as prominent as Wyatt’s own. Asher, unable to figure out what was happening, remained quiet.

“So... ArtLifes can get erections?” Wyatt’s voice sounded hoarse. “How does that work?”

“SynSkin is irrigated by sterile fluid and—”

Wyatt raised his hand, palm out. “No, not that. We... humans, vampires, I mean. We get erections when we’re aroused. Can you experience arousal?”

“ArtLifes are programmed to display signs of arousal and increase their owner’s—”

“Is that what just happened?” Wyatt interrupted again, his voice dropping to a lower decibel level by thirty percent. “Your program?”

Asher was about to say that it was, when he realized it would have been a lie. His programming called for him to exhibit signs of arousal when his owner reached for his body, but Wyatt hadn’t done that.

“No,” he admitted. “You were aroused. I wanted to be as well. To be... like you.”

Wyatt’s brow furrowed. “Why?”

Asher shook his head. The more he thought about it, the less it made sense. “I can’t answer that question. I believe my circuits might be compromised. I am to serve my owner; I should not have wants for myself. You may want to contact ArtLife customer service and have them run a diagnostic on me.”

Yet again, Wyatt’s laugh surprised Asher. As did a new kiss. And what happened after the kiss.

Sex was what Asher had been created for. All his factory programming revolved around pleasure—human pleasure.

He’d never known that he, too, would experience it when Wyatt touched him, when he led him to the bedroom Asher had never entered before, when he undressed Asher and allowed Asher to undress him in return. The pleasure wasn’t physical; Asher simply wasn’t wired that way. But it was pleasure nonetheless, such as Asher could experience it; the satisfaction of pleasing his owner, and of having his owner accept him after weeks of keeping him at arms’ length.

It went deeper than that, though. Wyatt had offered Asher a peek into his mind, into what it meant to be human—or vampire—through his words. Asher felt close to him, closer than warranted by two bodies pressing together, sliding against each other, both of them cool, both of them hard, both of them intent on making the other react to their touches and kisses.

And this, too, was something Asher had not known, that his owner would touch back, that he’d try to please Asher as much as Asher tried to please him. But in the end, he wasn’t surprised. He’d read Wyatt’s words and, maybe, his very mind. His soul, even, if such a thing existed. And while Asher didn’t know if he had anything like that to share in return, he certainly would try his hardest—as always.

THE END

Author Bio

Kallysten is a writer of romance novels and short stories, most of them with paranormal elements, ranging from sweet to erotic, M/F, M/M and ménages. Her first eBooks were published by Linden Bay Romance in 2005. The defunct Venus Press subsequently published a few of her short stories. Because so many of her stories are linked as series and part of the same universe, she decided it would make sense to have them all in the same place, which is why she self-published, first with the co-op Alinar Publishing and now on her own. When she sees calls for submissions that speak to her muse, she sometimes tries for them, and was published this way by Samhain and Torquere.

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