

© 2023 Ziel

Lies of D

Chapter 1

Pinot leaned in close and stared at his reflection in the mirror. He was so close that all he could see was the face staring back at him. On some level he knew that the face staring back at him was his. This is how others would see him, but did that really make it him? How was this face any different from that of the other prototypes which were still strewn about the lab.

Pinot ran his fingertips across the skin under his eyes. Was skin even the right word? Dermis? Polymer? Did it matter? He was told that it felt the same as human skin. Pinot had never felt human skin before, so he had to take their word for it. The substance that stretched across his frame felt soft and supple to the touch, much like he imagined flesh would feel. It looked like skin. It felt like skin. The chemical composition may not be the same, but did that matter?

There was a knock on the door. “Are you dressed yet? The professor would like to speak to you,” came the voice on the other side.

It was one of the lab techs. They mostly just did maintenance. Professor Grigio rarely let anyone else touch the truly delicate machinery. The professor’s hands were the only ones Pinot had felt since gaining the tactile sensors necessary to feel. The professor’s hands were tough and leathery and covered in callouses from a lifetime of working with machinery. His skin was nothing like the soft substance that now covered Pinot’s frame. The discrepancy only served to fuel Pinot’s doubts in how believable his own skin was.

Pinot stepped back from the mirror and looked upon his full reflection. His body was roughly the same as it had been before. He had a lean, slender form which lacked any real muscle definition, but that made sense. He didn’t have any real muscles. His sinews were experimental fibers that used the same theory as human muscles. The strong synthetic fibers were pulled tight into taut coiled bands which were denser, heavier, and stronger than human muscle but served the same form and function.

Aside from the layer of skin, the only other recent additions were curly, black hair and accompanying eyebrows and a small organ placed between his legs. Pinot was not sure what to make of this latest addition. He didn’t see the point, but the professor had insisted. He said that it was part of being

human, but to Pinot it seemed such a small and trivial thing. It was just a small, fleshy acorn seated atop a tight, fleshy sack which was crammed full of a pair of spheres which were roughly the size of macadamia nuts.

Pinot wanted to stand there longer and look over his new body, but he knew that the professor was waiting for him. Pinot turned from the mirror and pulled on the shirt and pants provided for him and then slipped on the pair of shoes he had been given. It was a strange and stifling experience. He had barely even begun to adjust to having skin to begin with. He still wasn't used to the feeling of anything touching his skin, and now he had the majority of his skin brushing against different blends of fibers. He had no context for what these sensations were. Was this itchy? Was it soft? Was it stuffy? It was all so overwhelming.

Pinot walked stiffly from the changing room towards the lab. He knew how to walk. He had done it his whole life, but now that he had an extra layer of fabric around his newly christened skin, every move he made felt weird. Wool against his chest and shoulders. Denim against his thighs, and of course, he had that other new addition rubbing against the inside of his fly. Did people feel like this all the time? Was this just something he'd have to get used to?

Pinot entered the lab to find the professor bent down with his head and shoulders buried in the chassis of a larger automaton. This one was much less polished than Pinot. It was an industrial model that

was all function over form. It had no sentience of its own. Yet, despite this, it had many of the same parts that Pinot himself had. Two legs. Two arms. A head and torso. It even had the sinews that roughly approximated muscles around its arms and legs. It had tubes throughout its body carrying the blue fluid that served as fuel and lubrication to all the parts – the same blue fluid that pumped through Pinot’s body like blood.

The professor stood up and wiped the blue fluid off of his hands onto the apron over his work uniform. If the color were different, he’d look much like a butcher, but he was putting things together rather than tearing them apart. Still, the image of “blood” smeared across the professor’s hands and apron was disconcerting.

“Ah. There you are. I was beginning to think you were having too much fun with the new enhancements I gave you,” the professor said with a sly wink – a gesture which was amplified by the magnifying goggles he wore over his eyes.

Pinot cocked his head curiously at the professor but did not otherwise respond.

“I suppose you haven’t had time to learn that trick yet. Well, no matter. Being alive is all about learning new things, and there will be plenty of time to learn,” he said with a chuckle.

The professor paused for a moment while he waited for a response from Pinot, but when it was

clear that none would be forthcoming, he moved on to the next topic. “Now, you look like a human. On the rare occasion that you say something, you sound like a human. For the most part, you even act like a human, but those are fairly superficial traits. Even before the latest upgrade, I’ve always treated you as a person. So, tell me. What is the difference between a human and a person?” the professor asked.

Another riddle. The professor liked to wax eloquent about philosophical issues. His favorite topic was “what made a person a person”. He said it was a large part of his research. As machines became closer and closer to being human, it became more and more important to determine what was the dividing line.

“Humans are the most widespread species of primate, characterized by their hairlessness, bipedalism, and high intelligence,” Pinot responded.

“Yes, so you can cite Wikipedia, but so can any old chatbot” the professor replied. “You’ve told me what a human is. Now tell me what a person is.”

“A person is...” Pinot began but then balked. The professor was clearly not interested in a dictionary definition. He was looking for something a bit more esoteric.

“The hint is in the word itself,” the professor explained. “A person has... personality.”

“A personality,” Pinot responded. He mulled it over for a moment before asking, “but wouldn’t you say a dog has personality?”

It was the professor's turn to give a silent response. He winked at Pinot and flashed a huge, toothy, satisfied smile. The professor obviously seemed to think that Pinot had had some breakthrough, but Pinot was more confused than before.

"A person has personality, but a human does not always have humanity," the professor in that cryptic, almost sing-song way he spoke when he was posing another riddle for Pinot to crack.

"You say I have a personality, but it's not complete yet." Pinot said.

"No one's personality is ever truly complete," the professor replied in the same cryptic way, but he then shifted into his more jovial tone, "that, however, is why I called you here. I have a surprise for you!"

"Oh? Is it an update?" Pinot asked.

"In a manner of speaking, I suppose..." The professor said with a shrug. He then turned and dug something out from underneath a nearby table. He stood back up with a flourish and held out a fairly simple looking backpack. "Tadaa~!" he said dramatically.

Pinot accepted the pack and quickly opened it up. "It's empty," he said after quickly rifling through the pockets.

"The bag itself was the gift. Not the things inside," the professor explained.

“I don’t understand.”

“You want to develop your personality? I’ve always said the best place to discover who you are as a person is at college.”

Pinot’s eyes slowly widened and his mouth slowly opened into a look of shock and understanding.

“I know you’ve been wanting to see the campus outside the engineering building, and starting Monday, you can do just that... as a student!”

Chapter 2

“Let me at least carry one of those,” the professor said. He was following close behind Pinot as the pair made their way up the stairs to Pinot’s new dorm room. Pinot’s arms were full of various boxes which were crammed full of changes of clothes and other dorm room essentials. It would have been way more than any normal person could have carried by themselves, but Pinot was not a normal person. Yet, despite how many boxes he was carrying, he had far fewer boxes than one would expect for moving into a new home.

“I’m far better equipped to carry these than you are,” Pinot said flatly.

“I know that, but I want to help! This is exciting! It’s not every day someone helps their son move into their first dorm,” The professor said.

“That’s just a cover story,” Pinot replied just as flatly as before.

“You wound me!” the professor cried out.

“I haven’t even touched you,” Pinot replied.

“You know that’s not what I meant,” the professor said with a sigh.

There was a heavy silence as the pair made their way up a few more flights of stairs. Pinot knew enough to know that the professor was being oddly quiet, but he did not know enough to be able to infer more than that. Eventually, Pinot felt a hand on his shoulder. He glanced behind him to see the professor staring at him intently. It was rare for the professor to look so serious, and Pinot knew enough to stop his trek and wait for the professor to speak.

Eventually, the professor broke his silence. “I know you have the ability to lie, but you’re capable of more than that. You’re capable of free thought, and with that comes the ability to not just see the world in truth and falsehood but to understand that there’s so much more to it than that.”

“I... don’t think I understand,” Pinot said.

“No... not yet. You have the ability to understand, but you’ll need a lot more lived experience. I want you to listen to me and take what I am about to say to heart.” The professor said solemnly.

Pinot stared into the professor’s eyes for what felt like eternity before the old man finally spoke again.

“Sometimes people say things that we know are not factually true but we want them to be. As far as most of the people in the engineering department know, you are just my newest creation, but I think of you as so much more,” the professor explained.

“I think I understand,” Pinot said. “I’ve spoken to the others in the lab. They make it sound like I’m some kind of great experiment – something that could get you a Nobel Prize.”

The professor let out a sad sigh. “Yes, they would say that... I think you’ll benefit from not being surrounded by scientists all the time.”

Pinot was struck by a strange sensation. He felt like he should reach out to the old man somehow – to do something to lift his spirits, but he lacked the words or understanding to do so. He didn’t even have the ability to lay a hand on the man’s shoulder since Pinot’s arms were currently weighed down with several moving boxes.

“You’ve been around the biggest eggheads this state has to offer and have been speaking with AIs as much as you have other people. You’ve been lead to believe that everything can be summed up as Truth or Lies, but reality is as much fact as it is perception,” the professor said solemnly.

The professor’s words were cryptic, but he didn’t have that tone he normally did when he was presenting Pinot with another puzzle to crack. Somehow, he was presenting these words, however

nonsense they appeared to Pinot, as some immutable fact. Pinot could not wrap his head around the professor's meaning, though.

"I see you have much to learn," the professor said and shook his head. "This isn't something I can teach you, but I think your new roommate will be much better at it than I am."

"My roommate?" Pinot asked.

"Of course. A dorm room without a roommate is little more than a prison. Rooming with someone is what makes it An Experience," The professor said with a devious glint in his eye and tone in his voice.

"So, you know them?" Pinot asked.

"By reputation only," the professor explained. "I think they'll be a good influence on you, and perhaps, you on him."

"Explain," Pinot said.

"Well, he's a bit of a wild card. You could learn a bit of free thinking from him, and maybe, he could pick up a thing or two about being rational from time to time." The professor said with a shrug. He then gestured towards a nearby door. "Speaking of which, we're here."

"Alright. Then let's go meet this 'free thinker' you spoke of," Pinot said.

“I’ll get the door for you, but after that, I’ll leave you two to get to know each other,” the professor said.

“You’re not coming with me?” Pinot asked.

“No. I wanted to walk you to your new dorm, but there’s nothing more awkward than meeting your new roommate with your old man hanging around,” the professor said. He then stuck the key in the knob, turned it, and then pulled the door open for Pinot to pass through. The professor then gave a flourish and a bow and said, “Your future awaits.”