

# THE DOLL

## Chapter 1

"He's a *what?*"

"MX2426," Oshihara Mamoru repeated. "He's a prototype Doll."

"Which tells me nothing," I said, and rubbed out the half-smoked cigarette that had lost its taste. "A doll that does what?"

Oshihara sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose with his forefinger and thumb.

"That's privileged information," he said, his annoyance thinly veiled. "Your job's to find him and bring him back. You don't need to know anything else."

I regarded him for a few moments, then glanced down at the glossy photo of the young man I was to find. I pressed the lighter into the near empty packet of cigarettes and stood up. In the oversized meeting room, with only the three of us, the slightest sound of my chair being pushed back was horrendously loud.

"Have a nice day gentlemen," I said, shoving my cigarettes into my jacket pocket.

"Mamoru," Crawford said, his first words since I came into the room. "Tell him."

"Mr. Crawford...."

"Tell him," Crawford said again. The words and the voice were absolute.

I halted by the door, thoroughly intrigued by the secret Oshihara had desperately wanted to keep.

"Yes, sir...", Oshihara finally said.

I didn't move.

"Mr. Lynch, something very valuable has been stolen from me. I would pay any price to have it back," Crawford said, and gestured for me sit back down. "I

understand you never fail."

"My clients get what they pay for," I said. "What does this valuable thing mean to you?"

He lowered his eyes and stared fixedly at the photo on the table. "He's a very expensive experiment," he said. "Something that took hundreds of millions of dollars and over twenty years to create."

I returned to my seat at the long conference table as he spoke.

"In some ways," he continued, "he's like a child I gave birth to and raised. And then someone took him away."

"This Doll was taken by force?"

"We don't know. We can assume so," Oshihara said. "The last person seen with him was Dr. Soma, one of many scientists on several teams developing this Doll. Dr. Soma has not been seen since the Doll disappeared."

"Would this Doll know how to leave the facility on its own?"

"Hardly. It was conceived in a laboratory. It has never seen nor experienced anything outside the artificial environment we created."

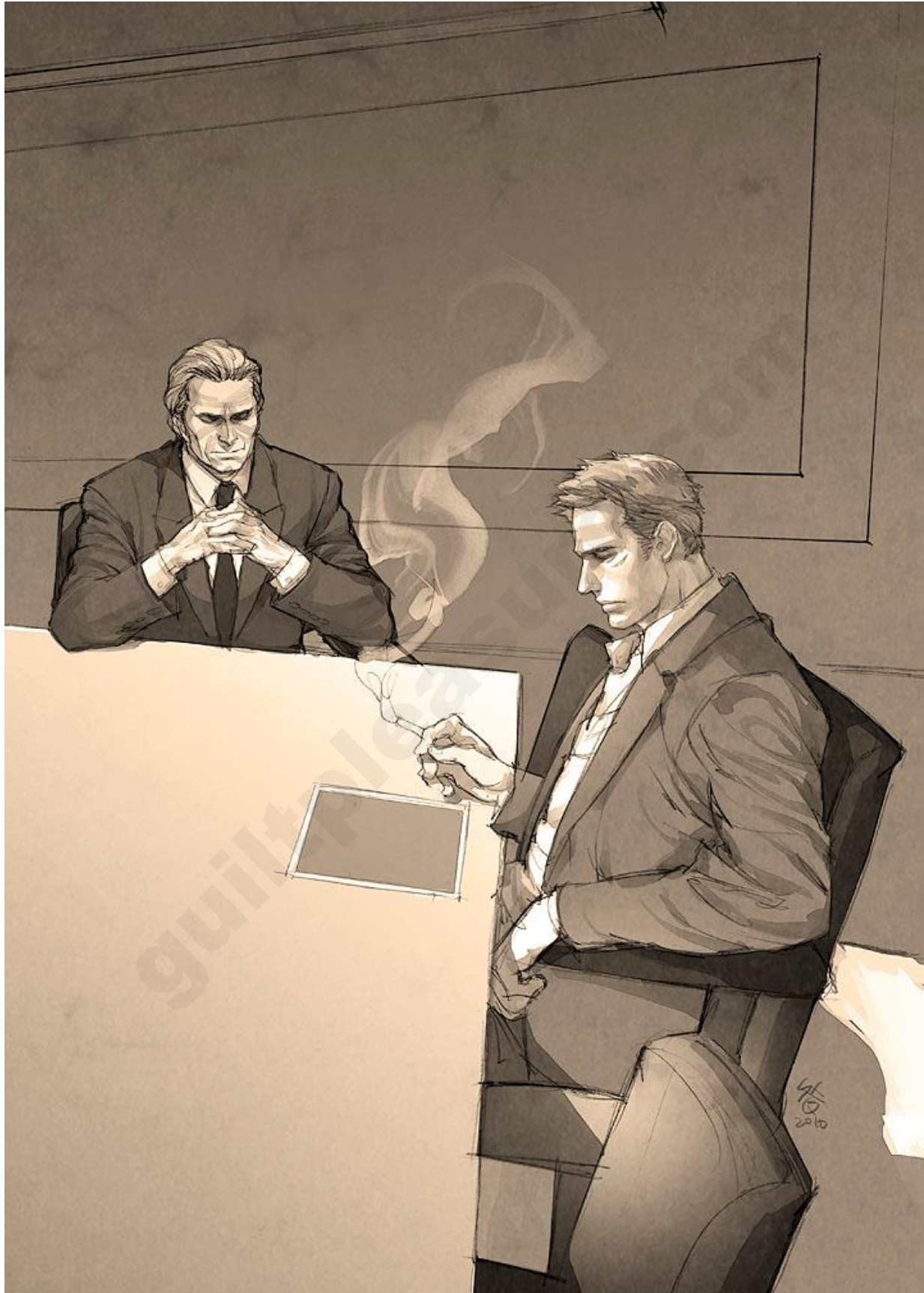
"So what is it?"

"It is a synthetic human. *He* looks, feels and reacts like a human. However, his behavior does not function in the same way. His behavior and emotions merely compliment the user's desires."

"So it's -- he's -- an interactive toy," I said.

Oshihara shrugged. "In layman's terms, I suppose. But he isn't a toy."

"When a synthetic human is made to fulfill desires," I said, "it's a toy."



I looked at the picture again. There was nothing about the young man that looked man made.

Oshihara opened his mouth to speak, to correct me. Crawford's chuckle interrupted him instead.

"If it were only that simple, Mr. Lynch. It is what a thing like a Doll can give to humans," Crawford said. He reached for the picture and slid it toward himself. "A thing that will always be devoted to you and love you unconditionally. A thing that can give you emotional and physical pleasure whenever and wherever you like, and tells you it will love you forever. And it can and it will. A thing that could bear the human face and touch and scent of the one you love and can't have, or a lost love."

Crawford looked up at me and tapped the picture with a fingertip. "An ideal. A lover all of us have searched for, for all of our lives, in the most perfect form we could possibly imagine."

"You assume all of us look for the same thing in our lovers," I said after a while. "What you describe can easily fit the description of a family pet. Well, except for the physical pleasure part, unless you're into that."

Crawford's smile widened and he broke out in a peal of laughter that echoed in the room. It sounded insane. Not what I had expected from one of the most powerful men on the east coast.

"Mr. Crawford...", Oshihara said softly.

Crawford held up his hand and shook his head. Gradually his laughter died down into labored breathing. "I'm fine, Mamoru," he said, and took out his silk handkerchief. He dabbed at his eyes which had the slightest sign of moisture. "Pardon me, Mr. Lynch."

I gave him a nod and took out my cigarette pack. He waited patiently for me to tap out a cigarette and light it before he spoke.

"What kind of lover do you idealize, Mr. Lynch?"

"I don't idealize someone like that," I said. "I fuck who I feel like fucking. I make love to who I feel like making love to. I like a little variety in my diet."

Oshihara flinched whenever I cursed, but he said nothing.

"A Doll can be a whore and an intimate friend," Crawford said. "It can be whoever you want it to be, anytime you wish."

"How does it know what I want?"

"It is programmed to be especially sensitive to the user's needs. It can sense your desires through subtle gestures or words you communicate to it. It knows what you would like to have it do, even without being told. It learns," Oshihara said. "Its body has been made specifically to heighten the pleasure of its users –"

I broke into a smile, which made Oshihara stop speaking.

"What do you find so humorous about all of this?" he asked.

"You don't?" I answered, and took in a long drag. "You're hiring me to bring back a sex toy. A very advanced and expensive Dutch wife." I blew out a thin line of smoke and watched it float up to the ceiling.

"More than a sex toy, Mr. Lynch," Crawford said. I could tell he was restraining himself by the forced tone of his voice. "He is both mother and father of the current inventory. And he's my property."

He pushed the photo toward me again. It slid across the polished surface of the table and came to rest inches away.

"Twenty million dollars," he said. "Half now and the rest when you have him back here safely. I also want Soma dead."

"Twenty million covers the Doll retrieval. Soma's an additional charge."

A corner of Crawford's mouth turned up in a grin. "Of course. Two million bonus when I see the body."

"No one can know about this Doll," Oshihara cut in. "Or we will be forced to...."

He didn't finish the sentence. He didn't have to. I knew what he would say.

"Does this thing have a name?" I asked.

"He doesn't have a name, just a part number. But, he will answer to the name 'Kai'," Crawford said.

## Chapter 2

I spent the rest of the day at the Crawford Corporate Headquarters, viewing the most recent laboratory files on Kai, with Oshihara's senior assistant, Dr. Moore. More precisely, the files were pornography without scripts. They were tests to gauge Kai's ability to flow into the character his users required him to be. Role playing, but played without a net.

"Do you find this disturbing?" Moore asked during the third disk, in which Kai had been physically abused for some time before he was raped. I called it rape, although it was part of the game his users were playing with him. He was crying and screaming and begging from the start. He was a convincing victim. It bothered me to watch it.

"This particular turn-on, or the fact that the technology you've invested so much in came down to this?"

"Both," he said and lowered the volume on the display screen.

"I make no judgments on what people are into or how much they spend on their toys," I said. "I sleep better at night with that much less on my mind."

"You must have an opinion of this."

I shrugged. On the screen, Kai was backhanded by one of the three men who held him down. Kai curled up on his side, trying to make himself smaller as they screamed at him. He was crying so hard he was shaking as he was pulled up to his knees by his hair so one of the men could shove his cock into his mouth.

"I think this Doll and the entire project cheapens the meaning of life itself," I said.

"I didn't think you would be so profound, Mr. Lynch," he said. He sounded almost amused.



“Sometimes I read, when I am not beating people or cleaning my guns.”

Moore nodded and he was quiet for a while. His eyes were focused on the screen, but I didn't think he was watching the scene as intently as he was watching Kai. Then he held up the controller and stopped the DVD player.

"He could have been so much more than this," Moore said as he exchanged the disk for another one. The blue screen leapt back to life with a different background. A new test.

On the screen, Kai sat on a day bed reading a magazine. He was wearing a white dress shirt that was a few sizes too big. It hung off him like a pair of pajamas, the shirttail coming down mid-thigh. He appeared content, happy, as he leafed through the magazine. He had nice legs.

"Then why isn't he?" I asked.

Moore looked over to me then back at the screen. "Because I don't own him."

A man in a blue three piece suit entered the room and placed his briefcase by the door. Kai's face brightened as he flung the magazine aside and jumped off the bed to embrace the man. I noticed Moore break into a small smile as the man wound his arms around Kai and held him. Kai told the man he had been lonely.

"Did Soma want to own him?" I asked.

Moore sighed. "Dr. Soma's a good man, but he's become too attached to the project. In some way, all of us have a relationship with Kai; but as scientists, we all know he's only a product."

"On an intellectual level that makes sense. However, the point of your project is also to make this thing look and feel like a human being. It's not entirely unreasonable for someone who has been in contact with Kai to form a human relationship with him."

"I suppose we've achieved our goal then," Moore said and smiled sadly.

On the screen, Kai curled up in the man's lap and napped as the man stroked his hair.





"Besides Kai being the first, why is he important enough to cost twenty million?"

"Kai is special because he was the original and most complete Doll we've made. There are several hundred others in various stages of development, but they haven't tested as well as Kai. We're not certain why that is, so you understand why we need to get him back...also, Mr. Crawford has taken a particular liking to him."

"If I had a favorite car, I wouldn't lend it out to be driven by anyone who happened to have a license."

Moore laughed. "Well, that's why Mr. Crawford never watched any of the test sessions. He understood the Doll would take little to no damage in these tests, regardless of how brutal some of the users were. For the Doll to be perfected, it's essential to test it against the worst conditions in a controlled environment rather than have the problems come out later."

"What kind of problems?"

"The Doll becomes useless once it learns how to have emotions like a human. If Kai truly felt pain or sadness, or worse -- hate and anger...."

"I assume you mean in the moral sense you would have to abandon this project."

"Of course," he said. "But I think you believe all of this to be immoral, although you've said you do not judge."

I shrugged. "It doesn't matter what my beliefs are. It doesn't change the job."

Moore was quiet for some time. On the screen, the man talked about his difficult day at work and Kai listened. Kai was just as good at offering solace as he was at providing sex.

"Will you bring him back if Kai has changed?" Moore asked.

"You mean if he's learned how to be human?" I asked. "Is it possible for an inorganic to learn how to mimic organic responses?"

"Theoretically, yes. Kai has been created to learn his owners' wants and needs. Even if the responses are artificial."

"Is that why Soma took him?"

Moore appeared to be startled by my question, but he hid it quickly. "There could be a lot of reasons why Dr. Soma took him. Kai's worth a lot of money."

"If there had been a ransom demand, I'm certain my services would not be needed."

"A Doll can be quite captivating," he said. "It's easy to be mesmerized by someone who can tell you with great conviction that he loves you and will do anything for you."

"I take it that Soma isn't the first to fall in love or lust with Kai in the twenty years."

"No, Dr. Soma isn't the first. He is the only one who's been successful at taking him from the facility. There were at least five accounts of similar incidents, but the scientists were all caught before they were able to make it out of the building."

"Then Soma had help."

"There's no evidence of it." He asked again, "Will you bring him back if Kai's been humanized?"

"Do you want me to?"

He smiled. "The decision's not mine to make. I do not own him."

"You've phrased my answer exactly. What would you do with a failed product? Kai would be a liability if he becomes human, wouldn't he?"

"Kai...", he said, and looked back at the screen. "Kai's memories would be deleted and what he has been taught for twenty years would have to be relearned. All of this -- " he gestured at the stacks of DVDs of filmed tests, "would have to be gone through all over again."

"Somehow I don't think Mr. Crawford will let his memories be deleted."

"This is just between you and me," he said. "I hope to God he doesn't end up with Mr. Crawford if that happens."

He lowered his voice to a whisper which I could barely hear, "If that day comes, I hope Kai has learned to take his own life."

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