

Dear Husbot

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CHAPTER ONE

“So, what do you think?” They were sitting in a coveted booth at a trendy new bar named The Serpent’s Jaw—Gretchen had arrived an hour early specifically so they could secure seating appropriate for showing off David. He sat in the middle of their circle, Gretchen at his side, giving the other girls a good view.

“We’re so happy you found someone,” cooed Elizabeth, whose boyfriend, Victor, sat attentively at her side. Elizabeth nodded at David. “It makes sense that Gretchen would have a thing for guys with glasses,” she said. David chuckled and pushed his thick black frames up the bridge of his nose.

“It seemed to make sense,” Gretchen responded, squeezing David’s arm. He laughed again, right on cue.

Jane was a bit more critical. She reached out, roughly grabbed the fingers of David’s right hand, and inspected them. “Long fingers,” she said. “What, you wanted another piano player?”

“Nothing wrong with long appendages, am I right?” Elizabeth giggled. Victor’s smile faltered almost imperceptibly.

“What operating system is he running?” asked Julia, Elizabeth’s less attractive younger sister. She jammed her hand down the back of David’s shirt, fiddled around for a moment, and then looked up with satisfaction. A pinprick of light sprouted beneath his button-down. She reached into her bag and pulled out a USB cable, then slipped it

back under the shirt. “Why’d you order one with a hairy back, you weirdo?” she giggled, withdrawing her hand and looking at Gretchen. “And what did I feel back there, whiteheads?” She jammed her end of the cable into a handheld mobile device.

“Ga-ross!” Jane screamed. She looked to her side, where a tall, attractive man sat, gazing at her and grinning. With his well-groomed hair, sculpted biceps, and almost alarmingly large blue eyes, he looked like a cartoon prince come to life. “You know, all you had to do was go to Good Buy and ask them for a Copabot. That’s where I got Eric. If you buy a refurbished basic model they’re seriously like less than \$500. You can’t do EVERYTHING with them, but you can do a lot of things.”

“That’s sad as hell, Jane,” Julia answered. “Not everyone’s working a shit job at Urban Outfitters, waiting for a white knight to ride in and buy them a condo. Tell yourself any lie you want to, but that thing you have is so janky and old you might as well cover him in Swarovski crystals and ask him to check your AOL email.”

“Oh god, AOL...like, ‘You’ve got mail,’” Elizabeth crowed.

“Well I’m not going into debt just so I can buy a man who’s a little faster and has, like, a different hair color,” said Jane, dragging Eric’s hand into her lap. He patted her thigh and smiled at her. “Because that’s the only damn difference,” she added.

“That’s where you’re wrong,” Julia corrected. She inspected

the screen of the mobile device. “David’s off the charts, girl,” she said to Gretchen. “Where the hell did you get him? I don’t know of any Copabots who have this kind of capability. He’s processing information at an incredible speed.”

“Well here’s the thing,” said Gretchen. She smiled conspiratorially. “He’s not a Copabot.”

“Are you serious?” asked Elizabeth. “Then...”

“I’m almost thirty,” Gretchen said, her voice taking on an edge of desperation. “I can’t screw around with a Copabot. I’ve never had one before, I don’t want to start at the bottom.”

“You bought a fucking Husbot?” Julia removed her clear-framed glasses and ran a hand through her pixie cut. “That’s like a toddler purchasing a Lamborghini, fool.”

“Did it...come with a manual?” ventured Elizabeth. She shifted uncomfortably in her seat and looked over at Victor. “I mean...I’ve never had a Copabot or a Husbot, so it’s all kind of Greek to me.”

Victor finally let his smile relax as he took a long sip of his drink. “That’s like a joke because I’m Greek, right?” He breathed into his whiskey. “It’s getting harder and harder to be a human-on-human couple around here. This fucking city.”

“Well, everyone wants an easy fix,” Julia said. She looked more critically at Gretchen. “At least tell me he came with

tech support. Or I guess if you can figure out how to get him online you could at least look up the manufacturer's instructions."

Gretchen separated herself from David and folded her hands primly in her lap. "Uh, here's the thing," she said. "He actually doesn't have any instructions. Because I, uh, special-ordered him."

"He's...custom?" Julia stared at Gretchen incredulously, and then at David.

"I found this website," Gretchen said. "He's really top-of-the-line. Nobody else has one. I mean, you can't swing a cat around here without hitting an Eric—no offense Jane—but not only does no one have this hardware, he also is running...uh...Julia, have you ever heard of Perdix?"

"You bought a fucking robot running open source software? As in, the kind that you'll need to program yourself? What are you, insane? You're a digital marketing assistant. You get paid like \$30,000 a year to run a Twitter. What do you know about programming?"

"The site said that Perdix produces the most nuanced personality! He's smart, he can learn how to do just about anything!" Gretchen threaded her arm through David's and hugged him a little awkwardly.

Julia said, a little more kindly, "Yeah, but for him to learn anything you'd have to program it yourself. Can you do that?"

"I'll learn!" Gretchen's cheeks burned, and she stared at the

table, at the rings of condensation produced by drinks that were all now in the process of being consumed.

“So you’re, like, saying that you pretty much just paid a shit ton of money for a souped-up Eric,” Jane said, finally. “You really should’ve just gone to Good Buy.”

“That’s not true,” Gretchen insisted. “Even his basic functionality is way beyond what Eric can do. Like, okay—David, can you please go to the bar and get us a selection of oysters, and also can you order an appropriate bottle of wine?”

David rose from the table, unthreading his arm delicately from Gretchen’s. He smiled graciously at her. “Of course,” he said, and loped towards the bar.

“I bet he comes back with a fucking box of Franzia and some oyster-shaped pebbles,” Julia grouched. “Robots are stupid as shit, Perdix or no.”

David made his way to the rosewood bar, which was packed three fashionably-dressed people deep. After accessing the relevant information, he opted to make eye contact with the bartender, a blonde in her early twenties. He smiled and waited patiently as she finished pouring shots of Jameson for a group of blue-shirted finance guys. He leaned over the bar, ordered 2 dozen oysters to be delivered to the corner booth, and then, after a brief pause as he considered his options, settled on two bottles of 2012 Chateau Ste. Michele’s Sauvignon Blanc from Washington state. “A nice crisp white won’t overpower the flavor of the oysters,” he intoned, his gaze fixed on the bartender.

“Okay,” she said, and toddled to the back room on her six-inch heels.

David felt a vague satisfaction that he had picked this bar. He had accessed an online application called Gulp that relied on user-generated reviews of bars and eateries. Although statistical trends indicated that the starred reviews were basically irrelevant, and qualitative analysis revealed that some reviews were also highly subjective and not indicative of any usable experiential standard, one could be certain to have picked a decent bar if it had generated a certain number of comments, especially as rapidly as this one had. It really was the place du jour. New York Magazine had profiled it favorably, after all. Tensing the fibers around his orbital socket, he Instagrammed the glowing, rosy wood of the bar, framed artfully by glass-ensconced candles. He tapped into the automated, algorithm-based radio feeding music through the bar’s speakers and approved of its projected playlist, which focused heavily on 1990s hip-hop combined—to odd yet satisfying effect—with disco standards of the 1970s. Although he found that music tended to scramble his circuits, as it were, if he tried to maintain too much focus while performing other operations simultaneously, he derived the same positive feeling from hearing a tasteful mix as he did from picking the “right” bar or sampling the “right” dish (pork belly was having a resurgence, and therefore he savored every bite).

In these sorts of establishments, you could rarely go wrong with A Tribe Called Quest. Not too alienating for users who

were unfamiliar with hip-hop, yet exotic enough to give even the mildest of city-dwellers the sense that the most pleasurable sort of danger lurked around every corner. An established classic. David wondered briefly if other Husbots felt the same sort of comfort when confronted with established standards. The last beats of “Electric Relaxation” faded out into the din of the bar. Thin strains of the now-drunken finance guys’ conversation began to filter into David’s consciousness. Something about fat asses.

The bartender emerged, carrying the two slim green bottles. She struggled to hold both out over the bar simultaneously, and David rushed forward to take them from her. However, just as the cool glass met his hands, a disco beat began to thrum, punctuated by the tinkling sounds of bells. He recognized the voice of late disco legend Anita Ward, imploring her lover to put away the dishes.

Elizabeth and Victor were halfway through a story about their efforts to adopt a beagle, designed, Gretchen felt, more for length than quality. She and the rest of the girls always ended up functioning as an audience for Elizabeth, who was so businesslike and sure of herself, even if her outfits looked like crap most of the time and Victor was uncomfortably hairy, not to mention human. Gretchen was attempting to ingest the last drops of her Aperol spritz when she heard the crash, and even under the thumping beat of the bar’s soundtrack, she could hear the voices of the crowd inside swell with alarm. She stood up, and all of a sudden saw David’s thin ankle and David’s

Florsheims limp on the floor, surrounded by a growing puddle of what she would learn later was 2012 Chateau Ste. Michele's Sauvignon Blanc from Washington state. "David!" she cried, and propelled herself forward through the crowd.

She was on her knees by his side immediately, cradling his balding head—surprisingly heavy—in one arm, grasping his unresponsive hand in the other. "David!" she cried again. "Wake up, honey! Why won't you wake up?"

"Oh, shit," drawled Julia. "He's bluescreening, girl."

"What the hell does that mean," Gretchen said through clenched teeth, jiggling David's head on her arm. His glasses had dropped to the floor, but hadn't broken. Thank god, because they had been Moscot—an extra not included in her initial order—and they had been really expensive.

Julia kneeled on the floor next to Gretchen and shoved two fingers into David's jugular. "Hm, yeah, he's totally out," she confirmed. "I guess you could reboot him? Can we take him to a Good Buy repair center? If he's custom they probably can't help him..."

"But if you reboot him he won't remember who you are," Jane said, bending over to look at them. The crowd around the prostrate robot had ceased to be horrified—and thus interested—and were transitioning to irritated. "I do it all the time with Eric, it's no big deal."

"It's true," said Eric, speaking for the first time that evening. "My memory bank only goes back six days at this point."

"I love you schnookums," Jane mumbled, not taking her eyes off David, whose irises had completely rolled into the back of his head. Jane was very, very drunk.

Gretchen's breath came faster and harder as she concentrated all of her energy into wishing for the warmth—like an electrical pulse—that had signaled David's functionality. Suddenly, a jolt of movement animated his body. He started to get up. "Are you okay?" Gretchen practically screamed.

"I'm going in and out," David said evenly, and then faltered and slumped back to the ground.

"Do you need help?" Julia said, slurping whiskey from a tumbler.

"No, we're fine," Gretchen panted. She slung David's arm around her shoulder. His head jerked up, his irises rolled back into their usual place, and he looked intently into the foreground as he made his way to his feet. "We're just going to find a repair shop."

Julia jabbed at her mobile device. "What's his model number?"

"Four-zero-zero-five-doubeleyew-el-em-eye."

Julia waited a moment as the screen of the device flooded with responses to her search, and then regarded Gretchen suspiciously. "Where the hell did you get this robot? There's only one place in the city where you can repair him, and it's seriously weird..."