I looked warily at the synth as he half-walked/half-jogged through the enormous warehouse. I'd never met a synth before, and now I'd be working with hundreds of them. This was going to take some getting used to.

The synth was tall and wiry—a smidge taller than me, so perhaps six-foot-two? But so thin! It looked like one stiff breeze could knock him over. He was covered in reddish-brown fur, but it was thin—like the hair on a horse—not shaggy. His tail was fluffier than a cat's, but not huge. It ended just below his knees and was tipped in white. He also had a white belly that extended to his chin and black socks.

I mean that his fur turned black before reaching his hands and feet, not that he was actually wearing any clothes. He had a yellow bow tied around his neck—as if he were a birthday present—and some silver rings pierced in his ears. He didn't even wear any shoes!

"You should talk," said the synth. "Set a pace where you can talk as you walk, but don't have quite enough air to sing."

"Sing?"

"Yeah, if you have enough air to sing, then you're moving too slow, and they'll write you up," he explained. "Not enough air to talk, and you're moving too fast. You'll wear yourself out before you make it through the day."

"Um, okay," I said, trying to think of anything to talk about, "Paul, right?"

"That's right," Paul said. He turned his vulpine head toward me and grimaced. He was clearly trying to smile, but the expression on his muzzle looked a bit like a snarl. I tried not to take it personally. "And you're Richard? Or do you prefer Dick?"

"Richard, please," I laughed. I hated being called Dick. "Or Rich." The synth nodded and didn't say anything else, so I kept talking. "Um, er, I suppose I was surprised to hear your name was Paul."

"Oh yeah?" he asked, glancing at me. "What were you expecting? Tod? Trickster? Just some number?"

"No, I just meant I was surprised that you'd have a guy's name. I thought all synths were female."

Paul chuckled and shook his head. "I'm not female, Rich."

I felt on the spot, like I shouldn't have brought it up, but how could I not? Had I offended him? "Well, you don't have a dick," I said, trying to justify my confusion. When he glanced at me, I added, "I mean, without any clothes on, it's hard not to notice."

Paul yipped a laugh. He didn't *sound* offended. "True, I don't have a penis. I suppose you haven't met many synths, huh? We pick our own names. I felt more like a guy, so I picked a

boy's name. Lynn, who did your orientation, picked a girl's name … but she doesn't have a vagina either."

"Huh?" Now, I was truly confused. "Where does she pee out of? I mean, synths do pee, right?"

He gave me that weird smile again. "You do realize that human girls don't pee out of their vaginas, right?"

He surprised me so much that I stopped and had to run to catch back up. "Uh, yeah they do."

Paul shook his head. "Nope. Girls pee from a pee-hole, just like synths do."

"Really?" I was fairly certain he was fucking with me, but he said it like he was sure.

At the end of one endless row of racks, Paul stopped in front of a screen and pointed. "There. That's your ID number, so that's your box—shelf three, slot seven. Grab it and let's head to the conveyor."

I grabbed the box. It wasn't that heavy—maybe twenty pounds or so—and hurried after him.

"Where did you work before this, Rich?" he asked.

"I was in the army," I said. "I did one tour and decided that was plenty."

"Well, you're probably in good shape," he said. "That'll help. We don't get many humans working the warehouse—and of those we get, most wash out pretty quick. They aren't prepared to walk for eight hours straight."

"I was in great shape during bootcamp," I said. "They still make you do PT even after you get out, but it's not nearly as grueling."

"Most of the humans we get are straight out of high school. Gym class and frisbee in the park is all the exercise they've had. I bet you'll do fine."

"Um, thanks." I walked a little while in silence. "I was surprised there were no synths in the army. Kinda expected it to be all synths these days, and I'd be the only human."

Paul yipped.

"When there weren't any, I figured it was because you're all girls—I mean, because I *thought* you were all girls." I sighed in frustration. "There are girls in the army, just not many—"

"Nah, we don't like violence. It's not in our nature like it is for humans," he said, interrupting me from putting both feet in my mouth. I found it interesting that he considered humans violent. Are we? Then, he pointed at a conveyor. "Drop the box and grab your next assignment. That's the aisle number next to your ID number."

“Got it.” We turned around and headed back the way we’d come.

“Why did you think the army would be all synths?” Paul asked. “Do we seem that scary?”

“No! I didn’t mean that.” The synths had bigger teeth than humans, but apart from that, none of them were particularly intimidating. I suspected that I could break Paul in half if I tried. “I just figured that since humans invented you guys…”

He turned and looked at me. I hoped that he would understand without me finishing, but he didn’t appear to.

I sighed. “Well, the military is dangerous. I figured they made you guys to take the dangerous jobs so we wouldn’t have to.”

Paul actually stopped for a moment and stared at me, wide-eyed. “We’re not *disposable,* Richard!”

“No, of course not!” I said as we started up once more. “I didn’t mean it like that. And the military isn’t all *that* dangerous. I mean, I did it, and I’m still here. I just meant that it’s more dangerous than working in a warehouse, and us humans love finding ways to make our lives easier and safer, so making someone to do the dangerous stuff seemed … logical.”

He glanced at me from the corner of his eye. “Yeah, that’s fair enough. Thing is, Metheus is awful picky about how its products are seen. There’s still a lot of conspiracy theorists who think we’ll take over somehow. If they saw us with guns, it would only stoke that fear.”

“Oh, I suppose it would.” Dang. That had to be rough—everyone always watching them, waiting for one to screw up somehow.

“We’re not even allowed to own guns,” he said, “but I’m okay with that. It’s scary thinking about being attacked, but I don’t think I could shoot someone. Running away feels much more natural.”

Paul smiled. “Besides, warehouse work is pretty safe. No one ever gets upset that you shipped them the crap they ordered online.”

I grinned at that. He was a lot more clever than I’d presumed. “Why did they make you guys foxes of all things?” I asked him. “Why not horses or tigers or something?”

“I’m glad Metheus didn’t uplift horses,” he said. “Prey animals have eyes on the sides of their heads. Can you imagine going through life with a better view of what’s around you than what’s in front of you?”

I tried to imagine that, and it made my brain hurt.

“And tigers? That would be worse for the company than if we were allowed to own guns,” Paul explained. “Everyone would be terrified of us.”

“Yeah, I suppose,” I mumbled. Obviously, he had thought about this much more than I had. “But, what about dogs? Everyone loves dogs.”

“Yeah, you guys do. I think that’s *why* they didn’t pick dogs.” He grabbed another box and shoved it into my hands before we took off again. “Humans have a long history with dogs and cats, a lot of expectations of how they are. I think Metheus wanted to avoid that bias, keep you guys from thinking of us as pets.”

At the end of the day, Paul didn’t even look tired, but I was exhausted. Apart from the fact that no one was yelling at me, it felt a lot like being back in bootcamp.

“You did good, Rich,” he said. “You’ve got good stamina, and you picked it up quick. A few more days of me leading you around, and they’ll let you work on your own.”

I tried to smile but could only manage a nod.

“Anyhow, I’ll see you in the morning, okay?”

When he turned to leave, I grabbed his shoulder. It was weirdly soft and warm. “Uh, Paul? You wanna go grab a beer? Hang out?”

The synth did that smile thing again, but it didn’t feel nearly so weird now. “I’d love to, but … optics, y’know? Metheus doesn’t want us out drinking. Looks bad.”

“You’re not allowed to drink?” I said with more shock in my voice than I had intended. As if being born without a dick wasn’t bad enough, they didn’t even let them drink? Why go on at all?

“No, we can drink—at home,” he explained. “But they don’t want us out at the bars or seen drinking in restaurants. They’d be pissed if we ever got a DUI.”

“Oh,” I said, finally comprehending. “Well, I live just a couple miles from here, and I’ve got a case in the fridge. Wanna come over, order a pizza?”

This time his smile seemed totally natural. “Um, yeah, okay. Sounds fun.”