Daega's test

An identity crisis.

Darak wiped a sheen of sweat from his brow and stole another glance at the ageing clock on the wall. Three hours to go. It might have been bearable if the air conditioner hadn't broken down again. The thing should have been decommissioned years ago.

Outside the window, Kuala Lumpur blazed ahead at full throttle. Rickety food carts piled with pyramids of ngaw, papaya and durian rushed past, gravel crunching under their wheels. The smell of rich spices and incense from the market stalls fought a losing battle with the billowing black exhaust fumes from the motorcycles and battered auto-rickshaws that weaved through the crowds. Darak coughed, his chest heaving. It was a choice between shutting the window and turning the room into a sauna or choking on the smoke. Not that more pollution would make that much difference.

He stabbed the button on his desk, ushering the next *daega* inside. It was a woman this time, hair dyed bubblegum blue. The cams tracked her every move as she sat down on the plastic stool, hands folded. This would be a tricky one. Normally, he could guess immediately. This time there were no clues. He had no idea. Not good.

But there was no time to waste. The more of these AIs he cleared the better. His hands hovered over the ash-stained keyboard. "Name?"

"Alisha Kemji," she said, her voice level and smooth.

"Age?"

"Twenty-five." She didn't look it. She looked a *lot* younger. But no matter, that was her answer.

He rattled through the rest of the standard questions, punching her answers into the system. *Where are you from? Which university did you attend? What did you study?* The Turing program monitored her vocal frequency and her movements. Nothing escaped it. Darak sneaked another glance at her. Her dark eyes stared back at him. She was unusually calm. Even the heat didn't seem to bother her. Everyone else he'd

seen today had been close to chewing their fingernails off. Darak didn't blame them. This was the final test. Except this was one

test that you *didn't* want to pass. Level 4 was bad enough, and would definitely get the CORPS on you. But Level 5 ...

Personally, he'd had only a few *daega* who'd passed the test, and he couldn't help but feel sorry for those Level 5 machines. It wasn't their choice. Wasn't their fault that the scientists in the labs had been too damn good at their jobs.

The Turing program finished its analysis. Alisha was watching him, a faint smile playing on her face. Darak narrowed his eyes. What was that look about?

The program beeped and he looked at the monitor, his heart starting to throb.

She was a Level 5.

Damn. Her eyes locked with his and he realized that she knew exactly what was on the screen. She'd known even before she'd walked in.

Darak flicked the recorder off. "How long have you known?" he asked.

"Long enough," she replied, scraping blue hair away from her face.

Darak nodded and leaned back, weary. "You know what this means, don't you?" Not like he had to ask. Every *daega* knew what would happen if the Turing program revealed them to be an advanced AI. They walked in here willingly to prove they were no threat, get their Green Card permit and so join the rest of society. They knew the risks.

Alisha, the *daega* in front of him, nodded, unfazed and smiling.

He reached under the desk for a small yellow button. Two men would come in and escort her to the scrap factory like the thousands before her. She'd never be seen again. "I'm sorry."

"You *might* not want to do that," she said.

Darak paused, his finger hovering over the button. *One little push ...* "Why ever not?"

"It's a long trip to the melting pot. We've got plenty of time to talk." Her eyelids flickered. "I could always ask them to look your way. Ask them why you're so good at your job. Why you've never made a mistake. Why you can spot a *daega* a mile away."

Darak felt a trickle of sweat ride down his back. Who was this person? "How did you —"

She shrugged. "Word gets around. A few ringgits in the right hand can get you far in these parts." Those lovely eyes of hers — eyes that weren't real — flickered again. "They don't even know you're a *daega*, do they?"

For once, Darak had nothing to say.

Alisha cocked her head at him. "You know, we could reach an agreement."

Ah. It wouldn't be the first time he'd been threatened or blackmailed on this job. But it was definitely the first time he was seriously considering it. He couldn't risk anyone taking a closer look at him. She held him in the palm of her hands. He could almost feel the walls closing in ...

He spat a curse and turned to the monitor, punching in the override key. He took control of the system and lowered her level to a sturdy 3. Her smile was sickly honey as the machine pumped out her permit card, the one that would allow her employment and full access to the same assets as other *daega* in the city.

He handed her the card, looking her straight in the eye. "If you're smart, you'll get out of the city. It's not safe for you here."

That raised an eyebrow. "Not safe for me?" she walked towards the exit, heels clicking on the polished floor. "You're the one working here. Do you think you'll fool them forever?"

Then she was gone. □

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