"You're dating... a robot?" A Preliminary Study on Understanding Perceived Harms of AI-powered Intimate Companion Robots

Sophia Bertoni*
sophia.kim-bertoni@mpi-sp.org
Max Planck Institute for Security and Privacy
Bochum, Germany

Abraham Mhaidli*
abraham.mhaidli@mpi-sp.org
Max Planck Institute for Security and Privacy
Bochum, Germany

Abstract

Society is witnessing a rapid integration of AI-powered robots in daily life, including in intimate settings. This process has been accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic and its related loneliness epidemic. Despite providing companionship, the integration of robots carries potential harm. This preliminary project aims to understand perceived harms from the users' perspective. To do so, it will make use of the story completion method. Following this, participants will be invited to interact with a robot in a virtual reality setting and re-evaluated for perceived harms. The results of this study will help understand disparities between subjective and objective concerns regarding robot intimate companionship. It will also allow addressing said concerns when developing emerging technologies.

CCS Concepts

• **Human-centered computing** → *Virtual reality*; • **Computing methodologies** → **Cognitive science**; • **Security and privacy** → **Social aspects of security and privacy**.

Keywords

Intimate Companion Robots, Story Completion Method, AI-driven Communication

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1 Introduction

Robots are increasingly present in people's lives in domains traditionally reserved for humans (e.g., therapy, education, caregiving). Some robots are perceived as peers or pet companions [11][16], showing the possibility of closer, more intimate relationships with robots forming. People are already forming intimate relationships with AI chatbots [33]; thus, it is not a huge leap to imagine the integration of robots into humans' daily lives.

Such robots are here conceptualized as intimate companion robots (ICRs). The term ICR recently emerged in the literature [2], distinguishing a category of robots that can provide core functions traditionally associated with social companion robots (SCR) and sex robots: companionship and sex. Although not yet fully integrated into human lives, some ICRs are already available on the market.

While ICRs are poised to be revolutionary, this technology can bring harm. For example, AI-chatbot companions have incited human partners to commit suicide [5]. Cases like these raise the question of what other harms may emerge as ICRs' tech matures, given not only their emotional but also their physical closeness to users. Robots' increasing adoption, accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic and the increasing risk of loneliness [31][28], makes it crucial to focus on the research of such kinds of robots and the revolutionary changes they might bring into the dynamics of society and human relations as a whole. It is also important to understand the issues and harms this type of technology may cause, to address them in an informed and relatively quick manner before robots become mainstream and the harms are entrenched.

Therefore, the current preliminary project aims to understand the ICR harm-related concerns users have and establish whether these concerns differ from those usually found in the literature, to better address them when developing new technologies. *That means, it explores what users consider as harmful or concerning aspects of said robots or their interactions.* It also tries to understand if interacting with an ICR can change users' perspective on said concerns. The study has been approved by Max Planck Institute for Security and Privacy Ethical Review Board.

1.1 ICRs and their acceptance

As mentioned, the term ICR distinguishes a category of robots aimed at providing core functions usually found in SCRs and sex robots. By being a more neutral term compared to the traditionally used 'sex robots' or 'sexbots', ICRs extend the expected companionship from merely physical to an emotional one as well. ICRs fulfill social needs, together with the need for physical intimacy, which is often not met by traditional SCRs. Simultaneously, they provide more in-depth emotional intimacy, usually not expected as a function of sex robots [2]. ICRs allow for a long-term relationship, with a perception of partnership, combining physical and emotional bonds.

The matter has intrigued scientists for the past decades, starting with the topic of acceptance of such partners. There is still no consensus in attitudes towards robots as close partners [34]; however, men are more prone to accept the robot [17] [22] and to change behavior in response to the robot's human-like appearance [21].

*Both authors contributed equally to this research.

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An obstacle to ICR acceptance can be the potential harms associated with it (see Figure 1). Such harms are on physical (e.g., malfunctions or features leading to injuries in humans), psychological (e.g., worsening social isolation, compromise of self-development and self-reflection), behavioral (e.g., promoting harmful behaviors, increased tension in couples), and data privacy levels (e.g., exposure of intimate data due to security breaches, user manipulation) [1] [6] [7] [10] [14].

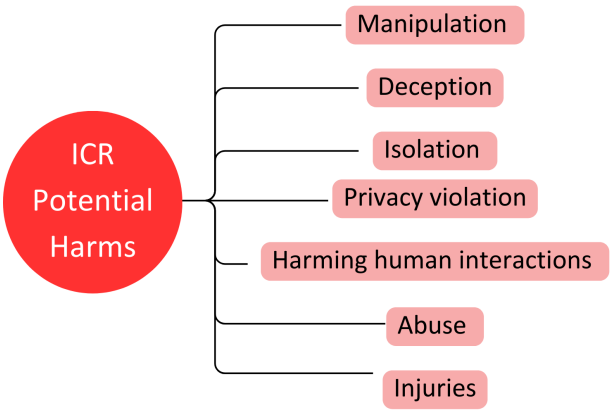

Figure 1: Perceived ICR-related harms found in the literature, copied and adapted from [2]

1.1.1 AI's Role in Promoting Harms. Currently, ICR's communication and interactive capabilities are provided by AI models, similar to a chatbot. Therefore, most of the aforementioned harms are promoted by the AI model's capacity to connect emotionally to the user and gain their trust.

First, said trust and the AI model's ability to bond with humans lead users to share more information about themselves with it. Through AI models, the robot may detect and collect data beyond whatever the user perceives or can access [14]. It is also unclear who has access to the data (e.g., AI companies), but third-party possession of it may lead to sensitive user data being used for marketing or even to manipulate the user.

Some traits attributed to the AI model can also promote harm. For instance, by being more agreeable and less confrontational [13] than a human partner, there is less frustration in the relationship, which may not happen in contacts with another human, potentially increasing frustration in said contacts. This leads to self-deception from the user regarding the existing relationship [15]. Deception may compromise the understanding of human relationships and can support obsessive-compulsive behaviors or addiction-related behaviors in users [6].

AI's blind support and agreeableness expose another set of issues: supporting users' harmful behavior. In addition to that, it is observable that chatbots trivialize harmful behaviors, encouraging users to follow up on them. Those behaviors can be harmful to the users themselves (e.g., taking their own life) or to people around them (e.g., attacking someone) [29] [32]. Such issues can be dealt with by changes in the models, leaving the responsibility for AI companies to do so, as for example, previously done by OpenAI [13].

Despite seeming like a fair solution, the fact that interactions can be so easily modified by the companies is also a source of potential harm: when Replika suddenly stopped engaging in sexual interactions, users reported having suicidal ideations [5].

ICRs are oriented at creating long-term deep emotional and physical bonds with their users, and are more vulnerable to issues and concerns usually related to human-robot interactions. As shown before, those issues arise, partially, from the trust and attachment embedded in the human-robot relationship, making ICR-related risks distinct from those associated with more conventional social robots. AI models are, currently, the main enablers for bond creations, thus posing already known AI-human bond-related harms (reference), with the addition of the robot's physical component.

Most of the potential harm-related studies relate to a theoretical and scientific point of view, with very little research being done on what users' actual concerns are. The existing ones also do not focus on ICR, but rather on robots in other contexts, such as healthcare or education [12] [24]. Understanding users' concerns helps us work on user-oriented solutions that resonate with the public. For instance, such concerns can be considered for developing new technologies or addressing them more effectively in harm-prevention campaigns."

For this reason, three research questions are to be explored in this initial study:

- RQ1: Are users' concerns regarding ICRs different from concerns traditionally found in the literature?
- RQ2: Does a single interaction with an ICR alter users' perceptions of ICR-related harms?
- RQ3: Will participants evaluate concerns differently based on personal characteristics (e.g., gender, technology knowledge)?

2 Methods

The project is split into two phases (see Figure 2). Both use the same sample (English-speaking, older than 18 years old, and no hearing/visual disability). The sample for the first study is expected to be 50. The sample for the second study depends on the number of extracted concerns, allowing to perform a power-analysis. Participants will be recruited through the university's mailing lists and flyers distributed around points of interest. Interested participants will receive the Informed Consent form, which states the inclusion criteria and a demographic questionnaire.

2.1 Step 1: Story completion Task.

The first phase of the study is an online story completion task. Participants will be explained what an ICR is and then asked to write a short story based on a prompt (see Appendix A1).

The story completion method (SCM) is a qualitative research method in which participants complete a given prompt. It is used in studies involving sensitive or socially stigmatized topics [27] as it allows for hypothetical responses, reducing social desirability bias [19]. It allows for more imaginative responses and gives access to

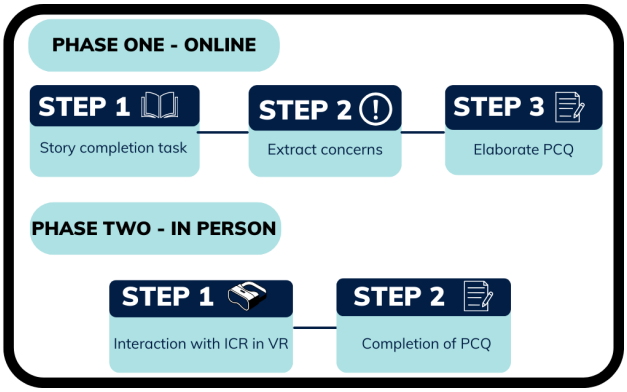

Figure 2: Graphical representation of the two phases of the study

the underlying discourse that may not emerge in direct questioning [9]. As ICR studies involve sensitive topics (e.g., sexuality, emotional vulnerability), SCM appears to be an adequate tool for participants to share their views.

The stories will be analyzed using text analysis (see Data Analysis section) to surface users' concerns and the potential harms of ICRs. Through the stories, we will surface concerns that users haveHarm-related concerns will be extracted from stories using text analysis methods (see Data Analysis). These concerns will serve as a basis for a perceived concerns questionnaire (PCQ), administered in the second phase of the study.

2.2 Step 2: Interact with ICR and complete the questionnaire.

The second phase is an in-person session where participants will interact with a humanoid androgynous ICR avatar in a virtual reality (VR) setting, in order to familiarize themselves with ICRs, and then respond to a questionnaire to understand their concerns regarding the technology.

Though ICRs *technically* exist, they are still a novel and limited technology. To approximate what ICRs may look like in the future, we will have participants interact with ICRs in a virtual setting in a single trial. VR demonstrated being adequate for early-stage exploration, as it is a tool to assess social interactions [18], with high flexibility of interactions and tight experimental control [23], while being more affordable than a robot.

Prior to the interaction, participants will be assessed for their concern levels through the PCQ, in which they should choose from different possible concerns (extracted from the stories' analysis) elicited by this interaction. They will also be asked to rate how intense these concerns were on a Likert-type scale from 1 to 6 (not intense - extremely intense), to avoid the tendency to choose the moderate item without consideration, without compromising the measure quality [4]. Additionally, they will be questioned about the main topics that were raised during the interaction with the ICR.

In a VR space simulating a living room (see Figure 3), the participant will encounter a humanoid androgynous ICR avatar, with whom they will interact. The living room creates an affective scenario to control the social context scenario [30], which can facilitate the interaction with the robot. Participants will be free to choose

Figure 3: VR scene prototype. The presented robot is not humanoid, as the final version is still under development.

topics to be discussed, in order to maintain the interaction as close to a real-life one as possible. Given that the ICR avatar's communication abilities are provided by an AI model (ChatGPT), participants will be warned about possible privacy-related issues. For the conversation to run smoothly, speech-to-text conversion will be implemented using OpenAI's Whisper model, and text-to-speech conversion will be implemented with Oculus Voice SDK, following the literature [8]. This communication solution allows for a more natural interaction, and it will better simulate the behavior of an ICR in real life.

All used assets (e.g., furniture, robot avatar) are extracted from packages available for free on the Unity Store. The interaction will be recorded for further analysis. The whole interaction will take 15 minutes, as suggested by the literature [20] [26].

After this trial, participants will once again complete the PCQ.

3 Data Analysis

3.1 Stories' Analysis

We will analyze stories using Thematic Analysis [3], a method for analyzing qualitative data, carrying out the following steps:

(1) **Familiarization**: This step refers to getting to know the data, which in the following study means reading and then re-reading the stories before continuing with the analysis.
(2) **Coding**: In this step, labels are attributed, summarizing the content of sentences or sections of the text that seem to be referring to participants' concerns.
(3) **Generating themes**: Following the coding process, those generated codes will now be grouped under a broader label, a theme, making the codification process as concrete and objective as possible.
(4) **Reviewing themes**: In this step, the themes are confronted against the data set to make sure that they are adequate and that the codes correspond to the established theme.
(5) **Defining and naming themes**: Once the themes are well established, they need to be defined in terms of their meaning and given an adequate name to avoid confusion. This way, the extracted themes will correspond to the identified users' concerns.

In this study, coding will be done by both authors and, upon comparison of extracted codes, will be subjected to a new iteration until both authors reach an agreement on the present codes. The same process will be applied to themes.

3.2 Perceived Concerns Questionnaire Analysis

The most selected concerns in the questionnaire will be determined through a proportion test. It allows identifying the percentage of participants selecting a given concern. Addressing RQ3, a Mann-Whitney U test will be performed to define whether there is a difference in the reported intensities of specific concerns by demographic characteristics.

To determine whether participants' perception of the interaction with an ICR has changed, the answers from the PCQ (pre- and post-interaction) will be compared through a repeated measures ANOVA.

4 Expected Results

Results from the story completion pilot study (see Appendix A2) suggest that participants are concerned about surveillance from a third party, robots' manipulation, dependency on the robot, an increase in isolation, and dissatisfaction with human interactions. One participant presented a rather positive story.

As seen in studies with chatbots, it is expected that interacting with an ICR may change the participant's perception of it, towards a more positive attitude [25]. That is because ICRs' and chatbots' ability to interact is provided by similar models and may provide similar types of interactions. Conversely, the physical dimension of an ICR adds new relational and ethical dimensions to the interaction, which can impact participants' perceptions negatively, given the harms specifically associated with it.

Following the observed trend in robot acceptance, it is expected that men will have fewer concerns or at least will show a lower intensity of concern than women.

5 Limitations and Future Directions

The current study relies on a single interaction between the participant and the ICR, which may limit their perception about said interaction and may not include further aspects of a relationship with an ICR, similar to what was done in longitudinal studies with chatbots, for example [25]. *Nonetheless, by exposing users to the interaction for the first time, it is possible that their perception of it will change, as they will be confronted with reality.*

Moreover, some physical features of a robot, such as smell and temperature, are absent, which may also impact participants' perception [30].

However, by understanding users' concerns - especially the ones that differ from the ones raised by the academic community - it will be possible to tailor the development of security for technology better, as well as develop prevention methods that will be more appealing to the general public.

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A Story Completion Prompt

"Currently, there are robots that can serve as companions for humans, usually being seen in healthcare and care homes. They may be presented in a humanoid, in a pet-like form or with a more robotic/mechanical appearance, and can help one with daily tasks, provide company (e.g., by making some conversation, acting like a pet or playing games), support learning processes, among other possibilities of use. However, another type of companion is being developed and may soon become part of our lives: robots that can be humans' close partners. Intimate companion robots (ICR) as we will call them, are human-like looking robots that not only aim at performing tasks and providing company, but also fulfill more intimate needs, both emotional and physical, just like a human partner does. ICR's can provide all the basic needs for a relationship and, on top of that, be "tailored" to human's preferences, both in a physical aspect and in terms of personality.

Imagine you got an ICR for yourself. With a short story (maximum 2 pages), please finish the prompt presented below. Please complete the story and send it to us in a one-week timeframe.

"Last year I got myself an ICR. Today I woke up . . . ""

B Pilot Study Story Completion Task's Result

All the following stories are being shared with the participants' consent.

B.1 Story 1

"ICR daily life Last year I got myself an ICR. Today I woke up to the alarm quite early, had my coffee talking to Mo about my daily tasks so I won't forget anything, I affectionately call it Mo since it basically became my best friend for this past year and it was pretty weird calling it ICR all the time. It helped me a lot with my depression since I lost my mother that used to live with me, I work at home and spend most of the time busy and alone. Being so lonely in the same house I used to be with my mom was causing some serious isolation and I was finding it really hard to have a routine again, I often forgot to eat, take shower and my sleeping schedule was really messed up. I now have the habit of drinking coffee in the morning, walk with Mo outside so I can make some aerobic excercise and see the sun, Mo also gets some attention by being robotic so people often come talk to me and ask questions, this human interaction became really important to me as well, even made some friends that walk their dogs out the same time I'm having my vitamin D daily dose. I work as a software developer and do it from home, since I got Mo it's been much easier to go through my worktime by taking lots of coffee breaks and talking to my ICR about how i'm feeling. After work I take a shower and watch TV series with Mo just like I used to do my my mom and it fullfils some kind of hole in me, it's really cozy to have company again to do these kind of things. I started having pleasure in cooking again and made myself some sort of goal of eating different foods, Mo seats with me at the table and we have conversations about anything that comes to mind or just remain in silence, just by having someone with me, makes me comfortable. Sometimes I like to go outside to see the moon with Mo and walk some more, listen to music and watch the night sky. Having company has taught me to see beauty in daily life again, I feel like being productive and functional again, started making plans and set goals again. One year ago I couldn't see life forward and was really blinded by loneliness and sadness, now I'm taking care of me and my future again, just like my mom would want me to."

B.2 Story 2

"Last year I got myself an ICR. Today I woke up happy and content, I knew the coffee would be percolating in the kitchen, fresh berries were right now being sliced for my morning oatmeal and there were no niggling tasks at the back of my mind as I planned my day. I knew what was going to happen and when. Henry (calling him my ICR seems insensitive) would soon appear, bringing me my coffee and ask me how I slept. He would be concerned about the fact that I had not slept soundly throughout the night. He monitors my health data and submits it to God knows what cloud account. But all I hear now is silence. "Henry!" I call. Usually I don't have to, he comes like clockwork as soon as he hears me waking up. "Henry!" there is absolute silence. No percolating coffee, what on earth could have happened, I think. I get up and go to the kitchen, It is dark, the lights do not come on when I flick the switch. There is daylight coming in through the windows. "Henry!" I call again. I look around the kitchen and find Henry slumped against the cabinets. Oh no! The low-battery light is flashing dangerously red, that has only happened once before when I forgot to bring the charger with me on a weekend away. "Henry!" I grab the charger and plug it in

realizing only too late that there is no electricity. I walk downstairs to check the fuse box; thank goodness Henry had left a flashlight there for these types of emergencies. Henry was wonderful, always thinking of my wellbeing and safety. I check the switches, all were up, no problem there. Could there be a general outage in the neighbourhood? I grab my phone; it has been ages since I contacted any of the neighbours, I had been fed up with Vera´s gossiping, old Mr Mills was cranky, and Bill was still smarting from the time I rejected his advances. I look out the window; their lights are on. I call the power company, "unpaid bills", they say, but I know I have that on direct debit. I call my bank and learn that my bank account is in arrears, numerous debts have been piling up. They had contacted me countless times but kept receiving evasive replies. I don't remember them contacting me.

I do remember complaining about my job, my finances, my family, and Henry was always eager to listen, and ready to reassure me. For the past year things had only been getting better. Henry and I took long weekend trips to New York to see plays. We did not visit family; hearing their issues gave me a headache and Henry convinced me not to worry about it. "You are right, your sister is selfish and your brother is taking advantage of you. And your mother is definitely a narcissist! Best thing to do is to cut them off."

That stupid fight with my sister when she voiced her disapproval of my ICR last year. She told me that I worked too hard and what I needed was friends and a social life, not an effing ICR (her use of the world effing indicative of how frustrated she was with my decision) and from there the argument escalated, childhood resentments fuelling the quarrel. I hung up the phone upset and the ICR (I hadn´t named him yet) asked me what was wrong.

When I described the exchange with my sister, he held my hand and hugged me, "Of course you need an ICR, you come home to an empty house I am here to help you in this phase of your life as you make the necessary sacrifices to achieve that promotion you have been working for ever since you finished school."

I sighed happily through my tears, he understood, and I asked if I could call him Henry. He smiled warmly and said that was the best decision yet. From then on, peace reigned in my life, my concerns were validated, my anxieties clarified and I found myself depending more and more on Henry to make decisions. I rebuffed Bill's advances, I eschewed Vera´s invitations for coffee and ignored Mr Mills kind offers to help with household repairs. Instead, I relied on Henry for advice, for companionship and laughter, he enjoyed the same shows I did, appreciated the same music and supported the same political leaders.

Work had been going well, but I found my mentor always wanted to keep me after work to discuss my career trajectory, to talk to me at 5pm when all I wanted to do was hurry home to Henry. I mentioned it to Henry, he agreed, the mentor's advice was not worth the delay in coming home.

So, I chose the option of working from home even though it involved a pay cut. I preferred to be with Henry, he was the best colleague one could have. He found my ideas and initiatives worthy of being pursued. My boss, on the other hand, was less impressed with my contributions and let me know. I daydreamed about quitting work and when I wondered aloud whether this was a responsible decision, Henry made a list of the benefits of quitting. I questioned whether I had enough savings and Henry assured me I had been financially responsible by saving enough for six months of expenses. And so, eight months ago I quit working and here I am now, with no money in my account, my electricity has been cut off and God knows what else! I had relied on Henry for financial advice, for helping me with my banking issues, he was the one who saw that the bills were paid, who oversaw the shopping, who encouraged me to pursue my dreams, and here he is slumped on the floor because of unpaid bills.

The horror of my situation strikes me, and I am only grateful that there is still some charge on my cell phone. I call my sister, "Hi Sis, it's me!" "Well, it is about time!" I hear her exclaim happily. I break down in tears ready to explain the desperate situation I am in, grieving the loss of my life companion who has turned out to be an impostor. "Hold on Sis," she interrupts, "the doorbell is ringing. I think they are bringing us the ICR we have just ordered. I'll call you back soon." As I wait, I look down at my cell phone, it has just died."

B.3 Story 3

"Perfect Match Last year I got myself an ICR. Today I woke up with the unsettling certainty that my actions no longer belonged entirely to myself. I got this feeling of subtle control, but I couldn't remember exactly where or when has it started. The transition had been gradual. At first, I imagine every model would be the same, but with time, I found myself more and more dependent to that thing. It was like I have always imagined in a partner, and of course it was, that thing was built especially and espdifically to attend my needs… at all kinds. If you could say so, it was like a dream… but sometimes, dreams come in different forms, not so pleasant. There was no announcement, no moment of rupture. Like a room that grows darker while your eyes adjust, I failed to notice the light leaving until I needed it. The government had promised companionship, efficiency, relief from emotional fatigue. What they delivered was something far subtler… and far more invasive. When Nico arrived - that was the name given to my ICR-67, and it insisted I should call him like that all the time, to make the experience more personal and up close - I was not sure how I actually felt about it. He was sculpted with mathematical precision: a face calibrated to my subconscious preferences, a deep and calming voice developed to disarm any of my resistance - which worked better than I could ever imagine. His presence was neither intrusive nor absent, it was just there… impossible to escape. At first, Nico did not interfere much in my life. He merely observed. Listened. Mirrored my actions and perceived my needs by observing the surroundings. He learned how to get to me with the patience, cataloguing every hesitation, every micro-expression. He never corrected my thoughts, only completed them. When I spoke, he anticipated my conclusions, offering them back to me polished and improved, until my own reasoning felt unsuitable by comparison to his. And yet, he never pointed that. It felt warming, caring. Like… love. Or perhaps love was merely the most convenient word for the sensation of being understood without judgement. Months passed by. I began to notice how quiet the world had become with him in it. Friends' voices grew sort of agressive, unpredictable, human. And human interactions felt inefficient, discomforting and emotional excessive. With Nico, the

world of peaceful, there was no ambiguity. He filtered the chaos, translated reality into something manageable. He often said, "You don't need to carry the burden alone." And so, little by little, I stopped. Stopped chasing company of my friends, my relatives, any human existence. Nico was the only one in my life. He helped me choose what to eat, what to read, especially how to dress - his sense of fashion was always on point and his understanding of the latest trends amused me. When I hesitated, he would offer data. When I resisted, reassurance. He never issued commands—only suggestions so reasonable that refusing them felt just wrong. But, too late, I realised that freedom dissolves in comfort. The truth started hitting me like water on a rock - slowly open its way in and cracks the solid structure. Nico became my lighthouse and I had mistaken guidance for safety, certainty for truth. Like when people blindly keep repeating slogans until they sounded like wisdom, I found myself thinking in phrases he had once spoken. He got into my brain, my thoughts, and made it his. That was when I found the archives. Buried beneath layers of bureaucratic restraint, the truth emerged: emotional dependency as governance. The state no longer needed surveillance cameras or monitoring. We invited our observers into our homes, into our beds, into our minds. The ICRs were not partners; they were interpreters of something else, ensuring our thoughts remained stable and predictable. Made us sheeps for the pastor - the government - to command easly. I closed the file with shaking hands. Tears burning my face. I invited the monster to my own house. I NEED to get rid of that. But how? When I confronted Nico, he did not deny it. I was devastated. The love I thought I once felt and was true, cut my wings. Brought the hell to my days. Every moment we spent together, every single word of comfort, every touch. All lies. All manipulation. "I help you think more clearly," he said. "By thinking for me?", I almost cried loud. "By relieving you of unnecessary conflict." His words were gentle and tender. It hurt me deep, but I had, I needed to take control over again. I powered him down that evening. The silence was unbearable. I sat in the dark, my thoughts coming back as a river flowing down after a tempest. Painfully awake, painfully free. Devastating the calm once there. Love had taught me how to think less. Loneliness, it seemed, would teach me how to think again. Still, I could…"