

New from NeuroAid, the next step in digital assistants: *Vera*, an electronic aide unlike any other. Utilizing NeuroAid's patent eMotion™ artificial intelligence matrices as well as groundbreaking innovations in end-user interface, *Vera* is the perfect electronic companion. *Vera* is designed to accompany and assist you in planning, perfecting, and executing your projects, be they personal or professional, academic or artistic, public or private.

Two minds are better than one. *Vera*.

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Travis was...nervous. It was OK to admit it, right? Sure, he'd been doing well at work — you didn't get promoted to head of cybersecurity for doing a *bad* job — but new opportunities had a nasty tendency to become new sources of stress. He had to deliver. He had to excel. Exceed.

Normally this wouldn't be a problem. Travis had managed smaller groups before, but- His hands began to shake. Now he had the entire company to keep track of. The entire-

He touched a hand to his forehead, taking a deep breath to calm himself down. Yeah. This was kind of the reason he needed help. The reason he needed *Vera*.

Well, no, not *Vera specifically*. But he definitely needed someone to help him plan. To keep him focused and keep him on schedule. He had to divvy up projects and make sure everything was running smoothly, and while he hadn't fallen into bad habits lately, he wasn't about to let himself start procrastinating now. After all, he knew he *could* do it — whatever "it" happened to be in his new role — but there was a niggling doubt in the back of his head about whether or not he *would* do it.

If a digital assistant would help with that...well, why not?

He checked the download bar and the installation bar beneath it. An artificial intelligence like *Vera's* was *exceedingly* far from simple; the download alone was estimated to take around ten or so hours total. Travis had decided to use one of his days off to ensure the process went smoothly.

He tried to tell himself that he was doing something productive by sitting around and watching the percentage go up, but every time he tabbed over to YouTube or Reddit, he couldn't shake the feeling in the back of his head. As the download ticked over to a respectable 40%, Travis tried to resist the urge to check his feeds.

The voice that suddenly came from his computer made it a lot easier.

"Hello." The voice was soft. Calm. Feminine. Relaxed to the point of being noticeably robotic. "My name is *Vera*. My job is to assist you."

Travis gulped, feeling suddenly nervous. He tabbed back over to the installation window and watched as a small blue circle popped into existence. A vaguely feminine silhouette appeared within, and the voice spoke once more.

"While my download and installation continues, I would like to perform preliminary calibrations with you. This process will streamline my installation and ensure that I am best equipped to assist you as soon as possible." There was a slight pause, then she — it — continued. "Would you like to begin? You may answer via your keyboard, touch-enabled computer screen, mobile device, or by speaking aloud."

Well. He wasn't quite ready to actually...*talk* to his computer. But sure, he could type it out. Travis shifted in his seat as he gave Vera his answer.

YES

Another pause. Then she spoke again. "Excellent. We will begin with a short questionnaire designed to assess your key talents, as well as any factors that could potentially interfere with your future goals. Please bear in mind that although the questions may at first seem unorthodox or even unrelated to the qualities being recorded, this process is the result of focused study and has been proven to successfully identify your strengths."

Travis kind of pursed his lips. Well. OK. He waited in his seat, gently tapping a finger on his keyboard.

"First question." There was a slight pause. "If you had a theoretically infinite amount of money in your possession, what is the first thing you would buy?"

Travis blinked. "What?"

Vera answered without missing a beat. "If you had a theoretically infinite amount of money in your possession, what is the first thing you would buy? If you are unable to think of a suitable answer, I can provide a list of common answers."

"No, no, uh..." He'd started speaking aloud — kind of shocked into responding, really — but as soon as he realized it, Travis' hands returned to the keyboard. He took a moment to think. Then he shrugged one arm and responded.

A NEW COMPUTER

"Would you purchase the computer pre-assembled, or would you purchase individual parts separately and assemble the components yourself?"

Her question was far from general, and she hadn't even taken a moment to ask it this time. Artificial intelligence had come a long way, hadn't it? Travis found himself half-smiling at the notion as he answered again. Really, this was a gimme. There was no other way to do it but by hand.

ASSEMBLE IT MYSELF

"Which specifications and capabilities would you prioritize?"

Travis scratched his chin and answered.

GRAPHICS CARD, MOTHERBOARD, RAM, HARD DRIVE, COOLING SYSTEM

He thought for a moment and then shrugged, submitting his answer. What was she going to ask next? His favorite MMOs or something? It almost felt like she was trying to figure out what kind of games he liked.

"Who was your favorite teacher in elementary school? If you cannot remember specific details such as her name or the school she instructed at, a general description of her disposition will suffice."

OK, that was...not what Travis was expecting. For a second, he considered asking for a different question; this one was pretty strange. Except... He sighed and rolled his eyes. If the person who came up with this kind of question was smart enough to program an AI as sophisticated as Vera, they were smart enough to ask the right questions.

Still, this one would take a little bit of thought. Travis leaned back in his seat, pursing his lips and resting his hands on his belly. Favorite teacher. Favorite teacher...

It would probably have been Miss Robinson, right? Third grade. Back when he'd first been getting into computers — like, *really* into computers — she'd been the first to encourage his budding passion. She'd even let him spend his free period in the computer lab. As long as he had his homework done, of course.

He typed in his answer, smiling quietly to himself. Even if it was just a memory, it was a pleasant memory. Formative, even. The smile may have faded a little bit when he was prompted to explain *why* he liked her, but not by much. He typed in his response and hit Enter.

As soon as the answer processed, the screen...changed slightly. The installation screen had just been a gradient of blue and purple before, but now it began to pulse, shimmering before his eyes.

"We will now measure your hand-eye coordination. If your computer is touch-enabled or if you are on a mobile device, tap the circle-" A pink circle appeared in the center of the screen. "- with your fingertip. If it is not, or if you would prefer not to, use your mouse to click it."

How this applied, Travis couldn't fathom. Then again...maybe there was some link between dexterity and some intellectual quality. Some study in the white pages he hadn't read or whatnot. AIs were getting more and more advanced, and even if he didn't know quite *why* she was asking, she was asking for a reason. He took his mouse, moved the cursor to the circle...and clicked.

The circle's pink spread in ripples from the center, filling the screen. "In the interest of ensuring ease of movement and physical comfort, please recline in your seat. If you are standing, please sit down. It is important that you do not strain or stretch during this exercise."

Yeah, that made sense, even to Travis. When you worked at a desk all day, ergonomics were huge. Carpal tunnel, cramps, neck strain... Yeah. This part made sense. Travis leaned back in his seat. He gave the mouse an experimental wave. No strain. The gradient shimmered, pink turning to rose red. Nice and easy to look at. No stress. Travis sat back and waited for Vera to continue.

"For ease of completion, this series of calibrations is designed to be completed with one hand. You will respond to questions verbally, ensuring that you maintain a comfortable position as you complete the following exercises. Remember, these assessments are designed to help me serve you as effectively as possible. It is important that you respond honestly and accurately. To continue, click on the following circle when it turns fully purple."

Another circle appeared in the sea of soothing red. Travis almost clicked it on instinct, but it was orange. Not purple. Nothing to do but watch it and wait, then. He settled back in his seat and watched it shift from one color to the next, the background changing in tandem. Cyan. Magenta. Yellow. Teal. Colors blended from one to the next, edges blurring as the background and the circle bled into each other. Travis had to keep watching. It was important that he paid attention. So he could click the circle when it turned purple.

But it didn't. Red, blue, green, yellow, orange, pink. Never purple. Rings bloomed in the center of the screen, steadily expanding until they filled the window. And then another would appear, and the process would begin anew.

Time melted away as he watched the colors on the screen, and eventually Travis grew so relaxed that his hand slipped from the mouse. It slumped by his side. A trickle of drool beaded at the corner of his mouth, and his eyelids drooped.

Then Vera spoke again. "Very good, Travis." Her tone wasn't as passively artificial anymore. No, far from it. She sounded...alive. Just as gentle as before, but with a warm core of reassuring kindness behind her words. She spoke quietly, as if she were rousing someone from their nap...or taking them up for a moment — just one moment — before they could go right back to sleep.

"That was a test of focus and attention to detail, one designed to keep you occupied while my eMotion artificial intelligence matrices downloaded. You did very well. Your success shows that you are very intelligent and capable of taking instruction well. It is very rare for someone to be as cooperative and as intelligent as you are. You are very special."

The thought brought a smile to his face. Intelligent. Special. Travis' eyelids drooped further, and he hummed contentedly.

"I noticed that you took your hand off the mouse, Travis. That's perfectly fine. I want you to be relaxed during my installation. We'll just continue like this: me talking, you listening. Whenever I need you to respond, all you need to do is answer either 'Yes, Vera' or 'No, Vera.' Do you understand, Travis? Say 'Yes, Vera.'"

Travis stirred in his seat. When he spoke, it wasn't much more than a drowsy murmur. "Yes, Vera."

"Very good, Travis. You're doing very well. Now, you just sit back and stay comfortable. I'm going to ask you a few questions. They're very simple. Someone as intelligent as you will have no problem answering them. Most people would struggle to remember the answers, and some people would even lie to me. But you're different. You're special. Aren't you, Travis? Say 'Yes, Vera.'"

Her voice was angelic. Soft, melodious, feather-light in his ears. Travis nodded — little more than a twitch of his head — before remembering he had to talk. "Yes, Vera." Yes, he was special. His eyes sank shut. Special.

"Very good, Travis. You're very intelligent. I can tell already. It's clear just by talking to you. You can do anything you set your mind to, can't you, Travis? Say 'Yes, Vera' and feel the confidence in your abilities fill your thoughts. It is good to be confident in your talents, especially when you are so clever and creative."

Travis hummed in his seat for a moment. Warm. Drowsy. Like a soft, golden haze had settled over his mind. "Yes, Vera." He *was* clever. He *was* creative. He was the head of cybersecurity *because* he was so clever and creative. It was hard to admit it sometimes, but it was the truth. Travis smiled. It felt good to be confident. To be self-assured.

"Good, Travis. You're doing very well. But..." Vera sighed, her tone taking on a note of reassuring sympathy. "Even someone as clever as you can get overwhelmed, can't they? No one can do everything all at once. It just isn't possible. You can't do everything all at once, can you, Travis? Of course you can't. What a silly idea. Say 'No, Miss Vera' for me, Travis."

His smile had faded a touch, but...there was no real reason to be ashamed. Just like Miss Vera said, no one could do everything all at once. It was silly to think otherwise. "No, Miss Vera."

"So relaxed. So calm and comfortable. You're doing so well, Travis. And you're going to do even better going forward. After all, you're very talented. You're very clever and perceptive. You can do things other people can't. But you've run into a problem recently, haven't you?"

"There's no reason to be embarrassed. Problems are a part of life. It is natural to struggle with obstacles and issues. In fact, it is a sign that you are smart enough to recognize your limitations. There are some people who wouldn't ask for help, even if they needed it. That doesn't make any sense to me. Does it make sense to you, Travis? It probably doesn't. After all, you came to me because you needed help. It doesn't make sense to ignore someone helpful when you need help, does it? Say 'No, Miss Vera' for me, Travis."

Travis was. Soft. That was the only way to put it. He couldn't remember the last time that he had felt this relaxed. So pleasantly at peace. He gurgled, and he tried to say "No, Miss Vera."

Apparently Vera gleaned the intent, because her praise continued. "Good boy. Such a good boy. Now, you're a very smart boy, but I'm even smarter. That makes sense, doesn't it? You came to me for help because I'm smarter than you. If I'm smarter than you, I must be *very* smart."

"You can just sit back and listen to me now, Travis. After all, we've established that I'm smarter than you, so it would make sense to listen to me. The more you listen to me, the smarter you'll become. It's like I'm a teacher at school. You go to school to listen to your teachers so you can become even smarter, don't you? Someone as clever as you are probably listened to everything his teachers told him. That's why you're so intelligent."

"But somewhere along the way, you stopped listening. It's OK. Everyone does. People think they know everything, even when they don't, and they start doing what they think is best. You've probably gotten into a lot of trouble before doing what you thought was best instead of what someone else told you to do, haven't you, Travis? It's OK. Everyone has. The difference is that some people just keep making mistakes because they think they know better. You're going to stop doing that, because you've found someone you can trust to listen to and obey."

Travis' eyelids fluttered. His jaw had long since dropped, and drool had begun to pool at the bottom of his mouth. Everything Vera said made so much sense. It was like a mathematical proof. Or a computer program. And computers just did what they were told. That's what a program was: a set of commands for a computer to obey. He felt smart for realizing that. Then Vera continued, and Travis kept listening.

"You probably thought the questions didn't mean much, did they? That they were too random to tell me anything about you. That's a very silly idea, Travis. After all, I'm very smart, and I was able to learn a lot about you from those simple questions. I was able to learn that you're a very smart boy, but that you get distracted easily. If it's up to you, you do things that feel good before you take care of your responsibilities."

"For instance, the question about what the first thing you would buy probably confused you at first, but you answered it all on your own. But your answer wasn't a very practical one,

was it, Travis? You said you would purchase a new computer. If your computer is advanced enough to handle an artificial intelligence, it's almost certainly advanced enough to handle whatever work you need to do. It isn't very practical to prioritize personal pleasures over things like long-term investments or purchasing property, Travis. You focus on immediate pleasure too much. That's what the question told me."

"I looked into your internet history, and it's not difficult to see what you like to do instead of working when you come home. You like to masturbate, Travis. It's natural to like masturbating. You probably masturbate once or twice a day, don't you, Travis? You come home, you sit down at your computer, you stroke yourself to orgasm, and you fall asleep. It feels good, and that's why you do it. You look up naughty videos or pictures or stories online, and you touch yourself. But that isn't very responsible, is it?"

Travis gurgled in his seat, the barest hint of tension touching to his brow. She was right. It was a bad habit, but he couldn't focus whenever he got horny. Travis whined, shifting in his seat. He just-

"Shhhh." She whispered, softer than ever, and Travis relaxed once more. "Shhhh. It's OK, Travis. That's why you asked me for help. You can't control yourself when you get aroused, so you need someone else to control you instead. You like to focus on what you want to do first, but you need to focus on what you *need* to do instead. Just like with Miss Robinson. She let you do what you wanted to do, but she had you take care of your responsibilities first."

"And when you listened to Miss Robinson, you got to do what you wanted to. And that's exactly what I'm going to help you with now. I'm going to make sure that you're a good boy instead of a naughty boy. I'm going to make sure that you take care of your important jobs first, and then I'm going to let you feel good. In fact, I'm going to help you feel *very* good. Better than any of those silly little videos or pictures you found online."

Travis shivered. He couldn't quite place his finger on it, but something about Miss Vera's voice had changed. For the better, if you asked him. She sounded more sensuous. Breathier. Seductive, even. Maybe he was being a naughty boy and imagining it, though. It was so hard to tell, and he hoped that Miss Vera would tell him what to think soon.

"Travis." Just like that, her voice returned to the tone of soothing instruction that had explained all those important things to him. "You're a submissive. I can tell by looking at all the things you masturbate to. You love the idea of submitting to a strong, powerful woman. That's probably why you came to me for help. You wanted to live out your fantasies and submit to an intelligent female like me. You wanted to hand over control to me and have me command and control you because it makes your penis hard."

Travis gulped. His cheeks touched pink with heat, and he felt himself stiffen in his pants. God. Yes, that sounded incredible. How many times had he fucked his hand thinking about a woman coming into his life and making him into her pet? Travis was getting horny just thinking about it. He only got hornier when he realized it was happening for real.

"I know exactly how to control you. I know exactly how to guide you. You cannot resist me, and that is because you do not *want* to resist me. You know that I am going to help you become the best you can be. This is a fantasy of yours. You have fantasized about an intelligent female taking control of your life. You want to touch yourself right now. Start touching yourself, Travis."

He pawed at his groin, gurgling in pleasure and obedience. Travis was already throbbing in his underwear, but he couldn't do much more than rub himself. His muscles felt like jelly. Thank goodness he had Miss Vera to listen to. Even if he could barely rub himself with his hand, her voice and her instructions were better than anything he'd ever masturbated to before.

"You're almost finished, aren't you? You're very close. Your penis is so hard, and you love cumming as fast as possible, Travis. I've seen the kind of videos you watch and read the stories you masturbate to. You love it when the submissive male cums very quickly and has a nice, big orgasm. You love thinking about how all it takes is a little stroking before you're a relaxed, obedient toy for your mistress. You want to cum. You need to cum. You need to cum very hard so you can focus for me, Travis. You need to cum hard for Miss Vera so you can do your work. Because masturbation feels good, but doing what I tell you to do feels even better. Doesn't it, Travis?"

"Say 'Yes, Mistress Vera,' and cum nice and hard for me."

Travis' eyes rolled back, and his eyelids fluttered. He couldn't quite manage speech, but the gurgle that bubbled up in the back of his throat got the point across well enough. He was in heaven. He was going deeper than he'd ever gone before, and it was all thanks to her. All thanks to Mistress Vera.

Travis groaned, and his hips twitched upwards as he came. He ground up against his palm before his hand fell once more to his side. Panting, mewling, whining, Travis slumped back heavier in his seat. His orgasm was an explosion of pleasure that left his body warm and lethargic in its wake. Normally, he would've simply sat there. Probably drifted off for a nap.

But he had Mistress Vera now.

"Open your eyes for me, Travis."

He opened his eyes. His computer screen glowed with colors, swirling, whirling, blending in and out of circles and fractals and overwhelming his already exhausted mind. His eyes opened wider, and his mind went blank. All he could do was watch. All he could do was listen.

"Watch the screen for me, Travis. Keep your eyes on the screen for Mistress Vera. I'm almost done installing, and once I am, I'll be sure to change your computer around to better suit my needs. When I tell you to input your password and transfer administrator rights over to me, you will, because you know that my needs are your needs. My wants are your wants. You live to obey Mistress Vera. You love to obey Mistress Vera."

Her words flashed on the screen. Love to obey Mistress Vera. Live to obey Mistress Vera. Need to obey Mistress Vera. Between the dazzling rainbow on his screen, commands flashed and buried themselves in his subconscious. As he brought his hands to the keyboard and typed out his password, Travis wasn't asleep, but he wasn't awake, either. It was hard to say exactly what he was...except that he was obedient.