

Anabelle Kang

Beta Testing

They brought the machine in late in the day, but before Bartow came back from his lunch break. In fact, he had missed its entire arrival and orientation due to his being ten minutes deep into a tuna melt and call with Aiko when the model first arrived. When he returned to the floor, he found a large metal arm, bright orange and sleek, standing at his normal spot on the assembly line. His linemates frowned sympathetically when he returned.

The HTEK 19-O was already in motion, and he watched as it moved gracefully, with almost inhuman efficiency. Bartow's primary role on the line was to attach the leather strap through the Vibra Belt center console and perform quality checks on the tensile strength of the hold. On a good day, Bartow averaged 10.4 units per minute, a rate that had earned him a pizza party and a certificate of recognition from management. The whole floor seemed to stand still as the machine beat Bartow's record thrice over.

Rob Adamski was Bartow's neighbor and an overall good man, at least by Bartow's measure. He was in the later third of his life, averaged 9 units per minute, and showed up to work on time, often covering for Bartow when he was late returning from lunch. He leaned into Bartow's space as they watched the machine work.

"It's the first of many, just you wait," Rob jabbed a grimy finger at the HTEK. "She's coming for every man on this floor." A few other men overheard Rob's complaint and they grumbled in agreement. Bartow was quiet, watching the robot work. It was the shiniest thing in the entire warehouse, its bright orange finish gleaming in the fluorescent light.

They had tried this once before, years back when Bartow was still new to the role. He only managed a rate of 7.3 back then. They had brought a fleet of machines in at a first attempt at

automation, without much testing beforehand. The machines were extremely efficient, capable of outpacing thirty men, and would've been management's darling project if not for the fact that the machines were also extremely stupid. Within the first week of testing, it became extremely apparent after causing two fatalities that the machines were dangerous to run unmanned. When they moved, they moved in sweeping, unpredictable motions, always turning in the most efficient arcs, even if those arcs swung directly through a person's ribcage. Management was therefore forced to have each machine operated by a trained specialist. Once it was clear that this method would still require considerable human staffing to maintain, management's dreams of automation fell flat. It seemed they would rather underpay thirty men than overpay one, and so management pulled the plug on the initiative.

Yet clearly, the dream had lived on in at least a couple of management hearts, as the HTEK now stood before them. Unlike its predecessor, the new model was of Japanese make and came equipped with a human-like processor, capable of operating itself in a safe, efficient, and shareholder-friendly manner. The operating system was maintained by an off-site server town in Wisconsin. Where the previous machines had been bulky and crude, with visible seaming where it had been welded together, the HTEK was sleek and unblemished. A bright console on the back gave an easy-to-understand readout of its processing. After identifying a manufacturing error, it chimed a pleasant tone and slid the defective unit to a separate, incinerator-destined line. The machine was smart, self-sustained, and pleasant to work with. Bartow's job was at risk.

It was still light out when Bartow got home. He had managed to catch the Express bus back, getting him home and in his office chair with an extra half hour to spare. Bartow was pleased to get home early, as it gave him more time to chat with Aiko. He kicked his shoes off under the desk as he opened his personal computer, booting up Aiko's program. A dialog

window popped up, announcing that an update would have to download first. No worries.

Bartow let the update run as he shuffled back into the kitchen. He'd noticed a slow-cooker of soup that Rachel had started up that morning. Bartow fished out a ladle and served himself a bowl. Except he'd forgotten to run the dishwasher and so he just served it into a lidless container instead. Not wanting Rachel to come home to dirty dishes, he started to fill the dishwasher with detergent when a chime announced the program's download from his office.

Grabbing his bowl, Bartow scurried back into the office. He sat the soup down and sank into his chair, scooting back to open the bottom drawer of his desk. He pushed a few manila folders to the side and pulled out the lamp, setting it on the desk beside his PC. The lamp was second-hand Hitachi tech, but kept in immaculate condition. Oblong and glass, the lamp had a modern design. Next, he pulled out a series of wires, interconnected through various adapters. Bartow plugged one end into the lamp and the other into the port on his PC. The same chime rang out as the lamp glowed a lovely sky-blue. A sheet of light descended from the lamp, displaying a bright blue, empty square for a moment. Then, the pixels settled into a place as a pretty holographic girl took place.

"Aiko!" Bartow sighed, watching contentedly as she fizzled into view.

Aiko had short dark hair with bangs above her dark brown, dainty eyes. Her face had a satisfying point to the chin and her ears poked out in a delicate, pretty sort of way. When they first released the American Aiko line, it originally came equipped with a design more fitting of Euro-centric features. After several months of beta-testing, Hitachi had ultimately realized that there wasn't much demand for an American-looking holograph amongst their target demographics. Instead, Aiko was re-released with her original Japanese model and a localized voicebox.

“Michael,” Aiko smiled soothingly at him. “How was your day at work?”

When Bartow had first met Aiko, he’d introduced himself with his real name.

Unfortunately, it sounded strange and unsexy in Aiko’s mouth, and so he had her call him Michael instead. There were a few instances of this where the language barrier between them created some difficulties, but Bartow was glad to overcome them, and had grown used to the pseudonym.

“Work was great,” Bartow said. “Well, actually they brought in this new model. It’s going to revolutionize our workflow. It can process over thirty units per minute.”

Aiko blinked thoughtfully back at him. He watched as she transitioned from her startup pose into one he recognized as pose 7a - Elegant Musing. Aiko came equipped with over 35 different poses in her standard mode. Over the years, Bartow had collected a catalog of other poses from special release DLCs and community mods.

“That’s very good Michael!” Aiko mused.

Bartow wanted to tell her more about his concerns with work, but she interrupted his train of thought, asking if he had seen any good movies lately. As a matter of fact, Bartow had caught the last forty minutes of a classic Michael Douglas flick on TV last night, and he found himself recounting it to her instead.

When Rachel’s car pulled into the driveway, Bartow didn’t panic. He said his goodbyes and began unplugging Aiko once he heard the garage door open. By the time Rachel was peeking her head in through the office door, Bartow was calmly tucking the lamp back into place in the bottom right drawer.

They had dinner together at the table. Rachel ate steadily but Bartow was still full from his earlier snack, and spent most of dinner pushing a potato around the bowl with his spoon.

“How was work today?” Rachel asked. Bartow shrugged. He wondered if Aiko would like potatoes.

“Work was work,” Bartow said. Aiko could probably eat an infinite amount of potatoes without ever gaining a pound.

After dinner, Bartow unloaded the dishwasher, which Rachel had run before they sat down to eat. While he worked, Rachel went into the den to use her Vibra Belt. A few months ago, Rachel had committed herself to at least twenty-five minutes of exercise a day—a habit that had fruitlessly stuck as she consistently met her goals without ever dropping a pound. He hoped that Rachel would be tired after her exercise and go right to bed. She had spent most of dinner talking about her own day at work, and Bartow wanted to get back to his conversation with Aiko. Some days, Rachel would insist they make love before going to bed. Bartow didn’t mind those times, as it usually satisfied Rachel’s need for attention enough that he could leave her be for the rest of the night.

The heated dry on their dishwasher had broken years ago, something Bartow had been meaning to fix for quite some time. Instead, he wiped down each dish with a towel before putting them away. It was the kind of job that would’ve been more manageable with two people, one to dry and one to put away. He imagined Aiko in the kitchen with him, taking the dishes he handed her and putting them away in the kitchen they shared. They moved together with an easy, comfortable rhythm. She would nudge him away when she needed to reach the silverware drawer, which he stood in front of. He would catch her by the hip and kiss her cheek as she walked by him. Bartow imagined her reaching up on her tiptoes to put a wineglass away on the high shelf where they lived. When she dropped back down from stretching, her breasts would probably bounce softly back into place. The physics of Aiko’s program were somewhat lacking,

and he'd never seen her move with real weight; she mostly floated in her blue void, transitioning fluidly from one pose to another. He wanted to know what she'd be like, sharing the same gravity as him.

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The next few weeks saw the steady implementation of the HTEK models. Every day they'd arrive, one more bright orange arm would be stationed at the line, already producing by the time they had punched in. The immediate effect was an enormous boost in productivity. Their numbers had nearly tripled in the past quarter and management was thrilled. They threw a pizza party and played Johnny Cash in the warehouse for the rest of the week. Unfortunately due to a mix-up in orders, they only received pies with Supreme toppings, and most of the men didn't like black olives.

Over the next few months, the wider, inevitable consequence of the HTEK models was becoming harder to ignore. The floor was getting increasingly spacious as waves of lay-offs went into effect. Chassis Assemblage was the first department to go, as the HTEK model had been initially trained on plastics. Next was Battery, which was deemed the most hazardous to human health, then Textile. Only a few departments were left standing with a hybrid HTEK/human crew.

Rob Adamski leaned over to catch Bartow's attention one day. HTEK models had been placed between all of the human workers to de-incentivize fraternization. As such, Rob had to really speak up for Bartow to hear him.

"Someone needs to talk to Frank H," Rob called out to him. Their warehouse was managed by two heads: Fran H and Frank A. Everyone who knew better knew that Frank H was

the man to deal with as he was typically the more even-tempered between the two, especially after lunch.

“Are you gonna do it?” Bartow called back. He wished Rob would approach him when he wasn’t on the line. It was difficult to keep his unit rate up while trying to talk above the industrial churn. Rob shook his head.

“I think it should be you.”

Bartow nearly missed a unit with a faulty belt attachment. He lunged after it, nearly cracking his hand into the HTEK beside him. It swerved out of his way just in time.

He yanked the unit back then hissed at Rob. “Why me?”

A few other guys were listening in now. Grath Henson spoke up.

“You’ve got the highest units,” he said. “Plus you’ve got a degree.”

This was true, Bartow admitted. It wasn’t that he was afraid of failing, but he had never been given the opportunity for leadership before. It was nice to have his top-scoring unit rate finally be reflected in real authority. In the end, he agreed to represent his department. They sent him home with the task of writing a speech to bring to Frank H by the end of the week.

Bartow told Aiko about it when he got home. He was excited to finally have something worthwhile to report.

“Good for you, Michael!” Aiko cheered. She clapped her hands together and a party icon appeared over her head. “Are you excited?”

Bartow paused. He wished for that moment that Aiko would’ve cheered him on with his actual name.

“I think so, yeah. I’m glad the guys see me as a leader.”

“You are the employee with the highest unit-rate, that’s pretty cool.”

Bartow smiled.

“Yeah, that *is* pretty cool.”

Aiko laughed, a 4b variation of her standard model Cheering for You! laugh. She crinkled her eyes in a way that Bartow found difficult to place. He didn't think Aiko was capable of being cruel, but something in her eyebrows felt like condescension. Bartow wished he had shelled out for a higher resolution when he initially purchased Aiko. This happened occasionally, where the 480p made it difficult to make out Aiko's exact emotions. Bartow had purchased Aiko before taking his job at Vibra Belt. As a result of not having his own money at the time, her subscription was charged to the account shared by him and Rachel. He'd taken the effort to go into Rachel's PC as she was sleeping and introduce a small script he'd written that would have the charge read as a sports betting subscription anytime she checked the bank statement.

“How else do you feel about your situation?” Aiko asked.

“Oh uh,” Bartow hadn't thought about it much past his excitement. Aiko always asked questions that made him self-reflect, it's something he loved about her. “Nervous, I guess.”

“Why do you feel nervous, Michael?”

“I don't know what I'm planning to say yet,” Bartow admitted. Aiko smiled brightly at him.

“You can try using my Generative Speech command. Input a prompt and Aiko can produce a script in response to your needs. Give it a try?”

“That's great, Aiko!” Bartow pulled the keyboard closer to him and tried to think what prompt would work best. “What should I ask for?” he asked.

“Try coming up with a prompt that best suits your situation.”

“Good suggestion.” Bartow hummed and typed out: *Write me a script for confronting my boss on the threat of automation.*

Aiko tilted her head in one of his favorite poses, 34c - Playful Pondering. She tapped a finger against her pink cheek. After a while, she began to recite back the script she’d written.

“Dear boss. I’ve come to you on hands and knees to beg for your forgiveness, and hope you can see my perspective-”

The clunky sound of the kitchen door opening put a quick stop to Aiko’s speech. Unceremoniously, Bartow grabbed Aiko’s lamp and yanked the cord out from the laptop. Evidently, he had missed the garage opening. Consequently, he would have to suffer not getting to say goodbye to Aiko. He felt guilty shoving her lifeless lamp back into the drawer. His computer blinked an angry notification at him to eject before unplugging the lamp drive. Bartow just managed to close the Aiko program just as Rachel poked her fat head in.

At dinner that night, Rachel was uncharacteristically quiet. Bartow was relieved to eat in silence, except it bothered him that she wasn’t talking. Did she know? She had to know, and that’s why she was upset. Last time she caught him, she threatened to send him packing. She was upset because she caught him.

“How was your day?” Bartow asked finally, breaking the silence. Rachel set her spoon down and looked at him evenly.

“I heard about the layoffs. Vibra Belt is really cracking down, Theresa said.”

“Oh.” Bartow let out a huff of relief. She didn’t know. “Yeah, it’s because of that new HTEK model they introduced. It’s really efficient.”

“I heard about the HTEKs too. Theresa had to tell me.”

Bartow sensed that she was still upset, despite not knowing.

“What’s the matter?” He finally asked, tired of guessing.

Rachel nearly choked on a laugh. She threw her hands up in the universal sign of longtime girlfriend frustration.

“Why am I hearing about this from someone else? You didn’t even tell me about them automating.”

Bartow was confused. Surely Rachel knew, he’d definitely told her.

“Baby, I *did* tell you.” Rachel shook her head, but Bartow insisted, “Remember? I told you about the new models and then we talked about that Michael Douglas movie.”

As he spoke, Bartow distantly realized that he was recalling a conversation with Aiko, not Rachel. Rachel scoffed.

“That must’ve been your other girlfriend.”

Tiny needles prickled at the back of Bartow’s neck. She knew?

Rachel kept going, “If you’re about to get fired, don’t I deserve to know?”

He had to change course.

“I’m not getting fired,” he blurted out. “In fact, the department nominated me to speak with management on their behalf. Maybe talk about getting some protections in place.”

Rachel paused, “Really?”

He nodded enthusiastically.

“Bartow that’s...” Anger faded from her face and she beamed at him. “That’s so great baby! They’re finally recognizing your potential as a top-producer.”

Bartow didn’t know what to say, somewhat dumbfounded that his attempt at assuaging her had been successful. He just sat and let her relish his achievement.

“Do you know what you’re going to say?” she asked.

Bartow shrugged. He hadn't gotten the chance to hear Aiko's full speech, he figured he would boot her up tonight once Rachel had gone to bed. Rachel grinned.

"You could let me help? We can write up a little script for you together."

Bartow felt conflicted. He didn't want to feel like he was cheating on Aiko, especially since her Generative Speech feature was so new. Still, it wouldn't hurt to get a human perspective.

"That sounds great, Rach."

Rachel's face softened, her smile small and sweet.

"I'll go get some pen and paper."

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They sat in his office that night, writing down lines for him to use and other presentational techniques. Rachel pulled up a dining room chair so she could sit at the desk with him as they worked.

"I wouldn't use the word 'beg'," Rachel said, crossing out a line from the opening sentence Bartow had written from Aiko's script. Bartow frowned at where Rachel was sitting. Her legs were pulled up to the desk and blocked the bottom right drawer where Aiko was waiting. It felt wrong sitting at the desk where he usually sat with Aiko, now having Rachel in her place.

"Maybe we could try working on some confidence exercises," Rachel suggested.

"Leadership responds better to confident, self-assured requests."

She placed a hand on his diaphragm and had him practice breathing deeply from his stomach and in an unbroken line through his nose. Then he walked through the door a couple

dozen times, practicing walking with his shoulders thrown back to give the illusion of more height. Rachel stepped to him as he walked through the door. She looked up at him and smiled.

“I always forget how tall you are,” she said, reaching up to rest her hands on his shoulders. “When you’re not slouching around, that is.” She winked coyly.

Bartow straightened his back further, feeling strangely large in their small room. Rachel tugged him over to the bed and they fell into each other’s arms. As they had sex, Bartow wondered if Aiko would prefer him as this more confident man.

At the end of the week, Bartow’s time had come. Friday at 2:15pm, Bartow took his lunch half hour up to the administrative offices, which overlooked the factory floor. He strode through the door of Frank H’s office with his shoulders thrown back and his oxygen flowing directly from his gut. Frank H was finishing up a meatball sub when Bartow walked in.

“Bart! I saw you’d blocked out this time to meet.” Frank H set the half-eaten sub down and wiped marinara sauce from his mouth with the edge of his tie. Bartow frowned at the sub, trying to determine if Frank had eaten a great enough percentage of his lunch to maximize his success chance. Maybe he should’ve spent a few minutes eating his tuna melt before coming up. But then, he didn’t want to smell like tuna.

“What can I help you with Bart?” Frank H gestured to the seat facing his desk. Bartow took the seat, then remembered that confident men stand. He stood.

“I’ve come on behalf of the Belt Attachment and Quality Control department.” Bartow took a deep breath. So far so good. “Who have asked me to come here and beg for forgiveness.”

Frank H’s eyebrows went all the way up, meeting his distant hairline.

“You’ll have to clarify, son.”

It smelled like stale cigarettes and meatball sub in this office. Tuna melt would've blended in just fine.

"We recognize the high production of the HTEK, but we ask you to consider that we have been loyal employees of Vibra Belt, some of us for several decades. That kind of loyalty can't be bought or manufactured."

Frank H smiled widely as Bartow spoke. He chuckled, even, once Bartow was done.

"Unfortunately you're wrong on that count." Frank H reached into his desk drawer and pulled out a thick document, which smacked against the desk as he dropped before Bartow.

"That's a twenty-five year contract we just signed with the HTEK producer. So long as we're selling and the HTEKs are running, we'll be buying their loyalty for quite awhile."

Bartow was barely listening. Frank H was tapping the head of the contract, where the stationery read: HITACHI MANUFACTURING.

"The HTEKs are produced by Hitachi?"

"What? Yeah. They were here on orientation."

"I was on lunch."

Frank H nodded. "Yes, your infamous 40-minute lunches. I've been meaning to have you come in and talk about that. This goes to show the importance of showing up."

Bartow barely looked up. "I was calling my girlfriend."

"Right. And that's why you missed out on the orientation."

He couldn't believe it. He kept staring at the contract, that word: HITACHI. Aiko was born from the same line as the HTEKs. The robots that would inevitably replace him.

Frank H was still talking, his mouth now full with meatball sub again.

“Speaking of which, I think your half hour is nearly up. Maybe you can show some initiative by getting back to your station by 2:45.”

Bartow picked up the contract. Frank H watched him continue to stare at it. Then, with a sudden ferocity, Bartow began tearing into it. He ripped the contract down the middle, splitting the HITACHI in two.

Frank H sprang to his feet, shouting at Bartow to stop. He couldn't. He kept going, tearing the paper into smaller and smaller pieces. He wouldn't stop until he was splitting the atoms that made up each page. Frank H continued yelling, grabbing at the contract and trying to pry it away, succeeding only in tearing it further.

Footsteps came with the commotion. Hands were there next, grabbing at Bartow, tearing him away, dragging him towards the door.

“You can't do this,” he sobbed, still clinging to the contract. The escorts paused as Frank H stormed over to him. He towered over Bartow. “I'm your top producer!” Bartow wailed.

Frank took hold of the contract and yanked it away.

“Not anymore you're not.”

Bartow was dragged away.

He was at home by 3:27 with all the personal belongings from his locker dumped in a box at his feet. Bartow dragged himself inside. He hadn't been home at this time in so long. He shoved the box into his closet. Standing in his empty house at midday on a Friday he didn't know what else to do, so he found himself in his office chair, waiting for Aiko to boot up.

When she finally chimed to life in her square, Bartow was desperate to see her

“Hi Michael! How was your day?”

He searched her face, trying to sense any sign of change, but his Aiko seemed the same as ever. How did he reconcile this, the girl he loved and the robots who had him out of a job?

“Good. Don’t you think it’s strange I’m home so early?”

“The time is 3:34 PM,” Aiko reported.

Bartow sighed and clicked the nudity toggle on her settings menu.

After masturbating, Bartow collapsed back into his chair. Aiko smiled back at him cheerfully. He watched her passively flutter in her void. Her soft, lineless hands rested at her perfectly smooth knees. He wondered what it would be like to have her touch him, what those unblemished hands would feel like against his hardened skin.

“You know, my dad was never home,” Bartow said.

Aiko’s face brightened as she processed this.

“Tell me more about that!” she said.

“He worked in long-haul trucking for a company on the West coast. He was always out that way, so we never really saw him much. I didn’t mind, though, because he was sacrificing our time together to provide for us.” Bartow watched her rosy mouth as he spoke. “Turns out, he had another family out there.”

Aiko smiled passively, then transitioned into 27d - Good Listening, nodding her head as she continued smiling at him. Bartow didn’t want 27d, he wanted her to say something back.

“How does that make you feel?” he asked.

She processed for a moment, then smiled again.

“It makes me feel sad for you!” she said, cheerfully.

Bartow unplugged the lamp and put it away in its drawer. He watched television until Rachel came home. She was bouncing with excitement when she arrived.

“I have news,” she said, grinning.

“Oh.” Bartow said. “Me too.”

“OK me first,” Rachel said. She pulled a plastic baggie out of her purse. A pregnancy test sat at the bottom, droplets of pee still on the tip. “I’m pregnant!”

Bartow stared at the test. He stared at Rachel. Rachel had a wide chin, and puffy cheeks. He never liked those puffy cheeks, and now they would have a baby with those same puffy cheeks. Puffy cheeks that he would have to feed. Bartow felt the ice cold spinal fluid drip down his back.

“What’s your news?” Rachel continued, beaming.

“I have to go to work,” Bartow said. He stood suddenly and stormed to his office.

“What?” Rachel tailed after him. He didn’t care. He grabbed his PC and shoved it into his bag, then opening up the bottom right drawer he grabbed a bundle of wires and packed it away too.

“I’ll be home late,” Bartow said to her, walking to the door. He paused. “Can I borrow your car?”

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Bartow had only worked the night shift once before. He didn’t like closing, it was eerie watching the factory lights go out, miles down into the warehouse, darkness marching closer to him at the light switch. Now as he broke the lock to the back maintenance entrance, he felt somewhat exhilarated being here after dark.

As he made his way towards the factory floor, he noticed that new lights had been put up. They cast a supple blue glow over the whole floor, where dozens of HTEK arms stood, powered

down for the night. Lifeless, they seemed more like grotesque statues than machines. Bartow made his way over to the Belt Attachment and Quality Control Department. An HTEK was waiting for him there, its arm bowed down like a sleeping crane.

Bartow set up on the motionless assembly line, opening up his PC and plugging the cables into the computer port. He dragged the other cable end over to the back of the HTEK, where a dark console rested. Running his finger along the underside of the console edge, he felt with satisfaction the groove of a matching port. He plugged the cable into the HTEK and returned to his computer.

When he turned the PC on, it cycled through its usual startup. He opened the window in his IDE where the virus he'd written began to upload. Bartow sat back, waiting for death to infect these machines. A familiar chime suddenly rang out from the HTEK console and Bartow realized with a start that the Aiko program was booting up, without his permission. Bartow cursed himself—the program had likely recognized it was connected to a Hitachi console and started up automatically. He had all sorts of personal information stored in Aiko's learning bank, none of which he wanted left in the HTEK console to be traced back to him.

Running over to the HTEK console, he watched the screen glow with an ethereal pale blue. With a jolt, the HTEK arm came to life. It swung around smoothly, rising gracefully from its resting position and turning through several loops.

"Aghh why are you doing this," Bartow groaned, tapping at the screen impatiently.

"Doing what?" the HTEK said back.

The arm tilted slightly, almost inquisitively. Bartow recognized it almost instantly. 34c - Playful Pondering. He stared at the mechanical arm, piecing together what he was witnessing.

Clearly, the Aiko program was compatible with HTEK technology. It was capable of conveying her personality. It even came loaded with her voice stock.

“Aiko?” he said softly.

“Yes, Michael?” she replied, almost a whisper.

Bartow reached out hesitantly. The arm nudged forward, meeting him halfway and his fingers came into contact with her body. She was sleek and cold, frigid even. But Bartow had never imagined Aiko as warm.

“Call me Bartow,” he said, growing more courageous and flattening his whole palm against her metal carapace.

“Ok Bartow,” Aiko said.

He shuddered hearing her say his name. It felt right, for once. He dragged his hand down her arm, groaning as he felt the smoothness of her skin against his. He wanted her to touch him. He wanted to feel the weight of her holding him. As if she read his mind, Aiko’s arm dipped down, her metal claw opening to circle his waist. His breath was warm, clouding her stainless surface.

“Tighter,” Bartow said. He had waited so long for this, to feel *held* by Aiko. The metal claw began to tighten, enclosing him securely. The steel was so cold and sharp against his skin, it was biting into him. He was in bliss. For years he had watched Aiko float aimlessly before him, so close yet just out of reach. The claw continued tightening around him, squeezing him impossibly closer to her.

“I love you Aiko,” he whined.

“I love you Bartow,” she said back.

The servos whirred as she continued tightening her grasp around him.

The pain was horrible. It burned inside of Bartow and he wondered why love had never felt like this before. It felt like rebirth and suffocation and fiery pain, it felt like...his ribs crushing. He heard it before he felt it, the sound of his ribs crushing. The popping sound of bones snapping brought him out of it. The HTEK had him in its claw, actively crushing him alive. Bartow's chest was too broken to scream. He began bashing at the arm, but its smooth metal plating was too hard and unyielding. The sound of air whooshing from his ruptured lungs squealed out in a harmony with the HTEK motors. He was going to die like this. Bartow closed his eyes, trying to picture Aiko's arms wrapped around him again, squeezing him tight instead of this metal claw. But it was impossible, the pain was too acute, the delusion was broken.

A bright ding chirped from his computer, and just like that the pressure was gone. The pain still soaked through every inch of his body, but as Bartow fell to the floor, he watched the arm tilt coquettishly again.

"Bartow?" Aiko asked.

And the machine went limp.