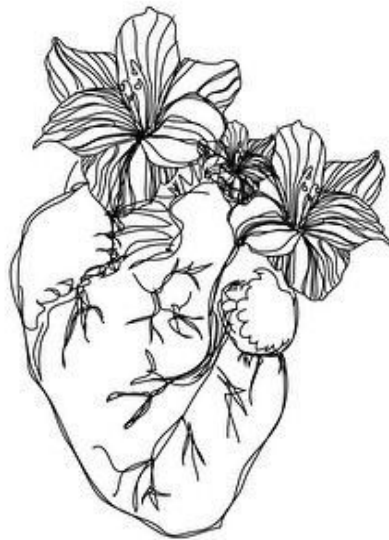


Steel Hearts



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Do steel hearts bleed?

It was *the* modern question - akin to the classic conundrum of dreaming androids and electric sheep. And yet nobody was ever interested in the answers - just the search for them, the questions themselves and the other questions they usually bore. Do steel hearts bleed? Who was it meant for? Why did it matter? If they did, would that be so bad? Some people would like to see androids with a weakness to them. The question was just another version of a question, packaged and made more suitable for the times. What it really referred to was emotion, the dangers of it. Was it worse to feel too much or nothing at all? *That* was the true question. A lot of people asked and so one could assume a lot of people cared. Maybe that's why it mattered.

But for some it didn't matter all that greatly. For some maybe it all mattered too much. For Iris it didn't matter at all.

The young tanned man's eyes snapped open. There was no fluttering of the eyes, nor some yawn as he blinked into daylight. For him morning came as a sudden intrusion. Black became blue. Night had turned to dawn. Sleep just stopped. Silence was cut short by the song of civilisation - from the hum of hover-cars and chirping claims from billboard advertisements.

"*Good morning Iris,*" came a disembodied voice that ghosted over his apartment in its calm yet sterile tone. A blue light emanated from the lines between his walls and the corners of his apartment, flaring in brightness whenever his smarthome spoke. "This is your daily alarm. The time is seven-thirty A.M and the temperature in Stardust City is sixty-three degrees fahrenheit." Iris had shut away his hazel eyes. *Out of sight, out of mind*, isn't that the old saying? "*Please wake up Iris.*" His blinds began to automatically open and so sunlight scrubbed the shadows of the ceiling away inch by inch.

"Snooze."

“You have disallowed the snooze feature,” responded the voice of his smarthome. Iris sighed in response. His metallic arm reached out for his second pillow and pressed it against his face. He drowned himself in darkness, hoping to dive deep into some sweet slumber to escape from a day that had barely begun. *“Please wake up Iris.”*

Fucking no-snooze feature he thought. Even his thoughts came at him in that tired growl of a voice that only the early morning could bring.

“Please wake up Iris,” the voice repeated. It sounded sharper. Iris pressed himself deeper into the pillow, trying to spend another slice of morning to seep himself in something. He only now realised too late that he was not diving into a sea of slumber once again, but was now sinking in a vast ocean of bitter cold consciousness. His smarthome sounded louder. The sounds of the city came at him harsher. Soft morning light fell on steel and skin. Forget starting to sink, now he had started to drown, only just grasping at the futility of fighting back against those waves of wakefulness.

Iris sighed again.

“Please wake up Iris.”

Jesus Christ.

“Please wake up Iris.”

No.

“Please wake up Iris.”

Fuck off.

“Please wake up Iris.”

“Okay!” snapped Iris, the pillow moved from over his face, steel fingers gripping the fabric so tight that he felt like he could tear it apart. Lines embedded in his arms like makeshift veins began to glow red as he flared with anger. His eyes scanned the ceiling, seeing the blue lights in the lines between his walls and ceiling begin to fade away. His arms lit up as amber. “I’m sorry.” The voice

didn't respond. Iris scanned the ceiling. He asked himself, *is it worse to feel too much or feel nothing at all?* He didn't know why, it just suddenly came to him. A part of him flushed. Was he really feeling sorry for his smarthome? He sighed.

"Searching..." responded the voice, the lights flaring up again, becoming bright and then fading, dancing to his ghostial voice.

"What are you searching for?" asked Iris, suddenly sitting up in interest.

"Common answers to your question, 'is it worse to feel too much or feel nothing at all?'" said the voice.

"What?" Iris' dark brows furrowed in confusion as he looked up around his home. His arms returned back to that crimson glow. Some smarthomes were sophisticated but he was not rich enough to get one that read his thoughts. But he didn't say anything out loud. Did he? He resisted the urge to yawn, the familiar fatigue of the morning clouding his thoughts. "Cancel the search."

"Cancelled."

Iris stood up and stretched, only feeling relief from his back, not his arms. Ten years and he never got used to that feeling, the relief from everywhere but his arms. A steel finger brushed his arm, tracing one of the lines from shoulder to his wrist - metal on metal.

It was his morning ritual.

Some wanted a cup of coffee.

Others desired their implants.

Iris craved touch.

So he let his finger rub his arm, letting it do its dance on the steel. He read that some cultures had dances hundreds of years ago to summon rain. Maybe this was his own dance, a finger tracing an etched line from his shoulder to his wrist, a rain to summon...Happiness? Love? There were no words to describe defeating loneliness.

He just wanted to make sure he could still feel something, his presence, that special softness of someone against you, something. He could still feel everything, just not that small stretching relief. The lines in his steel arms glowed yellow as he submitted to his contemplations. Iris looked away, so focused on ignoring them that he didn't even get the brief reprieve when the lights died down.

"Shower on," commanded Iris, as he walked into his en-suite bathroom, the one other room in his small apartment.

When the fuck did I leave this on?

A flare of anger rose in him and the several lines formed in his arms began to gleam red as he saw a simple seat hovering in the air before his desk. He tapped a button on the armrests and let it slowly float down and rest on a pad underneath it where lights danced on a surface and a word appeared on it:

HOVER SEAT NOW CHARGING: 3%.

Iris stepped into the bathroom as water spilled from the shower head into the small cubicle of a glassed off shower area his bathroom space would allow. He stopped looking so angry when he caught himself in the mirror, the glow of his arms dying down again as he stripped off his clothes. The brief shower did little to wake him up. "Shower off. Catch me up on the news."

"In recent news..." Iris ignored the voice as he clothed himself again, he only wanted a voice to fill the void and he was tired of his own already. He picked up a thick transparent bracelet, letting it lock around his right hand as he began to move his fingers, commanding his toothbrush to float through the air. *"Initialism has risen three-percent since last year, the movement whereby people identify themselves by initials rather than full names has seen..."*

His smarthome continued as he began brushing his teeth. He stared at himself in the mirror. He usually slicked back his short dark hair, which was currently a mess this morning. His eyes scanned over his face, his short nose, the thin lips, reminding himself to shave as the spectre of a beard, in the form of stubble. He looked at himself, fingers twitching as he moved his toothbrush back and forth, neck moving as he breathed. He looked like a person, but so did androids and holograms nowadays.

Was he a person? He didn't feel like it sometimes. He felt like something that had garnered the worst parts of a person - the neediness, the sadness, the vitriol and desperation of it all. He swore that sometimes, the way crying could be unending, the way anger could be so uncontrollable, he could get drunk on feeling; not on lust nor desire, but feeling, the pure rawness of emotion itself.

And the suffering made him hate it, and the elation made him love it.

Iris blinked suddenly realising he was crying. That happened often, more often than he'd like. He shut his eyes and gave himself a moment, shrugging off the feeling as he opened his palm and let his toothbrush fly into his hand as he spat into the sink.

"...trend of Breakfast is returning with over sixty-percent of citizens saying they were open to having breakfast in the morning. The classic practice used to be..."

"Mirror on." The mirror lit up, as a holographic screen appeared overlaying the glass presenting a set of numerous icons. Iris could still see his reflection underneath. He tapped one without even having to look as he focused on brushing his teeth, and the screen shifted instantly.

"...other news, a government bill sponsored by global digital security corporation Panoptes was passed last month and is soon to go into effect..." Iris only heard the voice briefly as he scrolled through the timeline, before finding something he could distract himself on. A square appeared, popping off the screen with a thin white holographic tendril that connected back to the screen. The square read:

Good morning Iris! You have two reminders!

Iris tapped the square and watched it disappear before the holographic screen displayed its first reminder in another popping square, hovering close to Iris' face.

Reminder (Today):

Anniversary. Get mom some flowers.

His mother was dead. She had been dead for ten years. She was gone and nothing was going to bring her back.

Except everything else did. The memory of her laughter. That emptiness from a lack of her embrace. The deep sound of her singing voice over some lullaby. The sunrises she had never seen, and the starry nights he knew she'd love.

Everything else always did. Sometimes Iris wished that he could forget all about her. He always felt bad for thinking about it afterwards. But he still did, only sometimes, on nights so cold that he'd be frozen forever like some macabre statue, the exhibit of the lonely and grief-stricken.

Iris' arms radiated red at the thought about that upcoming visit to the dead. He tried to concentrate on anything else, other than his reflection, other than seeing how sad he looked; how childlike. And thinking of himself as a child only made him think of his mom and that...

He gripped the sink tightly. The ceramic began to sound strained, the pressure from his steely fingertips causing a crack in the sink. There was a reason most of his things, his toothbrush and hairbrush couldn't be held, and instead floated in the air, responding to the most minute movements of his hand.

The reminder repeated in Iris' mind as he took a moment to collect himself. He swiped the text away allowing the the next reminder to come up and replace it:

Reminder (Today):

Dad's going to die.

Iris slapped the words away. He stopped looking at the mirror. He almost forgot that *everything* was going to change today.

It suddenly felt like a chore to even stand. Tears welled up. Breathing became hard.

Maybe it was better to feel nothing at all.