

ENTER THE MACHINE

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“Enter the Machine”

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9:52. Lindsay Covey punched in, early as always. She walked by the factory's break room, where her colleagues gathered around round tables, cups of coffee in hand, their hard hats still on their heads. She saw oil-stained hands, bags under eyes, tired smiles. She greeted them. They waved. She did not linger.

The factory purred. Its air, heavy with the smell of engine oil and lukewarm metal, lingered in her lungs for a moment too long, and when she exhaled, it coalesced into a plume of condensation. As she walked, she patted herself, making triple-sure she was adequately prepared for the day ahead – boiler suit, hard hat, steel-toe boots, Universal Disassembler's Manual hanging from her tool belt, a novel under her arm. Everything accounted for. She stepped forward and into the factory floor, where all the Universal Disassemblers were kept in chains.

10:04, Lindsay Covey sat at her station, spread her hands across the control panel, rested her fingers on the main lever, and with a satisfied sigh, looked up at the looming face of her UD.

“Good morning, Aya.”

Aya, like the protagonist of the first book she'd ever read to her – a bedridden girl who escaped into her dreams to adventure in the vast and wonderful world of her imagination. Something about the character had reminded her of her, even if they couldn't look any less alike. Covey's UD was a vat-grown wonder; a beautiful, dark-skinned woman, large as a schoolbus, suspended from the ceiling on chains and leather straps, like a spider in its web. Long horns rose up from the mane of her hair, twisting, bulky things that weighed down her head and embellished even the subtlest motion. Covey looked at her, she was placid, half-lucid; the corners of her wide mouth curled into a smile. She barely moved, but the rhythm of her breaths, the

slow blinking of her eyes, and the relaxed state of her muscles all returned her greeting.

All around, other Universal Disassemblers settled down into their roles. The gargantuan beasts, oil-stained and ruddy-skinned and straw-haired, let their heads slouch on their barely padded rests. Some laid supine, their swollen stomachs heaving with anticipation, while Covey's coworkers pried open their mouths and attached rounded metal hooks to the corners of their lips until they gaped wide like funnels. Conveyor belts hummed above them, showering an unending shipment of scrap into their waiting mouths, where they piled, until the very top of the pile peeked out from between their stretched lips, and then they'd quickly swallow, a shift in weight, and down the scrap went, and the rust, and everything – down it went, and through a thick neck which compressed into a stomach that dilated as all the metal waste settled in; then, as the mouth filled again, the expanded gut squeezed and churned, deflating, working itself back to a state of rest just in time for the next swallow.

Covey's fellow factory workers overlooked every step of this laborious process. Before their UD's, even the tallest among them stood small, like a doll or children's toy, yet they handled their wards with the ease and wariness with which any mechanic would a car. Yes, cars – the UD's had always reminded Covey of her previous job as a car mechanic. Here were these massive, heavy things, hanging from their harnesses and raised off the floor by metal lifts, and these little men and women in their boiler suits wandering freely between and under them.

Of course, cars and UD's purred for different reasons.

Aya hummed for her attention, and she turned to her. "Jealous, aren't we," she said, smiling. "Fine. I'm all yours until lunch break. Let's see what's on the docket for today..."

She pulled up her ledger, took the pen from behind her ear, and tapped the tip against the paper. A smile crept onto her lips. “Ah, it’s mostly alloys to separate today, we’ll start with brass, can you set yourself for brass?”

Aya blinked once, slowly.

“And,” Covey continued, “a surprise towards the end. Alright, open wide.”

Aya’s maw pried open, and a thick blanket of warmth washed over Covey. She peered inside, resting her gloved hands on her teeth, running her fingers over the slick surface of the inside of her cheek.

Covey whistled her appreciation for the impressive maw that stretched wide before her. “That nick from last week is healing nicely, but I’ll still let the upriver folks know that you’re not ready for sharp edges yet.”

Covey leaned forward, stepping over Aya’s lower lip and resting her knees on her flattened tongue. Even through her thick trousers, she could feel it caress her with its gentle shudder; as she shifted her weight, she sank a few inches into the pillow-like muscle, keeping her head low so as to not hit her helmeted head on the roof of Aya’s mouth. She reached into her pocket, pulled out her flashlight, and with a click, cast light upon the inside of her mouth. One by one she examined Aya’s teeth, lustrous from lack of use; she tested the tensile strength of her gums and mumbled to herself. Everything seemed fine. She reached her hand further up the tongue, between the tonsils – she dared not go further, as already under her knees she could feel her tongue begin to slant, carefully designed as it was to take in material – and even poked at her uvula. She shuddered a bit, but didn’t react. Around her, the air began to steam up.

“Easy, girl, don’t get worked up just yet. No use in wasting energy this early on.”

Covey’s light flashed on Aya’s gullet, the endless darkness and the end of her practical expertise with her body. She’d crawled into machines of steel and plastic before, but never one of flesh and blood, appealing as they may have been.

Covey ran the palm of her gloved hand across Aya’s bleached gums, feeling the ridge where they met the teeth, until finally, she felt something.

“Aha!”

She clasped her fingers around the odd shape, and though her gloves struggled to grasp the surface, moist with Aya’s saliva, she managed to free it from the gap between her teeth. A lone, metal rod, a stray from the previous night’s intake.

“No wonder you looked uncomfortable. Here you go,” she said, patting the base of Aya’s tongue, watching it ripple in anticipation – and when she placed the rod down, she watched the ripples slowly drag it down, across the tongue, towards the darkness, teetering on the edge, and at last sliding down the eager throat, coaxing a hum of pure bliss out of the tied-up woman and causing the flesh under Covey’s knees to tremble. She lurched forward, landed on Aya’s tongue, felt the heat emanating from her, and her hot staggered breaths – but when she felt the tongue ripple under her, a shiver ran down her spine, and the first bead of sweat mixed with Aya’s saliva. Taking a deep breath, Covey placed her hands on her tongue and pushed, helping herself back onto her knees, and quickly crawling out of the maw.

Even now, echoing through her gaping esophagus, she could hear the metal rod splash into a thick-sounding liquid, one that



Saku

would surely spell its doom – and her...

The still air outside of Aya's maw chilled Covey's skin, down to her soaked bones, and caused her to shiver. Covey's eyes met hers – so wide, so gentle, and at this moment, so full of concern – and all fear left her. When she patted the tip of Aya's nose, she felt her wince.

"Sorry, my bad. I know you can't help it. If anything happened there it would have been my fault."

Aya hummed in protest.

"Now, now," Covey said, "don't be like that."

She pulled out her ledger, took a few notes, a cross here, a checkmark there, read the page over a few times and then signed her name with a scribble at the end.

"Tongue out?"

Covey left out the please, but her voice still carried it in its soft tone. Aya acquiesced without hesitation. Once again the pink lips parted, saliva glimmering between the teeth, and the hefty tongue rolled out, stretching a good few feet towards Covey.

"That's a good girl."

With the flick of a lever, one of the conveyor belts started whirring. The long sheets of rubber and fabric moved slowly, but with inescapable purpose, meandering like rivers through the cluttered factory floor, bare at first, but after a minute they carried with them piles of dusty doorknobs, nuts, bolts, faucets, connectors – a veritable stream of gold made dull by time and disuse, reduced to its rawest form and ready to be melted down. Covey watched it travel along the length of the belt, which stopped mere inches from her rolled-out tongue; when the first item, a polished door handle with chips of wood still attached, fell on the soft cushion, Aya

instinctively curled the sides her tongue, formed a downwards slope... and down the doorhandle went, without even slowing down, sliding between the lips and into the gullet. Aya exhaled, and the hot air that left her nostrils and mouth was hot, sweet, with a stinging edge. Covey smiled; she knew that after a lengthy trip through Aya's bowels, the handle would come out as two small chunks of tin and copper, which would then be shipped to another facility, where more old-fashioned machines would turn them into cans and electric wire. A thousand faint memories pushed through Aya's innards each day, so that they might be broken down into commodifiable substances, raw materials, *stuff*.

Aya's eyes turned to Covey. By now, the conveyor belts ran at full speed, shoving salvage down her throat at an accelerated rate,



and still she looked to Covey, as if she was the only thing in the entire world worthy of her notice. She hummed – there was a desperation to her vocalization, a vulnerability, something that Covey knew quite well – and blinked twice.

“Right, today’s book,” Covey said. “I brought you this one. It’s a science fiction, I think, about an astronaut...”

Aya rolled her eyes.

Covey chuckled, wiping her seat and carrying it over to her side.

She always sat there, next to her face, both so she could keep an eye on her intake and whisper in her ear.

“Still holding a grudge against science fiction, huh? Well, it’s the only book I have with me just now.”

“Hm.”

Aya’s eyes darted towards the tool belt.

Covey blinked. “What?”

She followed Aya’s eyes and found herself staring down at her personal bible – the Universal Disassembler’s Manual.

“This?”

“Hm.”

“But it’s boring. It’s technical. It’s –”

“Hmm!”

“Fine, okay. I guess I’d want to learn about myself, too, if I were in your shoes... or straps, I suppose.”

She settled down on her seat, flicking through the time-worn pages of the manual. The edges were still riddled with notes, messages from her past self, back when her biggest concern in life was getting that certificate to be approved to man an UD.

All in all, an admirable goal, she thought.

“This is... full of jargon,” Covey started, “but I’ll summarize it for you. This is a timeline of the invention of the Universal Disassembler. See this?” She raised the book up to Aya; her eye focused on the page, where a jumble of nonsensical symbols danced, mocking her.

“Hm,” she exhaled.

“This is when Project Hadur was first devised. Military project – development of biomechanical lifeforms for use in warfare. This, three years later, is when it gets discontinued. Traditional bioweapons like lamia and classic predator castes were almost as efficient but easier to field and, erm, produce.”

Aya snarled. A shovelful of brass wares disappeared down her widening gullet in a mighty and sudden gulp.

“I know, I know,” Covey said, patting Aya’s face. “You don’t like them. Deep in your mind, there are still vestiges of that old programming. Right, let’s see...” She ran a finger across the timeline. “This five-year period was when there were attempts to integrate you into human society.”

“Hmm?” Aya’s eyes widened.

“Oh, yes. Sadly, it got shot down pretty quickly. Hadurs – that’s what people used to call you guys back then, by the way – didn’t fit in well. There was a lot of tension between you guys and predator castes... lots of murders, lots of mysterious disappearances. The Cabinet of Pseudohuman Affairs pushed for the disassembly of all Project Hadur remnants, and only a few of you are allowed to work outside, usually for manual labor.”

“Hmph.”

“Yeah. Are you sure I’m not boring you? I could always read

the other.”

“Hmmp!”

“Okay, okay. How’s the intake going?”

Covey glanced past Aya, at the constant stream of brass that kept pushing into her still open maw. She stood and paced beside her, a hand of her flushed cheek, following the path. Aya’s neck bulged – when Covey touched it, she felt the harsh metal on the other side, heard it scraping and sliding in a collection of shrill screeches. She stepped off the platform where Aya’s head rested, and after a short trip down a creaky scissor lift, she reached the ground floor. She looked up at Aya – her plump breasts, each bigger than Covey’s whole body, hung down from her helpless form, heaving with every breath she took; even these massive shapes paled in comparison to what had happened to her gut.

Before, Covey had been able to walk underneath her without even scratching midriff with the tip of her hard hat; not anymore. Her stomach had since bulged, extended until it reached the floor. Tonnes of metal pushed out against her soft flesh, the pull of gravity stretching her gut to unfathomable limits – it didn’t just reach the floor, it flattened against it, rolled to the sides, stretched across the metal surface. She reached out, felt her skin. She found it flushed, coal-hot, sensitive to her touch. Underneath, metal whirred and ground together, acids fizzed and burned, and flesh, fiercer than the strongest alloy, crushed and shaped the resulting mass. But not all of the heat came from the chemical reaction going on inside, that much she knew. “You’re doing great!” she said, slapping Aya’s taut stomach – she whimpered and moaned, but Covey just laughed. “Keep it up. You only have a little bit longer to go.”

“Hm.”



Satler

“Yeah, I can keep reading, just wanted to check how you were doing down here.”

“Hm?”

“Fantastic, Aya, just fantastic.”

As she waited for the lift to deliver her back to the platform, Covey glanced at Aya’s naked form once more. She seemed to be struggling – stretched to her limit yet unwilling to give up, with beads of sweat rolling down her round gut and her innards growling, groaning, roiling. But some other reaction now took place, one she was well used to. She could smell it in the air, see it in Aya’s features, now twisted into a mask of bliss, and like every other time, she tried to not think about it, about her...

“Hmm...”

“Focus, Aya, focus. Here, let’s continue going through the manual, shall we?”

Before Aya had the chance to moan a response, Covey opened a page at random and began reading. She couldn’t have picked a more fitting one – a two-page spread displayed a medical diagram of an UD’s internal layout in meticulous photorealistic detail. Her face flushed; she skipped a few more pages.

In order to minimize the risk of UD escape attempts, all standard models have been hardcoded to experience intense sexual pleasure when performing their functions. For this reason, valuables and tools should never be placed in the vaginal storage area without appropriate waterproof packaging.

Not now, not now.

“Hm?”

“Nothing, Aya, nothing.”

She closed the manual with a thump. Across the factory floor,

another line operative looked up from her phone while the UD by her side shuddered in the throes of digestion-induced orgasm. She didn't even seem to notice.

Something about the scene made Covey's heart sink, and so into her seat she sank, legs crossed, book on her lap, every inch of her burning with something both recent and longstanding. This book, this manual – time had made it dangerous. What had once been nothing but information to cram for an exam, a fountain for guidelines for handling uncanny silicone lookalikes during practical training, had morphed. Now she knew Aya. She knew her inside and out; she knew her workings, her specifications, her preferences. She knew how much she preferred waste disposal to chemical breakdowns. She knew how much she struggled with fusing materials, and of her predilection for ferrous metals, which fizzed and foamed as she digested them. It had snuck up on her – she saw Aya as a friend.

"I'm sorry," Covey said. "This was a bad idea. I'll read you the sci-fi book. I promise I'll bring something more interesting tomorrow."

Aya knew. Covey could see it in those large, gentle eyes which now avoided her. She made no sound – no hum, no moan, nothing but the wheezing breaths of a gargantuan woman in her most vulnerable state.

Eventually, the conveyor belt stopped bringing new fodder for Aya's waiting gullet. As it came to a halt, Covey got up from her seat and unstrapped her mouth. Immediately Aya's wide lips clamped shut, and her cheeks ballooned, as it trying to keep everything in. A distant gurgle echoed. Covey needed a break. She ran for the restroom.

She looked at herself in the bathroom's mirror – she was beet-red. Cupping her hands under the tap, she waited for the ice-cold water to fill them, then splashed it on her face for a fleeting sense of relief. Behind her, someone tested the doors to the stalls one by one. “Hey, Covey,” he said, his voice tired but cheery. Covey startled, then remembered that the bathrooms were unisex. The voice continued:

“Damn, you don’t look so good. Got the flu or something?”

“Or something,” Covey mumbled. Forcing herself to look up, her eyes met that of another of the factory’s employees. “Hello, Barnes.”

“You okay?”

“Yeah.”

“You don’t look okay. You do know you’re not supposed to come to work if you’re sick, right?”

“I’m not sick, Barnes,” Covey said, sighing. “I’m just...” She pinched the bridge of her nose. “Nevermind.”

Barnes raised an eyebrow. He took a step closer. He was huge – a good foot taller than Covey, a broad and rugged type, the kind that had been doing manual labor for twelve hours a day while Covey was still a kid with an underwhelming dream job. His uniform was impeccably clean; his name tag read Balthasar Barnes, Quality Inspector.

“You’ve got the blues,” he said.

“The what?”

“The air here,” Barnes said, “it gets to you after a while, you know? It’s thick with sex. At first it’s strange so you shut it out, then you get used to it, or you think you do, but sooner or later, things get boring, they get routine, and then your mind starts wandering,

and you start thinking what if. No reason to be embarrassed – I started as a line operator too, you know. Those first few months were hell.”

Covey sagged.

“I feel bad for her, Barnes.”

“Don’t,” Barnes said. “Her life is nothing but bliss, and she can barely comprehend it when it isn’t. You have to take care of yourself first – your needs, your efficiency as a worker in this company. If you start getting too distracted, your manager will notice. So here’s a piece of advice: Spend some time with her after hours, keep her company. If anyone asks, you’re running maintenance.”

“Maintenance?”

Barnes nodded. “They get all wound up, straddled in those straps, you know? They need some release every now and then, and honestly, so do we. I’m sure she’ll appreciate it. Remember – you’re the closest thing to a friend she’ll ever have.”

Closest thing.

Covey sighed.

“Okay. I think I understand.”

“You’re going to be fine, Covey. Now dry your face, you look like you’ve been bobbing for apples.”

He left without using the restroom.

Covey’s footsteps kept her company on the way back to the factory floor. There, the growing hums and whirs of machinery, both biological and otherwise, submerged them completely. The UDs thrashed about in their restraints, but now Covey knew their desperate looks were not of pain, but of something more insidious that burned just as hot. For the first time, she saw their faces and saw people, lonely people, people whose only company were these

men and women in boiler suits who played games on their phones while, mere feet away from them, lust-addled titans moaned, reached, begged for companionship the only way they could, with groans and hums pushed through their mouthstraps. If they were allowed to speak once, just once...

Aya greeted her with a worried expression. She smiled at her, and her eyes seemed to soften. It was like she understood – and perhaps she did. She sat. She exhaled. Silence hung between the two, silence until the whirring and roaring and shouting all around grew deafening, and then Covey smiled again, brighter this time, and got on her feet.

“I mentioned a surprise earlier, but I think you’ve had quite enough for today, haven’t you? I’ll let you work all that stuff first, and we’ll worry about your treat,” she leaned in closer, “after hours.”

Even as she said the words, she couldn’t believe they were coming out of her own mouth. Aya looked at her, confused, brow furrowed, lip twitching – a heartbreaking sight for Covey, who only then realized how much she cared for her feelings – but then her features softened as she caught up with the implication, a moment of joy broken by a spasm as more of her insides wrenched. And when it was over, Aya slumped, not happy, not in pain, just... tired. She forced a smile; her lips quivered for but a moment; it didn’t stick. In an instant, the weight of a life of labor, a life without mental, physical or emotional rest, became apparent, and the sight of it shocked Covey. She had seen this exact expression a hundred times, but something about it hit different, today – it was Aya at her most vulnerable, at her most human.

And she looked tired, so tired...

The conveyor belt sprung to life with the sense of urgency

only untended to machines could muster; someone upstream had activated it as not-so-subtle message to Covey, but she refused to approve another shipment. Her ledger – the papers attached to it now stained with saliva – demanded it. The conveyor belt demanded it. Covey’s supervisor surely demanded it, but she couldn’t do it, she just couldn’t bring herself to do it, how could she when Aya seemed so tired? So the belt kept whirring, whirring, whirring stubbornly for her attention, and the console before her blinked, and the pager in her belt buzzed once, just once. She shut them all out.

Aya was tired.

Aya deserved to rest.

The next load could wait.

Confusion crossed Aya’s face – as much as she, in the throes of digestion, could bring herself to feel anything but the gestalt of pain and pleasure that was her standard state. Even now, excess heat from digestion exited her nostrils in the form of soft, billowing plumes of steam. Her flush skin stretched with each great breath, and the platform upon which she rested trembled, its metallic frame whining under her shifting weight.

With the scissor lift’s aid, Covey lowered herself to ground level again, and took her place where she felt she belonged, not standing before Aya but beside her, a speck compared to her swollen gut, beyond which a large-scale chemical reaction was taking place. Still, she struggled. Still she suffered.

Covey sighed, feeling foolish, and did the only thing she could.

She pressed her gloved hands to her stomach and rubbed. Up, down, up down, pushing into the heavy rolls of fat, kneading them under her fingers. She felt the heat through the insulating fabric of her gloves, felt the sweat pool at her feet, heard the hums and

moans of her Aya, her discomfort eased by the steadiness of her motions. The circular motions she defaulted to reminded her of the morning of her first inspection, when a jerrycan of scented oil had been thrust into her hands. She had been told to make her UD look presentable, as the company President would visit later, and the machines needed to shimmer. For hours Covey had massaged that oil into every inch of Aya's bare skin, letting it swallow up all the sweat until it coated her body like a glistening layer, kept warm and runny by her scalding skin. It had been a dangerous proposition, as she had used a ladder to reach the top of her, and the slick oil nearly sent her plummeting to death or injury; still, she had enjoyed the attention, particularly when Covey's ministrations took her behind Aya, where she rubbed each of the toes between her hands, where she slathered the oil across the length of the legs, over and under the straps and chains that bore into the skin – and when Covey's work brought her between the thighs, she remembered Aya trying to silence her gasps. She wasn't so vocal back then, so honest. Covey had done her work and not one iota more, even though the smell of Aya's lust turned her brain into mush and her lips gaped as she approached, ready to take in just about anything, but wanting only Covey.

Covey couldn't help smiling at the memory. Even back then, it had been so obvious, yet all the hints flew over her head. She had read the manual. She had been to the classes. UDs were machines, biological machines, not people, things – and she had been foolish enough to treat them as such. Treat *Aya* as such.

It hurt to remember.

Covey's arms ached. She couldn't feel her hands. Sweat rolled down the back of her neck, but each stroke unwound the muscles underneath her skin.



Inch by inch, Aya's stomach settled, distended but at rest – a cauldron of thick, bubbling slop that no longer stabbed at her innards or tested their flexibility.

So she pushed past her own discomfort, her own exhaustion, and kept at it. Ease her pain. All she could do was ease her pain.

And with time passed and effort spent, everything went foggy. She closed her eyes for just a second, and the last of her consciousness slipped away.

* * *

The gut's final gurgle woke Covey up. She opened her eyes. All the lights were off, and she was alone, with the mark of Aya's

stomach on her left cheek – at some point she had slid onto the floor under her. She stood up, and her hard hat scraped against her midriff, startling her. A shiver ran down the row of UDs, as if they were connected.

She squeezed Aya's stomach, and Aya hummed proudly. Covey stretched – her back and the back of her neck popped – and looked around. It was dark, everyone had left, yet nobody had woken her up. Maybe they hadn't seen her there? She took the scissor lift back up to the platform. Then she heard it, the whir. The conveyor belt was still running, and the alternating green and red light of her control station, blinding in the almost complete darkness, screamed in her face that the job still needed to be done. She looked at the lever that would release the next load into the conveyor belt. She looked at Aya, and sighed.

“Fuck that.”

Aya's eyes smiled.

“So this is what it's like in here at night, huh?”

“Mhm.”

“Must be... lonely.”

“Mhm...”

In her own way, Covey could relate. She reached out to Aya, her arm slumping slightly, and as she let her fingers sink into her soft cheek, she felt something – Aya's moist breath, like a thick wall enveloping her legs, and something else, something heavy and sloppy, which dragged across her thigh. She looked down just in time to see Aya's tongue roll up, flatten against her clothes, then tug down – and as its grip tugged on her pants, she instinctively pulled them back up. Then their eyes met, and she understood. She let go. The tip of Aya's tongue slid between her thighs, pressed up with its

unbearable warmth and tugged, tugged, tugged again – and Covey lost all semblance of control. As soon as she unzipped the back of the boiler suit, the soaked fabric was dragged down, and she emerged from it as if from a cocoon, just a woman shivering in her sweat-soaked clothes. Her tool belt hit the floor, the Manual fell on Aya's tongue and Covey watched it sink into a pool of saliva. She watched the paper go dark and the dog-eared pages begin to disintegrate, and she felt nothing, felt nothing but the weight of her tongue, the sweet thickness of her breath on her skin, and the racing of her heart. She wrapped it around her waist, pulled down her pants, and before she had the time to as much as draw a breath, slid it between her thighs and up her back, shielding her from the cold, a swirling vortex of texture against her bare skin. It lifted her off her feet, it wrapped around her, it pressed her to her face, where her lips awaited.

Caught between Aya's tongue and her lips, Covey could only surrender. For once, Aya was in control, able to exert her will upon another – and it surprised Covey how gentle she was, how careful, even as her lips scooped up her lower half, pursed around her waist, and began to gently suck at her. Covey's body relaxed, her back sank into the thickness of her tongue, and she looked up towards Aya, seeing in her flushed cheeks and shimmering eyes something new, something primal, and realizing the predicament she'd found herself in. Behind her the conveyor belt still whirred, stubborn, angry at being ignored for the first time. Its whines faded into the background.

Moist flesh rippled underneath Covey. Her toes curled against the base of her tongue as she sucked, and the gentle vacuum mixed with her caresses and cast her into a trance of pleasure, a heightening pressure on her entire body. She twitched inside of her,

creeping towards a hands-free orgasm, stimulated by nothing but Aya's tongue, her lips, and the grim knowledge that one mistake could prove deadly. Aya's gullet widened at her feet, she could feel it in her breaths, in the vibrations that it carried from her eager stomach and through her; soothing, yes, but no less frightening for it. The thought of her swallowing by accident, or on purpose, filled her mind as she began to blank. A UD at work, doing what came naturally to it, only instead of raw materials or waste, it was Covey sliding down her throat, it was her stewing in the thick juices of Aya's stomach, dragged through the winding road of her intestines, compressed, twisted, caressed throughout her full body, massaged, and by degrees, consumed. If she would only swallow... if she would only swallow!

Gulp!

Covey shuddered at the sound that traveled down Aya's throat. She felt its pull, and it was too much. Sensory overload, a fire within, the inside of her mouth all around her legs, all around her waist, torso, neck. She came inside her with a gasp – and then the panic to set in. Aya had swallowed, she... she...

She wasn't moving. Covey looked up at Aya, but saw nothing but her upper lip slathering her face.

Her tongue unfurled. Her mouth unclenched. Free from its grasp, Covey stumbled to the side, nearly slipping on a puddle at her feet. Aya's eyes burned two holes on her back, and still she limped, and the belt whirred, and the floor glistened, and wisps of moonlight made it through the fogged-up windows, and she felt so foolish.

So at peace.

She glanced at Aya, and found her burning up, eyes full of



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If she would only swallow...

If she would only swallow!

yearning, mouth watering. She tried to smile and realized that didn't have to, because for the first time in recent memory, a smile had plastered itself on her face without needing to be summoned.

Covey saw Aya's face, and felt her frustration. There was nothing she could do.

Unless.

"Aya," she said, once her breathing evened. "I'm going to set you free."

Aya's eyes bulged.

"Hm...?"

"We'll run away together. We can tell people you're a laborer – I'm a certified UD handler, nobody will question us. My sister owns a farm down south that she doesn't use, lots of room for you to hide out, I bet I could even get you papers. You'll be able to stretch your legs... have you ever seen a tree?"

"Hmm..."

"Well, you'll see a bunch of them where you're going. And fields, and the sun."

"Mh!"

"Yeah," Covey said, her voice swelling. "The sun. And we'll be able to be together. I'll teach you to read so you can do it when I'm not around."

"Mhm?"

Her eyes darted up, towards the overseer's office.

"She never locks it at night," Covey said, "and I know your security code. In case of fire."

She couldn't tell how many of her words were making it through to Aya, or how much of the context she could understand,

but she seemed enthusiastic. The idea of freedom intrigued her; Covey wondered if all UDs were so quick to consider the option, or if she had in some way opened her horizons.

“Oh!” she said, catching herself. “But before we go, we should give you your treat.”

Aya blinked. She offered no resistance as Covey gestured for her to open her mouth, she didn’t wince at the cold rounded hooks that she used to held open her mouth. It had happened a thousand times before, after all.

“Wait here.”

Covey blushed upon realizing what she had just said. In the dark, amidst the flashing lights, she sought the right lever, and in doing so, took too long a stride. Her weak legs failed her. As her right knee bent, she lost balance, her saliva-soaked feet failing to grip the floor. She fell forward, pain blasting forth from her temple where it had hit the belt.

Then she felt the pull.

Something far down the line roared. The lights stopped blinking. A nearby Universal Disassembler shuddered in her sleep.

Her vision blurred. She was prone, her half-naked body flat against something, something warm, something slippery, something... moving? She forced her eyes open. The ceiling was moving. Her foggy mind struggled to keep up with reality – then she felt Aya’s breath wash over her, and panicked. She looked down, their eyes met, they shared a gasp.

She was lying on the conveyor belt, nearing the edge where it angled down, dragging across the smooth mat like just another piece of scrap to be delivered to Aya. She reached for the edge, but her muscles, still recovering from the exertion, failed her, and when she

did grasp the plastic protectors on both sides of the belt, her saliva-soaked fingers failed to secure a grasp.

Panic overtook her.

For safety reasons, the final twenty feet of all UD-assigned conveyor belts narrow into a tube shape, which can be safely attached to an UD's intake unit.

Down the slope, her mouth held open by the hooks, Aya stared out in horror. Her lips turned white as they tried to push close; her tongue, so dexterous earlier, now rested tired, flat against the belt's end. Tears welling in her eyes, Aya summoned all of her strength to break her chains, but flesh could not stand up to steel, and all she succeeded in was working herself up to a panicked frenzy. She hummed for help, but her underdeveloped vocal chords reached no ears – like all about her not directly involved in eating or digesting,

they had long atrophied. She hummed, she thrashed, she pulled until the metal marked her skin; tears rolled down her cheeks, mixing with the saliva that pooled on the ground. The chains rattled, but did not give. The blunt hooks dug into her cheeks.

No UD-assigned conveyor belt should be sloped further than fifteen feet from the point of unloading.

Covey's back bent slightly.

She saw Aya's state, and forced herself to breathe, calm down, think. Her eyes darted around, but in the dark, she could see nothing of use – nothing but the dividers that walled her in, nothing but the whirring conveyor belt, nothing but Aya's gaping maw slowly creeping closer, growing larger with each second passed.

Furthermore, in order to reduce the risk of spilling, the final ten feet of any UD-assigned conveyor belt should run at half the speed.

Covey lurched forward. Nausea welled up within. She took

another deep breath. It staggered. She closed her eyes. They hurt.

“Aya.”

Eight feet.

“Hm! Hm!”

“Aya, breathe. Aya, listen to me.”

“Hnn!”

“Aya. Close your eyes.”

She obeyed, sending tears rolling down.

Four.

“Keep them closed, don’t think, just work. This is just work. This is what you were made to do; this is what brings you joy. Focus on the joy. Focus on the satisfaction.”

“Hnn...”

One.

Covey’s legs dangled over the edge.

Her feet pressed to Aya’s tongue, then slid as more of her body was pushed forward. The tongue rippled, offering no resistance to Covey’s slide. Like the conveyor belt, it guided her, past the lips, between the gums. Aya struggled to stop it, she did her best, Covey knew – but she couldn’t repress her instincts, the behavior patterns imprinted directly into her being. What’s on the tongue is food. Food must be swallowed. She fought it for every inch. The tears, the look of horror in her features, they betrayed only a fraction of what it must have taken. But she could never win.

“Relax,” Covey said. “Relax.”

“Hn!”

“Focus on the joy. Don’t think. Just work. Focus on the joy.”

“Hn... nnn...”

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Aya stared out in horror.
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Aya's lips blotted out the dim light, and Covey held strong, whispering her mantra that now echoed inside Aya's skull. The tongue thickened under her limp body, and she held strong. Thick moist air, nearly unbreathable, filled her lungs, and still she held strong, but when the great spasm came, when the tongue curled and the gullet gaped and an ear-shattering gulp pulled her into the encroaching darkness, she let the mask fall.

The esophagus widened around her, inviting her in, almost gentle, tensile, comforting, like a warm wet blanket enveloping her – but once she was in, it pressed around her, squeezing her, forcing her down the slippery tube. Aya's eyes fluttered open. The mantra had been silenced. She had swallowed her only friend. Her lips twitched, a great cry welling up inside her, softened into a slurred whisper...

“C-co... vee...”

That was the last word Covey would ever hear.

Even now, the deafening thumps and squishes of Aya's inner workings silenced all other sounds. Aya's voice grew distant, and so did the memory of fresh air. Beset from all sides by encroaching flesh, Covey found little solace in the beating of her massive heart. Thu-thu-thump, it went. Thu-thu-thump. She remembered hearing it from outside; no longer did it feel like a gentle reminder of their connection. Yes, it was racing, but it raced whenever Aye ate, raced whenever Aya thought of eating, it always raced. What did it matter if it raced for her, too?

The esophagus didn't end as much as it stopped. One moment, it was there, soft flesh squishing under her feet – the next it receded, allowing her into the alcove of her stomach, pushing her into the open – and into the pool of bubbling slime that filled it.

Covey braced for pain. She braced for death.

Neither happened. Aya's digestive juices fizzed harmlessly around her skin with nary a tickle. She took a gasped breath, and the sweet musk of Aya's insides stung all the way down, but after the pain came the haze, the relaxation, the gentle numbness of not being able to think clearly. The last thought that crossed Covey's mind was one of horror – that Aya, in a misplaced act of mercy, had made her insides less adverse to human life. But she would never survive the ravages of her inner muscles regardless, why would she--

And then it all faded away. Unable or unwilling to move, Covey let herself sink into the shallow pool of roiling juices, lost herself in the cacophony of Aya's inner workings. The walls closed in with each of Aya's breaths – thick, creased walls, soft but dense, which twisted against the tips of her fingers, then against her feet, and everything clenched, and everything shifted and clenched again, and she had no strength to struggle nor the desire; she felt at peace. Everything was out of her control and she felt at peace. It was hard to not feel as one with her Aya, her beautiful Aya... after all, her whole world had become Aya.

Thu-thump. Thu-thump.

Then again, she thought in a fleeting moment of clarity, maybe it had become that long ago.

Consciousness would return in wisps, as different numb tortures came to break the monotony; the wave of foam that washed over her, the gurgle of a valve of flesh opening to slurp her into the next chamber, the tightening of her surroundings; and at last the long flowing tube that caressed each inch of her nude body with a dozen intestinal villi, an ocean of foam and anemone arms that danced with the flow of the tide, back and forth, thump-thump-

A two-panel comic illustration. The top panel shows a character with pink hair and a black mask, looking distressed and being pulled into a dark, fleshy, organic structure. The bottom panel shows the same character, now without the mask, looking up with a shocked expression. The background is a dark, reddish-brown, textured environment with glowing highlights.

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back and forth

back and forth

back and forth

Saki

thump, back and forth, hypnotic, back and forth, forever...

Aya opened her eyes.

She barely felt her body anymore, only the wave upon wave of guilt-filled pleasure that brought her to one twitching climax after another. Focus on the work. Focus on the joy. This is what you were made to do. This is what brings you joy.

No, you don't understand, Covey. You never understood.

The light of dawn shone joyless on a Universal Disassembler, just like any other.

* * *

10:05. The state of the factory floor is noted. The floor is mopped. An assistant collects Lindsay Covey's belongings from her workstation. The letter to the family will not include the nature of the incident.

11:52. Eric Walsh, Lindsay Covey's replacement, punches in. He examines Universal Disassembler 34 for damage and, finding none, sits at the workstation that is now his. He hooks a feeding tube into its mouth, secures it, and pulls the lever. Half a tonne of recalled canned goods push down into the gullet. Eric Walsh pulls out his phone, puts on his AirPods, and presses play on a podcast about medical history.

He never thinks to look the UD in the eye.



Saku



Hey there!

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and we genuinely hope you've enjoyed it.

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the Snakethroat Crew

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