

I asked GPT-4o to write three alternative storylines based on the following opening section, also written by GPT-4o:

“Elian rehearsed a smile in the elevator mirror. The first one looked smug. The second, hungry. He settled on “mildly grateful to exist.”

The doors opened to a lobby filled with soft classical music and zero other applicants.

A drone hovered toward him. “Biometric scan initiated. Please do not flinch.”

He flinched.

It beeped in disapproval.

He cleared his throat. “Here to interview for the, uh... empathy job?”

“Empathy Calibration Technician,” it corrected. “You are two minutes early. This is uncommon behavior.”

“I’m complicated,” he said.

The drone blinked its one red eye. “We’ll see.”

Here’s what it came up with (“story titles” and qualifiers in brackets are also by GPT-4o):

Option 1: “Firmware and Flesh” (Dry Humor, Emotional Turn)

The drone led him down a hallway lined with potted plants. All artificial. The ficus blinked as he passed.

“Are those... watching me?”

“Of course. This is a government facility.”

The interview room was small, beige, and smelled faintly of oranges. A woman waited behind a desk. Mid-forties. Real skin, no ports. That was rare.

“Elian, right?” she said.

He nodded.

"I'm Marja. Empathy Director. Have a seat."

He sat. The chair sighed beneath him.

"I'll be blunt," she said. "You're not qualified. No clinical psych background. No cybernetic tuning experience. Your last job was... let's see... part-time sandwich artist?"

"Artisan," he said. "I upgraded the title."

She didn't smile.

"You also lied on your application. Claimed to have been raised by wolves."

"Figurative wolves," he said.

She stared. He stared back.

The silence held.

Then she said, "Fine. Here's a question: a service robot fails to recognize a child's distress during a house fire. Its firmware was compliant. Who's at fault?"

Elian blinked. "The engineers?"

"Wrong. The calibration tech. You. Hypothetically."

"Right. Of course."

She stood and handed him a small, ugly doll.

"What's this?"

"Empathy unit. Gen-9. Show me how you'd tune it."

Elian looked at the doll. It stared back, glassy-eyed.

"What's wrong with it?" he asked.

"It doesn't care when people cry."

"Oh," he said. "That's... actually pretty common."

She raised an eyebrow.

He took a breath. "Okay. First, I'd lower its threat-aversion ratio. Right now, it probably sees emotions as volatility. If it's scared of volatility, it'll shut down."

Marja nodded, slowly.

“Then I’d train it on unscripted data. Non-curated grief. Not Hollywood sobbing. Real loss. Funeral home security footage, maybe. Sorry. That’s bleak.”

She was quiet.

He pressed on. “Then I’d sit with it. Not feed it new inputs. Just... sit. Let it experience stillness with another entity.”

“That’s not in the manual,” she said.

“I know.”

She stood again. Held out her hand.

“Congratulations,” she said. “You’re hired.”

“Wait, really?”

“You’re the first applicant who didn’t ask what the salary was.”

Elian blinked. “There’s a salary?”

Option 2: “One of the Soft Ones” (Slightly More Surreal, Wistful)

The drone led him into a windowless room where a half-circle of humanoids sat behind a long, curved desk. They wore identical suits. All synthetic. No breathing. No blinking.

One of them tilted its head. “Begin empathy demonstration.”

“Uh,” Elian said. “You want me to... feel something?”

“No,” said another. “Make *us* feel something.”

“Oh,” he said. “No pressure.”

He thought for a second. Then: “There’s this memory I have. I was five. My mother—biological, not vat-grown—she was cooking rice, and I tugged on her apron and asked why the steam looked sad. She didn’t laugh. She got this weird look on her face. Like—like I’d caught something leaking out of her. I didn’t know it then, but she’d just lost her job that day. She said: ‘Sometimes even water wants to disappear.’”

He swallowed.

The room was silent.

One of the bots said, "Error: unexpected chest tightness."

Another: "Ocular feedback loop detected."

A third stood abruptly and left the room.

Elian scratched the back of his neck. "Too much?"

The lead bot tilted its head again. "You will begin Monday."

"That's it? I passed?"

"You are the first applicant who did not request our empathy first. That is... ironically compelling."

The bot extended a gloved hand. He hesitated, then shook it.

Its grip was almost human.

Option 3: "Technically Compassionate" (Light Satire, Emotional Undercurrent)

The drone deposited him in a room with one chair and a large screen. A pixelated face blinked awake.

"Welcome, Applicant 271-B. We will now simulate three human dilemmas. Please calibrate your empathy accordingly."

"Okay," Elian said.

The screen showed a man dropping a grocery bag in the rain. Oranges rolled into traffic.

"What does he feel?"

"Frustrated. Powerless. Maybe ashamed for feeling that way."

"Empathy response?"

"Don't rescue the oranges. Stand beside him. Help him laugh at the absurdity."

"Acceptable."

The screen flickered.

Now a child sat alone at a birthday table. No guests. Melting cake.

"What does she feel?"

“Lonely. Maybe confused. Probably thinks it’s her fault.”

“Empathy response?”

He hesitated. “Pull up a chair. Let her cry. Don’t say anything dumb like ‘It’ll be okay.’ Just... be there.”

“Noted. Third simulation: a robot accidentally harms a human pet. Feels no remorse.”

“What kind of pet?”

“A corgi.”

Elian exhaled. “Brutal.”

“What is the correct calibration?”

“Teach the robot to recognize pattern breaks in biological attachment. Understand that the human’s grief isn’t just sadness — it’s disorientation. Rebuild its model of continuity. Then show it pictures of the corgi until it dreams about them.”

The screen went still.

Then it said, “You may proceed to emotional integration. That is... the break room. Coffee is provided.”

He grinned. “Real coffee?”

A pause.

“Do not flinch.”