

Artifice

Alex Woolfson

Winona Nelson, Illustrator

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Gay android/human romance blossoms amid a blockbuster science fiction plot.

Imagine a big-budget, summer science-fiction blockbuster with a tender romance at its core. Now imagine it's a comic book instead of a movie, and the romance is between two men. That's what Alex Woolfson and Winona Nelson have created in their graphic novel, *Artifice*.

The hero of *Artifice* is Deacon, an artificial person and soldier. A robopsychologist evaluates Deacon after the android, contrary to his programming, killed a group of human soldiers. As revealed through flashbacks and sessions with his therapist, Deacon was followed by the soldiers to a distant planet, where he disobeyed his orders to exterminate the entire colony, which leads to dire consequences.

Artifice was originally published as a webcomic on Alex Woolfson's website, Yaoi 911 (from the Japanese term *yaoi*, meaning "Boys' Love"). In the tradition of *yaoi*, *Artifice* features a sexual relationship between two men, but the science fiction setting and plot make it more than mere homoerotica.

Artifice is larger than most graphic novels, a commendable choice that shows off Winona Nelson's clean and expressive art. In one multipanel sequence, Deacon suddenly grabs another man's arm, shows reactions of surprise, followed by a subtle indication of affection, followed by an embarrassed pulling-away. Deacon is in a sympathetic state of confusion, not just because of his sexuality, but because he has seemingly surpassed the level of his programming—as he explains, "I also have a difficult time connecting with others. I'm a soldier. It's not part of my design."

The robopsychologist, Dr. Maven, strikes a realistic balance between genuine scientific curiosity and utter disdain for a nonhuman who, as she sees it, is mimicking real human emotions, or simply malfunctioning. The characters seem real and likable, and the interpersonal dynamics anchor the story more than the occasional shoot-'em ups.

The story's main flaw is something of a *deus ex machina*: Upon capture and return to Earth, Deacon is reprogrammed to obey only one human. This vulnerability seems a major defect in the design of a super-strong corporate android, and though Woolfson promises to reveal more details about the "missing scene" and how exactly Deacon was reprogrammed, its absence from this volume is a bit confusing.

Artifice is for mature audiences, and due to the homosexual content, might not be to every reader's taste. But for those who want to see heroes who just happen to be gay, this book could prove the long-awaited fulfillment.

PETER DABBENE (Summer 2013)

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