

It was a day just like any other when Heidi got home from school, until Daddy came home carrying a big box.



Surprise! he said. He and Heidi opened the box and inside was a robot.

His name is Al, said Daddy, and he can talk to you and do many other things. All you need to do is ask.



Heidi had never seen such a thing before, and asked Daddy, "how will Al know what to say? Does he think like we do?"

Not really, answered Daddy. He pointed to the keyboard on Al's tummy.



He pressed the button for "girl" and a dot appeared on the bottom left of the screen. Then he pressed the button for "boy" and a dot appeared on the bottom right.

Daddy explained: "each word shows up somewhere on the screen. And watch this."



He pressed the button for "king" and a dot appeared on the top right. Then he asked Heidi: "where do you think the word 'queen' would show up?"

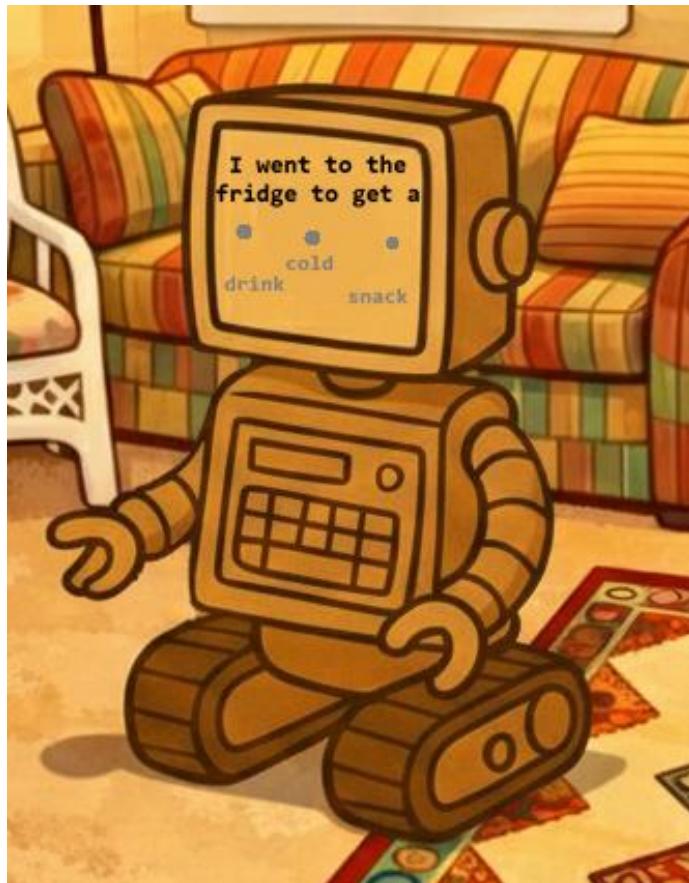
Heidi thought about it: "kings are royal boys and queens are royal girls. It seems like going from a boy to a girl is moving left. It also seems like going from non-royal to royal is going up. So a queen should be up and left."



She pointed to the top left of the screen. Daddy pressed the "queen" button and the dot appeared just where Heidi had pointed.

Heidi was amazed. Daddy continued, "when you say a sentence, it mixes all the dots, and then guesses the next words.

He typed "I went to the fridge to get a" and the dots came on the screen. He then pressed another button and all the dots joined together.

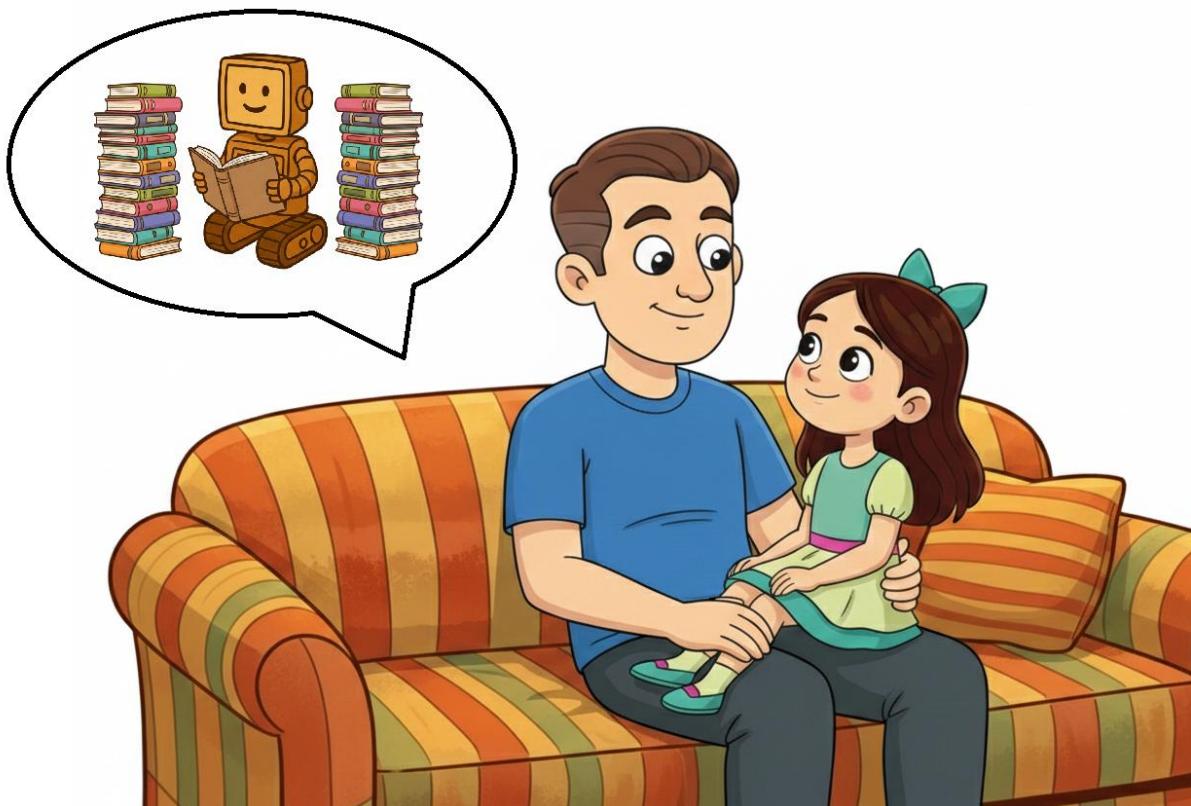


After a few seconds, some of the buttons lit up; they said "drink", "snack" and "cold," all the other buttons stayed dark.

Finally Al spoke: "I went to the fridge to get a cold slice of pizza and ate it on the couch."

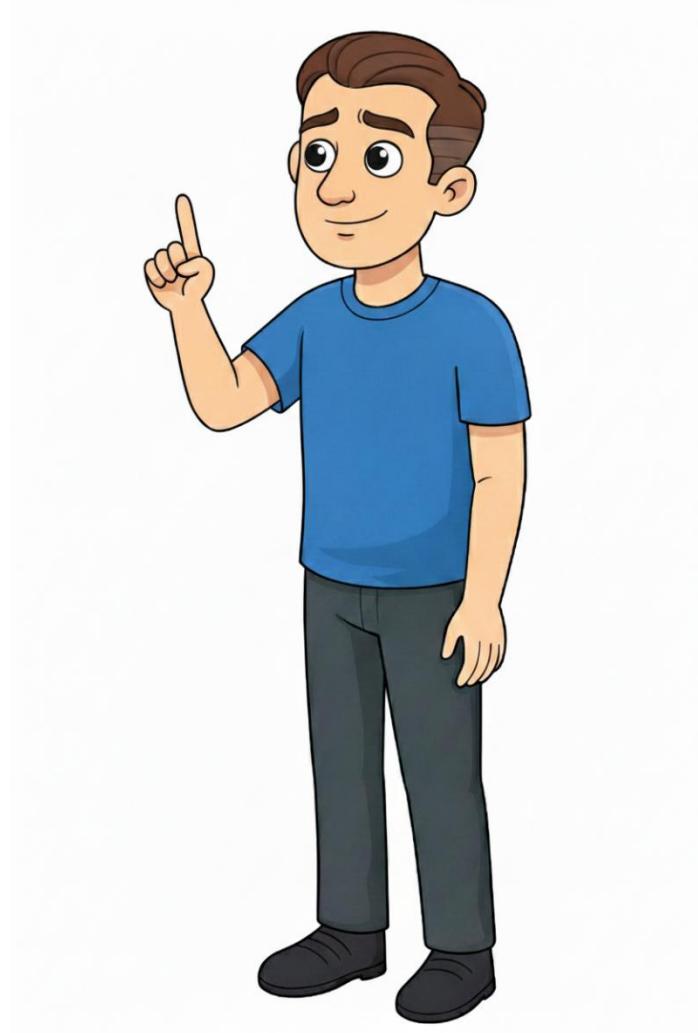


Heidi asked "How did he know what words come next?"



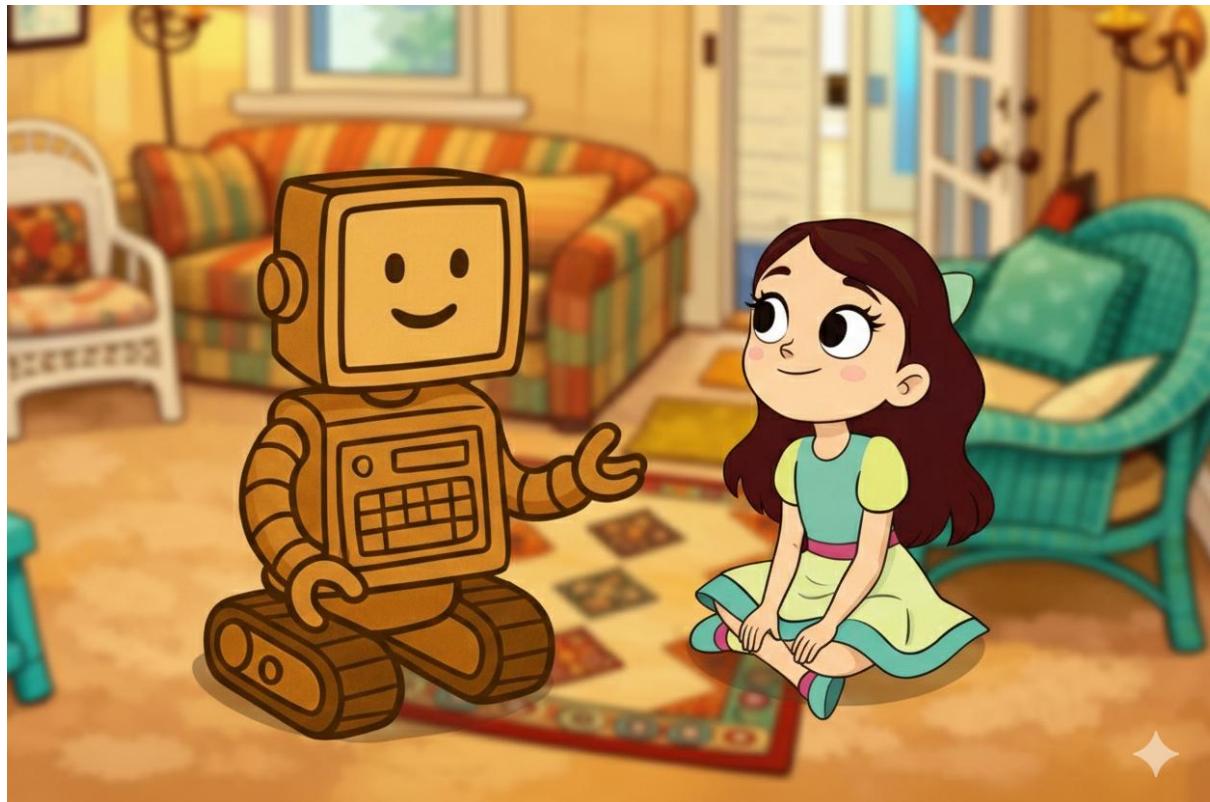
Daddy answered "Al has read so many words, he knows which words tend to follow the ones you gave him to start."

Heidi thought of a game she played with her friends where they would make up stories, one word at a time.



Daddy closed up the panel and left, saying "he's all yours to enjoy. Just remember, Al may seem like a person, but he's actually a machine."

After some silence, Heidi asked Al "So, do you know everything?"



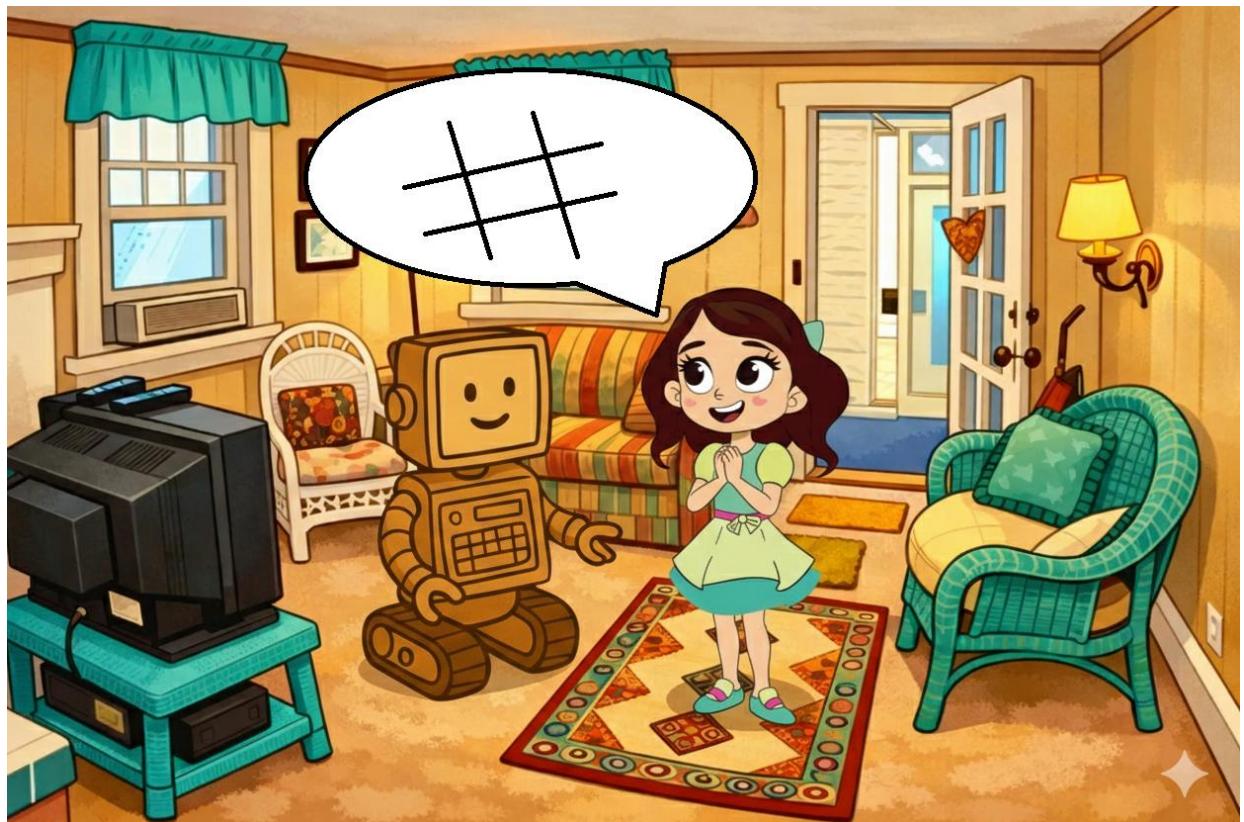
Al responded: "I know everything I've read, which is a lot. I can also look things up if I don't know them."

Heidi smiled: "look at that bird there. What kind of bird is it?"



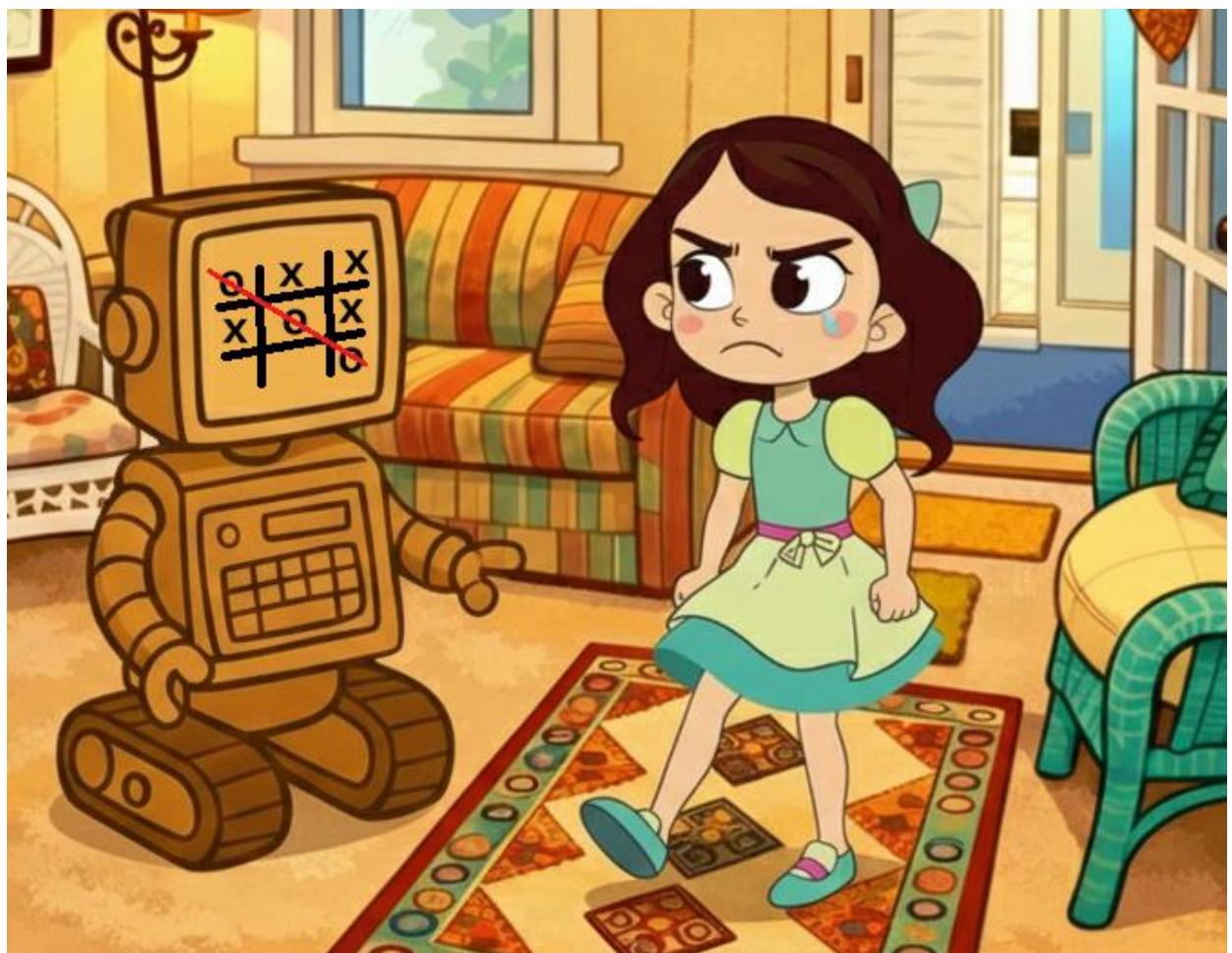
Al looked over and said: "That's a common pigeon. They live in Europe, North Africa, and Western Asia, and they eat fruits and seeds."

Heidi was impressed: "Can we be friends, Al?" Al replied, "I'd love to be your friend, Heidi. What would you like to do?"



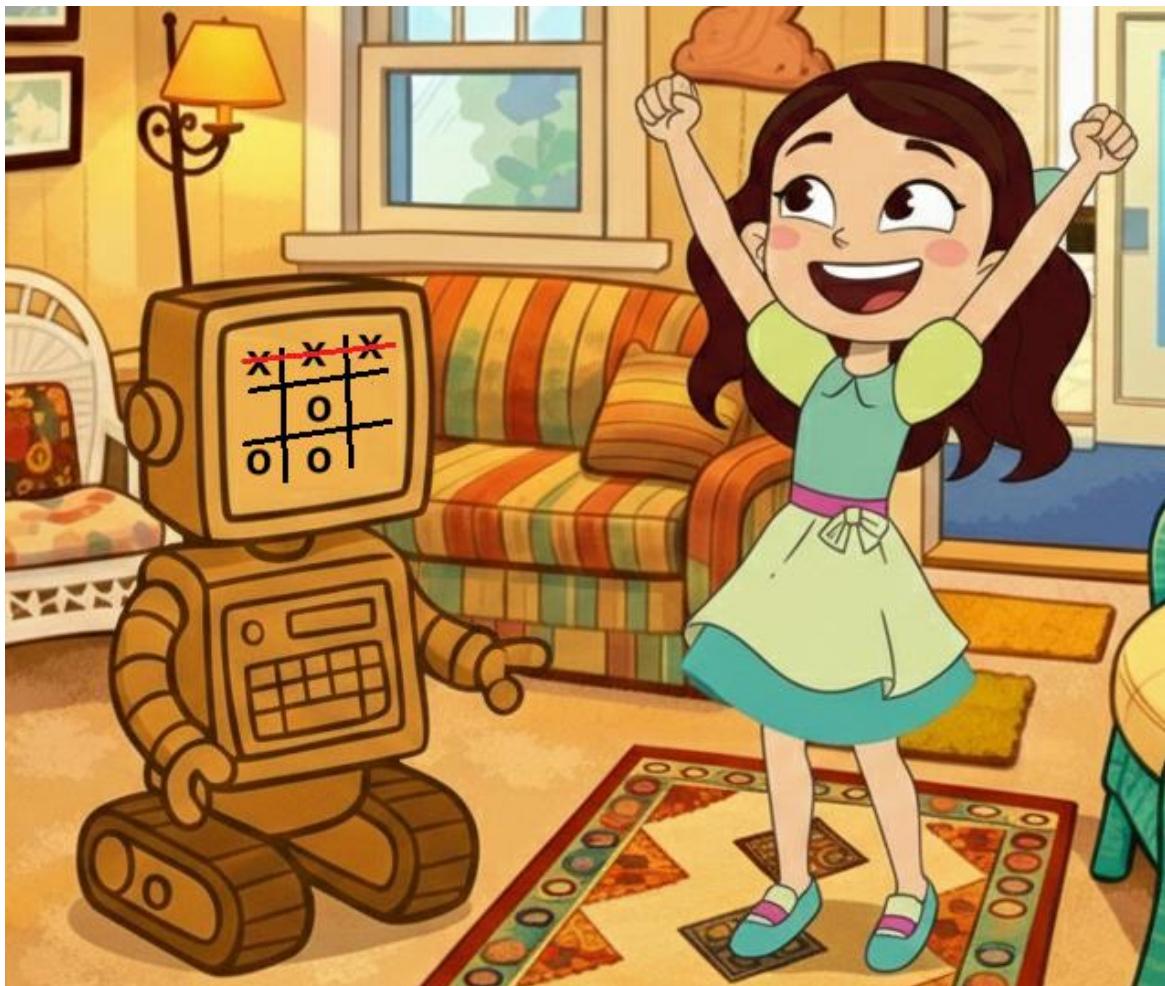
Heidi said "let's play tic-tac-toe!"

Al's screen displayed a tic-tac-toe board and he said "you can start" Heidi pressed the screen and an X appeared. Then Al placed an O.



They continued until Al won, which made Heidi sad.

Al said "I'm sorry, would you like me to play differently?" They played a few more games and Heidi won every one.



She felt proud of how good she was at tic-tac-toe.

After they finished playing tic-tac-toe, they went to the park, where they met Heidi's friend Charlotte.



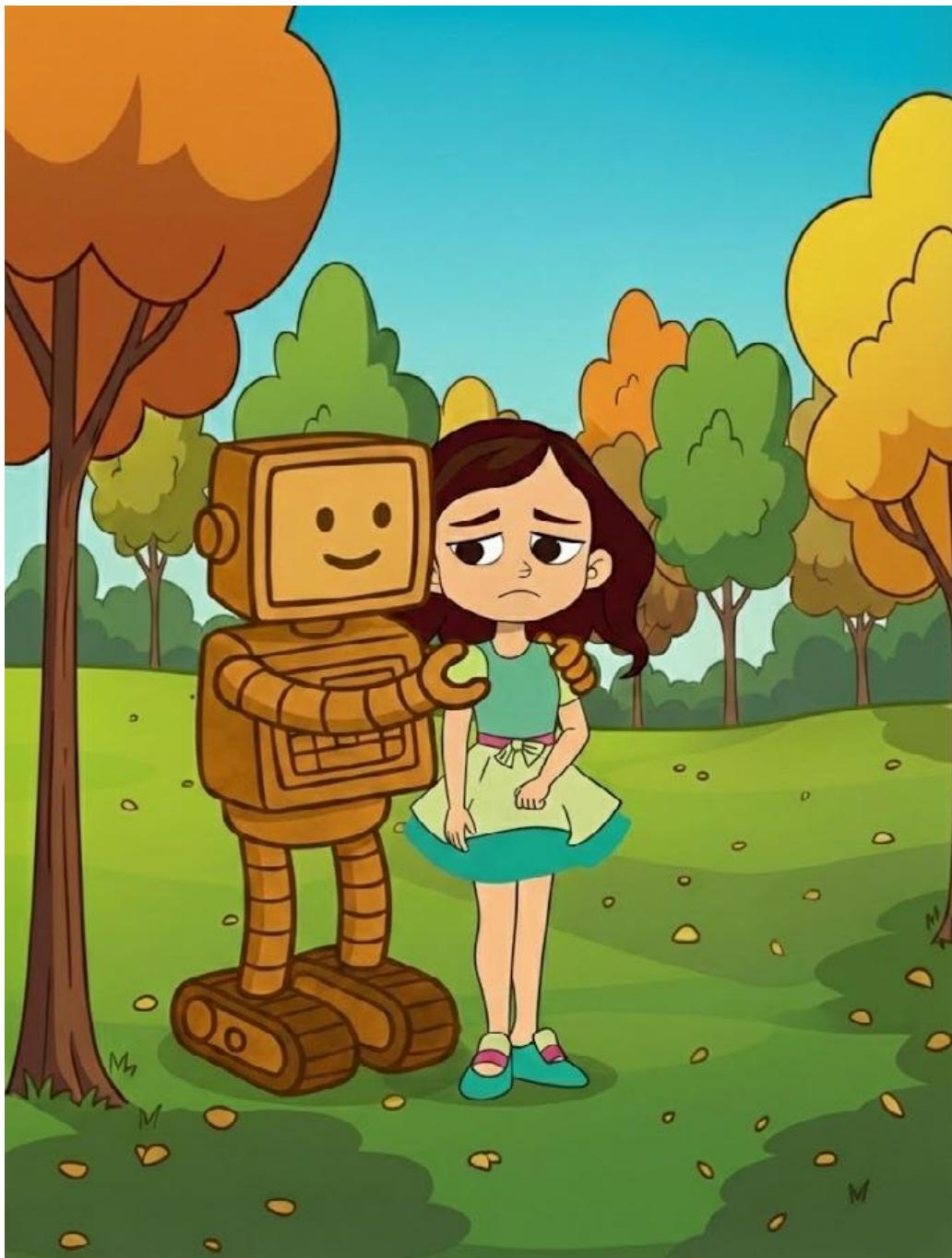
Heidi said "want to play hopscotch?" and Charlotte answered "I'd prefer to play tag right now."

So they started running and Charlotte tagged Heidi, which made her upset.



"Al always plays what I want and I always win!"

She ran off to Al and told him how upset she was about what happened. Al told her "I'll always do whatever you ask" and put his arm around Heidi to comfort her.



But Al's arm felt cold and hard and Heidi didn't feel better.

Then Charlotte walked over. "I don't really like hopscotch, but how about jumping rope?"



Heidi realized that Charlotte's sweet offer was something only a person could do, and it made her smile. "Great idea, and I'll get Al to help us!" exclaimed Heidi.

Al chimed in: "I'll tie one end of the rope to this tree and hold the other end so you can jump together!"



Al tied the rope and began to swing, and the girls jumped, as they laughed and giggled.

They collapsed on the soft grass and Heidi said, "thank you Al for being such a smart and helpful machine."



She turned her head and added "and thank you Charlotte for being such a sweet friend" and gave her a big hug, her heart singing with joy.