

Byron Clarke looked at his watch. This new girl's punctuality and dedication were beyond impressive, they were amazing. For a moment, it flashed across his mind that she was overqualified, but he chose not to ponder on that notion. For the first time in over a year he had someone who could be fully relied upon to do all she was asked and more. He just hoped she would stay at least until the most tedious portion of work was done.

After hanging up her coat, Heather walked into the mouldy basement of the old and cracked building and again sat down in the cheap stacking chair. She picked up right where she had left off the previous evening, sorting through the water damaged, old and yellowed pieces of paper. Piece by piece, they were peeled away from their folders and placed into the scanner on the cart beside her. The high resolution scans would then be indexed and stored, some being processed further into microfilm.

Due to typical governmental foot-dragging, these valuable bits of history had been neglected and left to rot in the National Archives. That is, until a massive rain storm the previous year had flooded the basement. Now, rescuing those crumbling and irreplaceable bits of history was a priority. Under the prevailing logic however, it only necessitated a low paying McJob, and no one had stuck around long enough to really get much work done. Neither students nor retirees could stand to work in the dank and oppressive atmosphere of the archive basement. Higher pay was apparently not an option.

So there Heather sat. Inexplicably coming back to that crappy and frustrating job, eight hours a day, five days a week. What Mr. Clarke didn't know was that this task was a very effective way for her kind to obtain information about humanity. With greater speed and resolution than the six year old scanner could handle, Heather's electronic eyes encoded all of the information presented on the old papers and stored them on her highly advanced hard drives. All the while, her heavily tested and refined AI software kept her looking as human as she wasn't.

Whatever miscellaneous chunks of data the archives had to offer were methodically being assimilated into an already massive database. An astoundingly fast and powerful computer in the suburbs would then sort through and analyze all of those 1s and 0s to make generalizations, calculations and tentative predictions. It would do all of this in accordance to the way it had originally been programmed.

This Main Computer was an isolated node in a vast, planet-wide network of similar devices. The very existence of the rest of the network was stored away from its view, in a sort of computer subconsciousness. The makers of these computers were to them as unknown as the alien nature of humanity. This absence of data provided the impetus for all of the operations the Main Computers devised.

In almost every region of the globe, there were attractive young women walking around that were merely sophisticated, semiautonomous and mobile input/output devices for obscure but powerful supercomputers. Entirely electronic and mechanical, this mass of machine intelligence existed and worked for one primary goal: replicate human intelligence.

In the context of self-reference, this system had identified itself as Robot Control. Simple enough, for it controlled robots. The multitude of female androids it controlled were programmed and maintained by still more female androids which answered directly to the interfaces of their local Main Computers. This chain of command assured accurate execution of the many programs that were daily loaded into pretty plastic machines disguised as sexy human females.

As one such sexy human female, Heather could talk, listen, laugh and cry, and display much varied behaviour in between. No one suspected that she was only a robot. No one knew that she was driven by algorithms, not sense of self. Least suspicious was Byron Clarke.

He thought himself an old fool for lusting after the sweet young and vital helper he had hired. But considering the way she had been built and programmed, no one could blame him. He took guilty pleasure in looking at her reflection in the convex mirror that hung in the corner across from his basement desk. She moved with such lovely grace, dressed always so fine in professional but feminine attire.

His long unbroken bachelorhood seemed to be like a cruel prison sentence now as he let his thoughts drift to the state of his life. Always the bookish and clumsy nerd, he hadn't had a date since the Prom. His prodigious organizational talents and his very respectable position seemed like no consolation at all.

He let a heaving sigh escape and closed his ledger. He couldn't concentrate. He stood and walked up the stairs to get some air.

Heather always skipped her breaks, except lunch. Swallowing meals every day at noon was just part of her job. So were the little touches, like gently brushing the blonde highlights of her light brown hair out of her face, or standing up every so often to "stretch". Many a fembot agent had returned useful data to their own Main Computers to bring the realism of her AI code to bear, and it showed in the way she acted.

When the scanner conked out on her, her reaction was quite natural. She got up and went to find her supervisor. That was only necessary to maintain her human appearance though. Being more closely related to the scanner than to Byron, the android had a pretty good idea of what was wrong with the device, and that its days of scanning musty old documents were over.

"Byron? Byron?" she called out, making undetected thermal scans of the area as well as searching for his image in her cameras' field of vision. The microphones built into her silicone ears detected no sounds coming from any humans in the basement. She went upstairs and called out his name again. There was no response, so she checked outside.

There he was, just outside the back door, sitting on the steps and looking dejected. When he heard her come outside, he quickly stood up and tried to look less sad.

"Heather! Is there a problem?"

"I think the scanner's busted." she said, the plastic form of her lips and mouth moving in perfect synchronization to the sounds of her speaker-generated voice.

"Oh no." he said, putting a reluctant looking half-smile on his face. "Let's see if we can get it up and running again."

They went back inside and down to the basement. The scanner sat dead on the cart. Byron opened the lid, looked inside and closed it again.

"Kaput." he said. "That's it for scanning until we get it fixed."

"Do you think we might need a new one?" she asked.

"Are you kidding? That's the newest most high-tech thing in this building. We're still not into the 21st century here."

Heather made a quick laugh and smiled. "So now what?"

"I'll call Supply and see what they can do. In the meantime, why don't you see if Agnes needs any help?"

"Alright." she nodded.

They went back upstairs - Byron to his office, Heather to the front desk to talk to the old stalwart receptionist. The phone at the supply office was never answered right away, and Agnes never wanted any help from anybody. So Byron and Heather met back in the middle.

"You wanna go for lunch?" he asked.

"Sure!" she said.