

"Have you ever been to that Vietnamese sub place down the road?" Byron asked as they went to grab their coats.

"No." Heather said. "Is it good?"

"Let's just say we're lucky it's not the noon hour yet, or we'd be in line for half an hour."

Byron told Agnes where they were going, and they were off. The sun melted away some of the late winter chill as they walked and talked together. Heather performed superficially well as a simulated human, laughing at puns and jokes and showing real looking interest in what her boss had to say.

The conversation turned friendlier than it ever had been between them. By the time they got to the sub shop, they were almost flirting. Almost. Byron didn't have the nerve to take it that far yet, and Heather just wasn't programmed for that kind of thing. Her function was to collect information.

Other agents of Robot Control were designed and built for romance and intrigue, but not this girl. If anything came up that was too hard for her processors to handle, it would just have to wait until the Main Computer at her house could figure something out.

Byron held open the door of the shop for his attractive helper while the little bells above jingled to signal their entrance.

A cute, slim Vietnamese girl behind the counter looked their way and said hello. She never stopped working, moving her experienced hands all across the sandwich table for the four customers waiting and salivating in line. The newcomers took their place and waited.

Mr. Clarke tried to impress Heather with his intellect, and she kept up - impressing him by downloading information and relevant details from the internet. Text and binary code swarmed her field of vision as she watched, listened and responded to her supervisor. She made fitting gestures and looked completely natural the whole time.

When it was their turn, Byron and Heather approached the petite lady and told her what they wanted. They watched and talked a bit more as she prepared it for them. The black-haired girl on the other side of the glass wasn't overly talkative, but she was very friendly nonetheless. Mr. Clarke paid for both stacked subs and drinks, and they went to sit down by the window.

The young lady behind the counter called out in Vietnamese to the back, and out came a smiling older man to take her place while she took a little break. She took off and discarded her plastic gloves, grabbed her purse, and emerged from behind the counter to walk down the short tiled hallway to the washroom.

As the door closed slowly behind her, she walked into the stall and latched the door shut. She unbuckled her belt, unzipped her pants and pulled them along with her panties down to her ankles. After sitting down on the toilet, she quietly reached into her purse and pulled out a folded down antenna. With those same experienced hands, she extended and unfolded the metal device until it stretched out to its full size. Then she grabbed her face by the cheeks and removed it from the rest of her head, exposing waiting connection ports amid all of the charged and complex circuitry. A short cord leading from the bottom of the antenna was plugged into its matching interface while she held the contraption directly in front of her exposed electronics.

Originating from a hard drive in her chest, a patterned, repeating pulse of heavily encrypted code was sent through her wires to the top of her android body and out through the antenna as a radio signal. From there it beamed through the walls and nearby buildings, bouncing around through the atmosphere until it reached an aerial in the attic of an inconspicuous city dwelling. It traveled down those wires and directly into a receiver connected to one of Fembot Command's Master Computing Devices.

The supercomputer's consoles lit up with a flurry of activity as it calculated the meaning of the data. One of its agents had detected an agent from Robot Control. Faster than a human being could even think of comprehending the signal, the Master Computing Device began making plans. Next to the active console, a robot named Natasha - identical in every way to all of the other robot technicians in Fembot Command's arsenal - stood motionless and ready to obey the computer.

Back at the busy sub joint, Byron and Heather were devouring their delicious spicy sandwiches, unaware that the young lady coming back to work the counter was recording their every word and action. Due to a lag in technological development, Heather had no way of knowing that the other girl was also a robot.

By default, all of the people that Heather interacted with were treated as human. Even the women back at the house which were obviously machines, and which she knew to be electronic devices like herself were shown as much courtesy as her programming could produce. She saw Byron with her stereo digital cameras and computed her actions based on his behaviour, the situation and the local environment.

Between tasty bites, he kept up the flirting as much as he could, but he was getting nowhere. By the time they were both done eating, he had fallen back to friendly chit-chat.

Upon finishing up their drinks, they stood up and put their coats back on. They smiled and thanked the fembot behind the counter, who smiled back and waved as she recorded all she could.

On the walk back to work, Byron found it hard to keep up the friendly banter. He was feeling a little rejected, but also a little stupid. The more he thought about it, the more he wondered just what he had let himself do. Not only was it inappropriate to hit on an employee, it was a very bad idea to do so when the age difference was so great. Byron was in his early forties, and the brown-haired robot had been built to look about 23. And he was lucky she didn't take offence to his come-ons, otherwise he could be out of a job.

When he entered the old archives building again, he couldn't help but feel as lonely as he had on the steps an hour before. He took a deep breath and tried to clear his head. He had almost forgotten that Heather was right behind him.

"Do you have anything you would like me to do?" she asked, looking at him with those pretty, like-like eyes.

Some lewd thoughts came immediately to mind, but he kept those to himself. "Well," he said, stroking his chin and looking around, "I can't think of anything you can do while the scanner's down, and I'm sure there are lots of things a pretty girl like you can do with an afternoon. Why don't you take the rest of the day off. Hopefully you can get back to work tomorrow."

Heather looked at him through finely machined glass eyes, hearing his words with her electronic ears, processing it all with the super fast silicon chips inside her plastic body. The only thing on her mind was going home and getting an early maintenance session and an extra long charge. Had

she been supplied with more advanced programming, she would have at least blushed at the compliment.

"Thanks Byron!" she said in cheerful mode. "See you tomorrow then."

She slung the strap of the purse that she held around her shoulder and walked out the door, saying goodbye to Agnes as she passed.

Byron hardly realised the pining look he had on his face when Agnes spoke up.

"Must be nice to have the administrator wrapped around your little finger." she said sharply.

"What?" Byron said, trying to laugh it off. "Can you think of anything else she could have done?"

Agnes rolled her eyes up to the ceiling and theatrically shook her head as Byron retreated to his office. Thankfully, he was occupied with trying to track down another scanner for the job. Through the rest of the afternoon, he hardly thought of what a fool he had made of himself. He was still busy as ever, and glad to be distracted.

That evening, after closing, he got in his car and listened to Mozart and Chopin on his way over to the technical institute. Three times a week he drove to the specialised technology school to encourage his newly found talent to blossom. On more than one occasion, his teachers had told him that he possessed a remarkable creative genius for computer programming. Long neglected since the days of tapping away at the keyboard of his old Sinclair, he had rediscovered it, and even found he still enjoyed figuring out difficult things for himself.

Diving headlong into complicated machine-language instructions was also an excellent diversion that helped keep his thoughts away from his dismal love life.