

Natasha went back to work on Melanie as Byron realised that pulling attitude would get him nowhere with these androids. He slowly walked over to the pair and watched what they were up to.

Natasha worked on the nearby console for a while, pressing buttons and flicking switches without even looking. Then she turned again to Byron's synthetic classmate and said "Melanie, please install and execute program QT314.G37."

"Yes Natasha." said the slim robot in the chair. Byron watched a blaze of flashing LEDs in her chest as her inner systems worked on the technician's command. He heard the harsh sounds of synthesized tones and beeping coming from the seated blonde as more and different lights flashed all around. After some final loud beeps of different pitch, Melanie announced "Program QT314.G37 installed and executed successfully."

Natasha asked "How do you feel Melanie?"

"I feel fine." she said.

Byron was struck by the strangeness of their interaction. "Why did you ask her how she feels? She's just a machine." he said to Natasha.

Natasha calculated the meaning of his words and formulated the standard reply. "Melanie will answer all of your questions. She will be ready soon."

Byron stood back and watched as Natasha unplugged Melanie and ordered her to rise from the chair.

Melanie stood up and immediately turned her attention to Byron.

"Hi, handsome!" she cooed, slinking over to him with her chest panel still open.

Byron stepped back. "Drop it." he said. "I didn't want you when I thought you were real, what makes you think I want you now?"

Melanie came to a stop, as if she was pondering hard upon the question. She kept looking at him while the electronic brain in her chest worked through the data necessary to formulate a response. She switched modes.

"Well," she said as she glanced down and closed her chest panel, "If you don't want to be called handsome, I'll just call you Byron."

"I should have figured you were a robot. You never had an original thought of your own."

Melanie wasn't bothered by the remark. "That's why you're here Byron." she said.

He looked back over to Natasha. She was standing at attention, completely naked and completely motionless. Her unbroken gaze went nowhere.

He looked once more to the table that held his beloved, or what he thought he had fallen in love with. It hurt him to know that she wasn't real. To him, it felt like Heather had died. The person his heart longed for just didn't really exist.

He looked back to Melanie. "What do you want me to do?"

"I'll show you. Follow me." she said with a friendly smile. She turned around and walked toward the sliding door. At that moment, the local ultra-robotic blonde-haired maid entered the room, bringing with her all those purely mechanical sights, sounds and smells.

Byron was a little creeped out by the stiffly moving imitation woman. The vision of such a clearly artificial female form dressed in such a sexy see-through outfit just didn't sit right with him. He stared at the shiny-skinned and graceless automaton as she pumped her robotic limbs in her machine-like strut around the room. His nostrils caught the sharp smell of plastic as the sounds of her servos and hydraulics mixed discordantly with the computerised tones and beeps that streamed loudly and constantly from her speaker and her insides.

Now even more unsettled, he quickly turned his sight back to Melanie and followed her out of the cold lab and up the stairs. As he tried to get the image of the robotic French maid out of his head, he couldn't help but think that Melanie was not much different.

The skinny lady led him through the huge kitchen to the main living room. Byron had passed this room before on his way to the lab as he followed Natasha.

Now, as he and Melanie got into the large, nicely decorated room, he noticed three computers set up close to each other in a large corner desk unit.

Melanie walked toward the machines.

"This is where you will work." she said, smiling at him and gesturing to the desk with her hands.

"Doing what?"

"We have some software we need you to work on."

"I'm no expert." he protested. "I doubt I can help you much."

"We think you can Byron. You are a creative genius." she said as she started to boot up all three computers. "I have been watching you since our classes with Ralph Sweet began."

"Like I said before, I should have guessed you were a robot."

She paused and looked back at him. "I am a very realistic simulation. It would have been almost impossible for you to know that I'm not a human being."

Melanie showed no kind of emotion in her face that Byron could recognise. He watched her as she went back to what she was doing.

"This is 'Project H'." she said as a complicated interface appeared on the screen. "It was developed to provide automation for heuristic processes."

"Heuristics? You mean like common sense?"

"Exactly." she said as she pulled out the rolling leather chair for him.

He gave her a grudging look and took the offered seat. All he saw in front of him were graphical links to different subroutines of some master program. Upon the monitor to his right soon appeared lines and lines of code. The screen on his left was just blank for now.

She continued. "Project H' was designed to run on desktop computers to provide better automation for business processes. The features of the program go far beyond that however. As a whole, the program can be configured to provide a basis for true artificial intelligence."

Byron was still too tense and shocked by what he was going through to make any sense out of what he saw on the screen. Even Melanie's explanation just went in one ear and out the other.

He rolled the chair away from the desk a bit and looked up at the blonde fembot. "You sound a lot smarter than you ever did before Melanie. Is that some new programming or were you just acting stupid before?"

His intent was to offend, but Melanie's circuitry and software didn't allow for that kind of thing. "I have been reprogrammed to function for this mission." came her matter-of-fact answer.

Byron stood up. "I can't do this." he declared.

"Yes you can, Byron." she said cheerfully, as if encouragement was all he needed .

"No I can't." he said in a loud plain voice. "I'm human. You fucking... things just can't expect to kidnap me and expect me to go to work on whatever it is you want me to do. You just can't."

Melanie's eyes stayed aimed at the human while she computed the words he had spoken and the way in which he had delivered them. She had no response for him before he spoke again.

"Let me go." he pleaded. "Please, you have to let me go."

Those words were easier for her programming to deal with. "We can not let you leave Byron. You must complete 'Project H'."

Byron looked at her and took a deep breath. "I can't argue with androids, can I?"

"You may argue with us Byron." she said.

He saw that she didn't get his point. He just shook his head and sat back down. Fortunately for him, the fembot realised he was distressed. She kept her plastic mouth shut for a while as he gained his composure again.

After almost a whole minute of silence, while a storm of stress raged inside his head, he looked up at the artificial woman and said "I can't do any work right now."

"Why not? Is there anything I can do to help you?"

"No. Look, I just can't concentrate on anything right now except being a captive, a prisoner. That's not pleasant. Do you understand?"

Melanie was silent for a few seconds. "I am not programmed to understand."

Byron shook his head again. "Do you... people intend to feed me? Have you thought about that?"

"All of your biological needs will be taken care of. You will be properly maintained."

Byron thought of all of the "biological needs" that the machines had surely missed. It just made him more mad. He looked up at Melanie and said "I can't work with you."

"Why not? My artificial intelligence is the best available to Fembot Command."

"I don't like you. That's why. I've never liked you Melanie. I like you less now that I know you're a robot. I will not work with you."

Melanie just stood there, calculating and computing to no avail.

"Why can't you get Heather up here? At least I like to look at her." he said.

Melanie ran the suggestion through her processors. "I am not programmed to make that decision."

"Who is? That naked girl, Natasha?"

Melanie looked at him with those vacant eyes and said "The Master Computing Device determines all of the programming for all of the Fembot Command units."

"Well, can you do anything at all about it? I won't work with you. I want to work with Heather."

Byron folded his arms after his statement, to give it an air of finality. Whether or not the stubbornly programmed humanoid machine in front of him got the message, he could only guess.

She blinked once then said "I will relay your request to Natasha. Please wait."

The Melanie robot walked out of the living room and down to the scanner as Byron waited and tried to calm his frazzled nerves.