

The lab in the basement had surely been soundproofed, Byron thought. As he sat and leaned back in the comfortable leather chair, he could only hear the hum of the three computers and the soft rumble of the house's furnace. So much the better for him. He had seen enough electronic circuitry for one day.

A long, lonely time passed after Melanie had gone back down to that basement lab. Byron found himself weeping at the hopelessness of his situation. And he hadn't even begun to cry at his broken heart yet.

There he sat, in someone - or something - else's house, with no escape and no hope of it. Outside, the sun was setting over only snow covered trees. He guessed the fembots were keeping him far away from other humans, and he was right. Heather had driven him quite far into the secluded wooded mountains, to a private cabin that served as this particular Fembot Command base.

Byron's wrinkled sleeves rubbed harshly on the swollen area under his eyes as his tears came down. The salty drops obscured the light that came into his tired eyes, and made things look worse than they were. Even so, he dared not think how things could possibly degrade any further.

Back in town, repeated calls by Agnes to the local hospitals had started suspicion that would soon turn into a full blown search operation. The morbid thought of his admittedly few friends panicking and searching the woods for his body made him collapse on the desk in a heart-wrenching sob.

He had several minutes alone to cry, and it did him a little bit of good. Not much, but after he had done it, at least the urge was more or less out of the way. With his eyes red and raw, he took some deep breaths and waited for someone, one of the robots, to emerge from the basement.

He waited for a long time.

When she had reentered the lab, Melanie had dutifully relayed Byron's words to Natasha, who then sent them as a digitised signal to the Master Computing Device. All the parameters of the situation had to be assessed before it decided whether or not to accede to the human's request.

He remained unaware of the specifics involved in that process, but up to a point he had a general idea of what was going on down there. But he still didn't know which electronic woman, or women would next walk up the stairs.

In the meantime, he had regained some of his calmness. He felt cold and hungry now more than anything. The presence of those base feelings in his mind gave his emotions a much needed chance to settle down. He watched the sky outside gradually darken while he waited for something to happen.

At last, one of the androids came up the stairs. Byron held his breath in anticipation, and sighed in relief as he recognised Heather walking toward him.

She walked calmly and stiffly up to where he sat. Her facemask had no display of emotion configured upon it.

"Hello, Byron." she said in a voice that was just as lifeless.

Byron stood up. "Heather..." he said as he put his arms around her. She didn't respond in any noticeable way to his touch. He pulled back and looked into her once vibrant eyes. He gently found and held her stiff mechanical hands.

"They reprogrammed you, didn't they?" he asked.

"Yes." was all she said. Her soft silicone lips showed neither a smile nor a frown.

Byron took a very deep breath and let it out again. "So, you're the one who's going to answer all my questions now?"

"Yes." she said again.

He looked for a long time into her eyes. "Heather, do you remember the times we shared together?"

"Yes. Memory files stored on my hard drives indicate the state of my previous mission. All of my interactions with you have been indexed."

Byron winced at the technical sound of her speech. "All the time we spent together, does any of that mean anything to you?"

Heather stood unmoving, then said "Your present query is too general. Please increase specificity."

Byron had to look away for a moment. "Never mind." he said.

Heather stayed still, looking at him and recording audio and video as well as data from the thousands of sensors in her artificial skin.

Byron looked back to her. "It probably doesn't mean anything now, but I fell in love with you Heather."

She just stared ahead, almost right through him. "That does not compute. Love is undefined."

He changed the subject. "I'm hungry, Heather." he said. "I'm tired too."

"Processing." she said. "I will show you where food is stored. Please follow me."

Heather turned and led Byron to the kitchen. He watched her womanly body as she walked. Everything about her now looked overtly artificial. Byron wasn't sure yet if it was better for him to have her this way or the way she was before.

She stopped in front of the large stainless steel double freezer. She opened one of the doors to display the contents to the human.

"These are frozen meals for you. You may use them when you think it is necessary."

Byron nodded as he looked at all the sameness inside. This side of the freezer was stacked full of only a few different varieties of the same brand. He couldn't stand the thought of actually eating one of those frozen entrees, but for now his hunger overruled his taste.

He grabbed a package off the top shelf and read the box. Heather stood by like a sentinel, holding the door open as the cold poured into the room. When Byron wandered off in the direction of the microwave, the robot closed the door and followed.

She said "To use the microwave..."

"I know how to use a microwave." he tersely interrupted. He managed to unwrap the frozen box and crumple the plastic up with his hand while he looked into her vacant eyes.

"I'm sorry." he said.

She didn't respond. He continued to prepare the meal for cooking while she watched in efficient silence. He started the big microwave and leaned up against the counter.

"No food for you anymore, eh?" he asked.

"I do not require food to function." she stated.

Byron felt like he was in a bad dream that wouldn't end. He looked at her pretty face, only a plastic cover to mask the electronics that kept him under constant surveillance. He still wanted the woman he thought she was before.

For a whole six minutes he just stared at that motionless silicone construction. The hum of the microwave oven and the intermittent popping of the preservative-laden food provided some of the only sound the whole time. When the oven's beeping indicated the end of the cycle, he said out loud the words that had bounced back and forth in his mind, amplifying themselves as they went. "I can't believe it."

He didn't touch the microwave. He just stood there, looking at Heather.

"That does not compute." she said after a pause.

He just shook his head and went to find a fork. She turned her head as he went through the drawers, following his motion with her cameras. When he had all he needed, he got the food out of the oven and put it down on the table.

"Can you get me a glass of water?" he said to the fembot, making sure his words could easily be understood by a machine.

"Yes." she said. She immediately reached in to a cupboard and pulled out a glass. She filled it up with cold water and brought it over to him at the table.

He mixed his steaming container of food for a while as she stood like a statue next to him. "You might as well sit down, Heather." he said.

The android calculated the meaning of his statement and pulled a chair out from under the table. She stiffly sat down with perfectly straight posture and watched him as he ate.

Neither of them spoke as he swallowed the meal. It tasted better than he had expected, but still nothing like what he could make for himself. The size of the portion also left him wanting, but it was enough for now.

After he had gotten the last bites down and drank the rest of the clean tasting water, he leaned back and looked at the pretty female android.

"So, you don't know what love is?" he asked.

"Love is undefined."

"I suppose you want help with that too?"

"Your task is to complete 'Project H'."

Byron folded his arms. "Tomorrow. I'll start that tomorrow."

Heather didn't respond.

"Heather, do you have any kind of... emotions, or... simulated emotions at all?" he asked.

"No."

"You used to though, didn't you?"

"Yes."

"Why did they take them out of your programming?"

"Unknown."

Byron rubbed his eyes and stood up. "I need a shower and a change of clothes." he said.

"Processing." Heather said. She made some computations and stood up too. "I will show you where the bathroom is. Please follow me."