

"Are you lonely here?" she asked as she took a seat at the big wooden table.

He paused on his way to the fridge. "Very lonely Heather." he said. The look on his face punctuated his statement in a way he was sure she missed. "I need company - someone to talk to."

"I'll do my best." she said. "If you finish Project H for us, I'll do even better." she promised.

"Don't worry about that, I'm working on it." he said as he got some things out of the cooler.

Melanie's programming too had been changed at Byron's request. She had started going into town regularly to buy real food for Byron to eat. Also, at his request, the skinny but good looking blonde android had gone back to Ralph Sweet's class to finish taking lessons and to start dating Dustin. Byron was still rather surprised that Fembot Command had gone along with that, but at least he had done some good for his former classmate.

Byron began to chop vegetables and grate ginger for his stir fry. The pan sat on the stove, taking its heat. He looked over to Heather again. She looked at him. He started to have doubts about making her this way again, but he reminded himself that it was necessary.

"Do you like lots of ginger or just a bit?" he asked.

"Umm," she said as she crossed her legs in a classy way and gently bit her lower lip, "I'll make your settings my settings."

While Byron deciphered what she had just said, she spoke again. "I'm sorry. Am I still too robotic for you?"

"Don't worry about it." he said. "I understand. Just be yourself Heather."

She stared back vacantly at him while he started to dump ingredients in the hot pan. They sizzled and steamed while he pushed the wooden spoon around to mix them. He concentrated on cooking until it was done. She didn't have anything further to say either.

"All done." he announced as he portioned out two plates full of the delicious looking meal and poured two glasses of milk. He tried to keep the smile on his face while he thought of how pathetic he was - trapped by robots and offering one of them food.

He sat down to enjoy his meal and again looked at Heather's pretty facemask. Despite being an android, her presence made him feel better. He knew that, and became more sure that he could form some kind of useful relationship with her, no matter how artificial it was.

"Thanks for making this Byron." she said with a smile as she picked up her cutlery and began to show off her updated programming.

"You're very welcome Heather." he said as he started eating too. "After lunch we'll go snowshoeing again. And this time you can enjoy it."

Heather was still for a moment while she searched the extensive databases in her memory. "I don't know how to enjoy snowshoeing," she said. "will you teach me?"

Byron was pleasantly surprised by her curiosity. "Of course." he said.

He wasn't exactly sure he knew how to teach enjoyment, but he would try. Heather already knew how to walk with snowshoes on. Every day since his capture they had strapped the large frames to their boots just as Heather had strapped a harness on Byron and chained him to her body. It was the only way the fembots would let their human outside. The same would happen today, but at least he could have a proper conversation with his attractive jailer.

When they finished eating, they left the dishes there for the maidbot to clean up and walked over to the closet by the front door. Heather fastened and locked the waist harness around Byron as he retrieved the snowshoes from inside. They got dressed in their winter coats and put on their boots while they talked about Byron's progress.

"I'm going to start on the data recollection algorithms today." he said as he knelt down to do up the straps over his boots.

"Aren't you going to wait for the test results to come back from the Master Computing Device?" she asked as she fastened her own straps.

"I don't think I need to, not to start anyway. I can plug in the exact values afterwards."

"You're doing a terrific job so far." she said as they stood up and got ready to exit, joined by the four foot vinyl covered chain between them.

"Thanks." he said. "It's nice to get a compliment for all my effort."

Heather showed him an inviting smile as they walked out and closed the door behind them. The human led the fembot out upon the heavily piled snow around the remote cabin, pointing at the trees nearby.

"See those trees?" he asked.

"Yeah?" she said.

"Well, they look beautiful, the way they're all covered with all that snow." He waited for a response as they trudged onward. "Do you understand?"

"Not really." she replied finally, sounding uncomfortable to admit it.

"Don't be embarrassed." he said. "I think even humans need to learn to appreciate beauty."

"Beauty is undefined." she said.

The sounds of their steps and their breaths were the only sounds around for miles as Byron thought about that. "It is for me too." he admitted.

They walked a while in silence until they came to the snowy edge of a ravine.

"I don't know if I know what beauty is, but I know it when I see it." he said as they stood in front of the view.

"Do you think you could write an algorithm for that?" she said, her foggy breath created by vapour pumps located behind her silicone face, inside her electronic head.

"I don't know. I'll try." he said.

"If you do, then I can look at beautiful things with you." she said.

He looked at her face for a while. The sophisticated electronic mask that covered her circuitry had changed colour in certain areas to match the way his own face had been affected by the cold. Her big long eyelashes fluttered as her eyelids made natural looking blinking motions.

"You're beautiful, Heather."

"Thanks." she said. She blushed. "Am I as beautiful as the trees?"

"You're more beautiful. And in a different way too." Byron said. He quickly remembered the chain around him, and just what he was chained to. He changed the subject again.

They talked about Project H some more as they wandered over the growing layer of white on the ground. He managed to get a good 45 minutes of exercise out of it before they got back to the well-hidden cabin.

Happy to be back indoors, Byron took off his outer wear while Heather released him from the nylon snare. She put the gear away for him while he relieved himself in the washroom.

There was a warm and radiant fire going strong in the big fireplace in the living room. Dusk had settled over the woods, and the maidbot had earlier drawn the thick drapes closed over the big insulated windows.

Byron poured himself a half glass of port, then went back and poured a second one.

"Heather," he called to the other room, "why don't you join me in the living room?"

"Okay." she called back.

He placed her glass on the coffee table and sat down on the plush sofa. He waited for her to emerge. She looked so good in the soft light that he had to remind himself she was a machine.

"I poured you a glass." he said as she sat down next to him.

"Thank you." she said as she sat down beside him.

He held his glass out as she picked hers up from off the table.

"Cheers." he said.

She looked at him for a moment. "What?"

He let out the slightest chuckle. "Hold your glass like this."

Heather did what he had said. He brought his glass close and touched the rim to hers, making that friendly clinking sound.

"Now say cheers." he instructed.

"Cheers." she said with a warm smile.