

There was an uncomfortable silence after Anya's statement. Only the radio and the car engine made any sound as Mike and Tammy looked at each other.

Mike thought fast, and flicked the switch to lock all the car doors. He looked over at Tammy and said "Keep driving."

This wasn't how he had expected to meet any additional fembots. A novel situation of helping out two fellow travelers had turned into one where danger lurked.

Friend or foe? Mike wasn't sure about Heather, and he had no way of knowing.

He turned around in his seat and stared meanly at Byron. "Shut her off."

Byron protested. "No, wait, I can explain."

"Shut her off or Anya will." he warned.

Heather looked back and forth between Anya, Mike and Byron. She looked confused, but composed.

"Anya's a robot too." Mike added as he looked unflinchingly into Byron's eyes. "She's very strong."

Byron leaned over to his love as sweat trickled down his forehead. "I'm sorry dear." he said as he took off his gloves and unzipped the front of her jacket.

Mike had a tremble of nerves come over him as he thought that this hitchhiker might pull out a weapon instead. He watched apprehensively as Byron exposed and opened Heather's chest panel. It looked just like Tammy's, and just like Anya's except there was something plugged in to one of the connection ports. When the red power button inside was pushed though, it had the same effect.

Heather froze in position, looking into Byron's eyes.

"Please, don't hurt her." he pleaded. "She's all I have."

Mike found it hard to keep looking tough and mean after seeing another man's display of love for an android, but he kept the pressure on. "What were you doing out on the highway?" he asked. "And don't lie to me, or Anya will punish you."

Byron glanced over to the pretty brunette, now pushed into the role of enforcer. She stared back with a familiar expression - empty and cold.

"We just escaped from a bunch of robots. They call themselves Fembot Command. I was kidnapped, and I took Heather with me."

Mike looked at Byron for a while as he thought about that. "Anya," he said, "he's not a robot too, is he?"

"My scans indicate that this man is not a renegade robot." she said emotionlessly.

Mike looked back to Byron. "Why were you kidnapped?" he said, continuing his interrogation.

"I'm a programmer." he said. "The robots wanted me to finish some AI programming that they couldn't."

Mike looked at Anya, only to visually remind Byron that he'd better be good. "How did you escape?"

Byron took a full breath and explained "I connected a specially programmed laptop to Heather, which overrode her programming. I made sure she would obey only me, and that she wouldn't alert Fembot Command when I tried to escape. We went out snowshoeing like we did every day, only today we never went back."

Mike thought about what he was saying. Could it be that both of these human males were on the run from Fembot Command? If that was true, did Mike want Byron around?

"What exactly did you plan on doing once you got away?" Mike asked.

"I planned on going back to Ottawa, and of course, calling the police."

Mike looked for a moment at the deactivated Heather robot, who still had her head facing Byron's way.

"You seem to care a great deal about her." Mike said.

Byron didn't care to admit it, but he did. "I've fallen in love with her." he said. "I didn't think it was possible, but I did."

"And what do you think would happen to her if you showed her to the police?"

Byron was silent as the car rumbled on the rough surface of the snow and ice covered road. "I hadn't thought of that."

"I'll let you in on a little secret. I'm on the run from Fembot Command too. I thought about going to the police too, but I realised that if I did..." he paused as he looked to the machine driving the vehicle, "I'd never see Tammy again."

Byron looked at Tammy as well. "Is she... also a robot?"

"Yes." Mike said. He softened his harsh tone now. "These girls are far beyond anything in robot technology today. They would be confiscated, as evidence of course, but I would lose the woman I love."

Byron saw something in Mike's eyes as he said that. The more things he found they had in common, the less hostile he was to Byron.

"I feel about Tammy the way you feel about Heather. It's not so strange."

Outside the fast moving car, highway signs and the occasional billboard went by, showing the signals of civilisation on the road ahead.

Inside Byron's head, as in side Mike's head, were thoughts of the most special moments they had shared with their automated companions - those moments when computer generated behaviour had transcended its form and become acts of trust and love.

"Mike," Byron said, "can I reactivate Heather please?"

"Not yet." Mike said. "There are probably fembots coming after you right now, and she might have a homing device inside her or something."

"I'm pretty sure she doesn't." Byron said. "I worked on her for a month. I've seen her inside and out, and I know there's nothing like that inside her."

Mike mulled that over. He knew he wouldn't want Tammy shut down like that. "What's inside that metal case?" he asked.

"That's, um, replacement fluid cartridges for Heather." he said.

Mike nodded. He understood the desire to bring a case like that along. "Okay. Now, you're also certain Heather's loyal to you and not Fembot Command?"

"Absolutely." he affirmed. "As long as she stays plugged in to my laptop, she's completely devoted and obedient to me."

"Where is the laptop?"

"It's strapped to her back."

"If the fembots kidnapped you to program for them, why didn't you just reprogram Heather directly?"

"She has built-in safeguards against that. Besides, every morning she got hooked up to a huge supercomputer that did all sorts of scans on her, and I would have been found out."

Mike considered what had happened to that point. "What do you plan on doing then? Do you still want to go back to Ottawa? Because if you do, and if you want to keep Heather with you, you'll have to hide her."

Byron thought about it, and knew that Mike was right. He couldn't tell the police what had really happened. They would only believe him if he showed them Heather, and then they would surely take her from him. "I don't know yet. Where are you three going?"

"We're just moving around from town to town. We're going nowhere in particular." he answered.

"Can we stay with you until we decide?" Byron asked. He was talking as if Heather would have some say in that decision.

"I guess so." Mike said. "You might even be safer with us. As you can see, Anya can detect androids, although she's not very diplomatic about finding them."

Anya's facial display didn't change at the dig. It was doubtful she even got the meaning.

"Will you let me reactivate Heather then?" he asked.

Mike was silent as he considered letting the desperate hitchhiker turn his companion back on. He tried to think if there was some kind of dire risk involved that he was missing.

"Heather will be no danger to you, you have my solemn word." Byron said.

"Okay then. Reactivate her." Mike said. "But if anything goes wrong, Anya will shut her off again." He looked at Anya to see if she understood, but couldn't tell by looking at her expressionless face.

"Thank you so much." Byron said. He reached out and gently pushed in the red power button built into his woman's chest.

She made a few beeps and some barely audible clicking sounds as she turned her head to face forward. "Heather robot number 742655A-FC activated." she said computer-like. "Loading peripheral extensions.... loading.... loading.... "

She snapped into her human act and looked curiously around. "What happened Byron?" she asked as she looked at him and grabbed his hand.

"Mike and I had a discussion." he said. "They're going to help us get away."

"Where are we going?" she asked, with as much innocence as a computer could have.

"We'll find out." he answered.