

Maria, the one that had been active for only a minute or so, walked mindlessly through the hallways and levels of Robot Control Zero to a destination that had just been programmed into her. She passed a few naked maidbots shuttling through the halls on her way. Not once did any of these machines greet or even look at another, for that would be a waste of battery power and processor time.

The Maria unit walked with bare but durable plasticised silicone feet down the final corridor of her journey. She stopped in front of a door that was just like all the others. Behind this one however were the only two biological beings in the entire complex.

The door locking mechanism received a signal from Maria's chest, and opened the heavy stainless steel doors for the pretty device. Byron and Mike turned to look right away.

They both somewhat recognised her. Byron knew what she was by the way she wore nothing, by her rigid unnatural posture, and by the blank look set upon her facial apparatus. Mike remembered that face from the image on Tammy's laptop on the night they had met.

Maria scanned the room, immediately detecting the two warm humanoid shapes inside and calculating correctly that she had found the humans. Her CPU sent electronic pulses to her speaker, which came out of her moving plastic mouth as words.

"Human unit Byron." she said at the same time as she slowly pivoted her neck to look at him.

He stood up straight and tried to sound strong. "That's me."

"You will finish Project H." she vacantly said. "You will finish experimental artificial intelligence software for the Heather unit. Your existence will be sustained."

There was a second or two of silence and stillness. Byron and Mike looked at each other. Maria's entrance and communication had raised more questions than it answered.

"Follow me." Maria said. She turned around like a machine would and made some steps.

Just like last time a technician had asked Byron to follow, she processed clues from the constant stream of audio data to calculate that he hadn't yet moved.

She turned around again, her synthetic nipples jiggling slightly. "Human unit Byron, follow me." she said.

This time she waited until he started walking before she went on her way. Byron looked at Mike. He didn't know what to say.

He followed the naked woman and her exposed recharge port out of the holding cell, and looked back at Mike again.

Mike spoke up. "Maria..." he called out.

The robot stopped and methodically turned around again. She aimed her optical sensors at him and waited for him to finish his verbal data transfer.

"What about me?" he said.

"You are the human unit Mike." she said, more as a statement than a question.

He answered anyway. "Yes."

"Your existence will not be sustained." she said coldly.

Byron looked again at Mike as the robot led him away. They said nothing more to each other, but both saw helplessness in the other's eyes.

With finality, the door slid closed after that. Mike could barely hear footsteps walking away. He stood there for a very long time, mulling over his sudden death sentence.

Byron couldn't believe what had just happened either. After following Maria for a few metres, he stopped.

"Maria," he said, taking a cue on her name, "what do you mean Mike won't be sustained?"

She again stopped her smooth walking movements and turned around to face Byron. "The human unit Mike will not be sustained." she said.

"Why not?" he demanded.

Maria's processors zeroed-in on the meaning of those two words, referencing them with the contents of his previous statements. She sent a signal through the air to the nearest Main Computer terminal, asking it how to respond.

She stared with perfect emptiness at Byron for a moment while the Main Computer relayed its instructions back to her.

"Access denied." she said. "Follow me."

Byron started walking again. He was starting to feel sick to his stomach. He felt like a coward for not doing more.

He stopped walking again.

Just like she had done before, Maria came to a halt and turned around to look at him. "Follow me." she repeated.

"No." he said. He crossed his arms against his chest and tried not to look as scared as he was.

The emotionless technician was not equipped with the software to deal with this situation. She looked back at him, not moving at all while she sent digital requests for help to the Main Computer.

"You can't let Mike die." Byron said. "I won't help you if you do."

Maria was listening, as her microphones were 'on' and recording audio data, but her processors were not actively computing what he said. She kept right on staring that glassy-eyed machine stare at him, sending constant updates of the situation to the powerful supercomputer all around them.

The Main Computer deliberated as efficiently as it could, but it was still at a loss as for an ideal solution. After sorting through thousands of permutations and combinations of data from Maria, it fell back on a tactic that had always been effective before.

The soulless computer acted fast, only seconds after Byron's last statement, but it took a while for him to see the results of its next move.

He heard familiar motorised whirring sounds again. A maidbot was approaching. He looked around, but couldn't yet see it. Then he heard the servos and beeping coming from another direction. There was more than one.

He was getting very afraid now. He looked repeatedly from left to right and back to Maria's perfectly unmoving face. He saw one maidbot turn the corner toward him, then the other come from behind. They weren't very quick, but they were unstoppable.

They went on either side of him and clutched his arms tightly with their strong metal hands. Byron was nearly in a state of panic.

"Follow me." Maria said, exactly as she had before.

She turned around and started walking. The twin maidbots followed, moving clumsily but deliberately after her. They forced Byron along with them.

He couldn't shake the feeling that he had let Mike down now. He racked his brain to see if he could think of a way to get him out of that cell. He came up with nothing.

He could barely think straight now any way. There was no escape. Those two naked women, so clearly and horribly artificial to him, held him fast in an unbreakable grip.

Every inhuman beep and whirr their computerised and mechanical parts produced made his soul sink further. It mattered little to him whether these women were the products of Robot Control or Fembot Command. He was back to being a prisoner, outgunned and outnumbered.