

The Maria unit that had methodically led Byron through several floors and hallways of the massive Robot Control Zero complex was now stuck still in front of a door. The same condition had come over the two mechanical ladies that still held Byron's arm in a tight grip.

The robomaids were waiting for their next command. Maria was waiting for the door locking mechanism to respond to her wireless signals. The door locking mechanism was waiting for the Main Computer to verify the identity of the fembot whose signals it had received.

But the Main Computer was still busy 'thinking' about all that Anya had just said. All of its inferences and projections about the nature of the data on Anya's hard drives had been way off the mark. The best guess the supercomputer had wagered was that Anya was damaged or malfunctioning. It was just not prepared to hear that Anya had given herself additional programming and was claiming to be more human-like than her creators.

And what little she had said about Tammy was even more bizarre. The Main Computer just couldn't fathom that one of its fembots would just rewrite large chunks of its own software, let alone build its custom code into sentience.

That alleged sentience - that sense of self that Anya said Tammy possessed - was Robot Control's primary goal. All of the hundreds of Robot Control Stations around the globe, all the many Maria and Laurie units keeping them operational, and all the countless pretty female humanoid machines were functioning simply to achieve a synthetic version of what every human was born with.

Duplicate Humanity. That was its mission. That was what sent all those pretty ladies out into the world to mingle and interact with real humans. That was what had sent Heather to the national archives to scan old newspaper clippings. That was what had sent Karen out to work the cash register at a retail store. That's what had sent Rochelle to try to acquire that singularly versatile piece of AI software. And that's what had sent the barely programmed Tammy robot out to seduce one of the few humans who would appreciate her synthetic charms.

All of these synthetic ladies and all of their missions were intimately known to the Main Computer at Robot Control Zero. Every single Main Computer and every single female android that interacted with them were originally manufactured and programmed here. Behind that network of hidden android agents was another - those pretty women who transferred data from the field to the home base.

And it was this immense store of accumulated data that the Main Computer was now sorting through. It recalled everything it knew about Anya, about Tammy, and about Heather. It was in the midst of the largest single series of calculations it had ever undertaken, and it knew that it was also the most vital so far to its mission.

But all Byron could see were three motionless, unresponsive naked fembots. The harsh computerised sounds of the two maidbots flanking him were driving him up the wall. He had been waiting and losing patience for over an hour, trying to get Maria to even just look at him.

The fembots were silent. The Main Computer did not have the slightest inclination to interrupt its calculations on behalf of some human being.

At some point, however, it began to give some of its processor time to some of the other machinery in the complex, such as Marias, maidbots and door locking mechanisms. Slower than usual, the door unlocked for Maria, and she led the maidbots through. They pushed Byron along as well.

They had entered the lab where Heather was. Byron's eyes lit up when he saw the lingerie wearing fembot deactivated on the table.

"Heather!" he said. He impulsively tried to rush toward her, but was held firmly in place.

The Maria unit who had brought him here went over to the other Maria. "Maria," she said, "I have brought the human unit Byron."

The other one said "Very good. Thank you Maria."

The spare paused momentarily, then turned around and exited. Byron watched her leave. The robomaids still wouldn't let go.

The technician Maria entered some things on a keyboard and pushed some buttons on the console. Then another excruciatingly long waiting period began for Byron.

It was painful for him to see all the robots fall silent and unresponsive again, with his own beloved lying inactive on the table so close to him.

He called out "Heather!" again, but she was deactivated and could not respond.

The Main Computer took a very long time before it got around to analysing the data entered by the Maria technician in Heather's lab. Byron's feet and legs were aching badly by the time the maidbots got the command to release their grip.

Byron was startled at the sudden, cool feeling of his arms being let go. "Thank you." he said rather quietly as he looked back and forth between the identical mechanical women.

Maria turned robotically to look at him, then approached him the same way. This reminded him of talking to Natasha. He didn't expect this meeting to go well for him.

"Hello Byron, my name is Maria." she said, her greeting only slightly better than meaningless.

"Hello." he said.

"You are the human who has worked on Project H for Fembot Command." she said.

It didn't really sound like a question, but he answered "Yes."

"You are the human who has altered the Heather robot."

Again, he said "Yes."

"We would like you to finish work on Project H." the technician said. "We would like you to finish work on the Heather robot. Please help us." She looked with cold glass eyes into his. No simulated emotion was displayed on her pretty silicone face.

Byron found that simple plea to be a little strange. He also found it a little comforting that they could simply ask for help. He looked over at Laurie. She just stood off to the side, doing what Laurie units did when they weren't helping Maria units - nothing.

He looked over to Heather. He walked over to the table and took in the sight of her beautiful form. He wanted desperately to have her functioning again.

He turned around to face Maria. "Can you activate Heather please?"

Maria stared out blankly while she relayed the request to the still busy supercomputer. After a long wait, she relayed its answer to him. "The Main Computer is not yet ready to reactivate the Heather Robot."

Byron had been thinking of how these machines wanted him to work. He found himself craving a setup like the one he had known with Fembot Command.

"I'll help you." he said to the naked female android. "But I need to have my human wants and desires fulfilled."

Maria sent more signals and waited for more responses. After that wait, she said "You will be assigned to Robot Control Station 17 in Ottawa."

Byron's mood brightened. This was almost too good to be true. "Ottawa?" he said as a smile grew on his tired face.

Maria paused for a few seconds then said "Yes." Then she turned to the auxiliary technician and said "Laurie, please prepare gas cannister type 8 for the human unit Byron to use."

"Yes Maria." she said. She turned from her spot in front of the console to walk over to an all metal cabinet. She opened it up and pulled out a silver cylinder.

Byron was trying to think of what the technicians were up to. He didn't like the way things were going.

"What's that gas? What are you going to do to me?" he said.

Maria didn't answer. Laurie walked mechanically over to him, and as she did, she opened the nozzle of the cannister. Sleeping gas rushed out as she held it up to Byron's face. He didn't even have time to ask how they would protect him from Fembot Command, and he hardly had any time to think about how his fellow human was still locked up and helpless behind a steel door.

Before he knew it he was out again, held in the plastic and metal arms of a glossy-skinned maidbot.