Paradigm Robotics

by andlat

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The Costume Box
2023

Chapter 1

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Thoughts of the upcoming Little League season occupied Peter's thoughts as he wandered the halls of Paradigm Robotics, getting further and further from the lobby. He always signed up for Little League, but his team was never any good. All the same, he knew his parents approved of him getting fresh air and exercise and all that. Plus he made friends for gaming, didn't he?

"Closed door after closed door." He muttered. What was the point of going with his mom to a robotics company if he just had to sit in the lobby while she interviewed the CEO for the news? He had imagined it would be exciting, but this place looked as boring as his dad's accounting firm.

He sighed and turned to go back to the lobby, but noticed that one door was slightly ajar.

"Room 105. How thrilling." He muttered, but he figured a peek inside might be more fun. He poked his head in. No one was there. Almost out of instinct, he flipped a light switch and saw that the room was mostly empty, except for a hulk of machinery right in the middle of the room. His eyes widened. There it was, a real live robot! Well, live was not really the right word, but he did not care. He stepped further into the room. He could at least touch it and then he would tell all his friends about it, exaggerated and made more exciting, of course.

His scuffed up sneakers squeaked on the tiled floor as he walked toward it. It did not seem to be on, though it would be in his retelling to his friends. All the same, the blood pounded in his ears as he got closer. What if it did come online and attack him? Mom had said they made all kinds of robots here, including ones for war. It had been cool to think about, but now that he stood in front of what he was growing more and more confident was a killbot, it seemed like a terrifying thought.

"Don't be a chicken." He said to himself. He yelped and nearly tripped over his shoelaces as the robot's monitor suddenly shot up so that its simulated eyes met his. It spoke, but its voice was so strange that Peter did not hear what it had said, just that it said it in a weird voice. Mechanized, but also trying to have human warmth. "Uh"

"I said hello, little girl." It said, making a noise approximating a chuckle.

"Little girl?" The thing was busted.

"Correct. A juvenile female." The robot replied amiably. "You are a little girl, aren't you?"

"No!" He snorted derisively, walking around the robot to get a good look at it. It looked really awesome, but the stuff it was saying was really weird. He would just make up new things for it to say in his story to his friends, he decided.

"Little girls must not yell." The robot replied.

"That wasn't really a yell hey!" The robot grabbed Peter's

wrist. Its grip was firm, but gentle.

"Promise to be a good little girl."

"What? I am not a girl! Look at my hair!" He snarled, trying to pull his hand away from its claw. "You ever seen a stinking girl with hair like this?" The robot studied him and he knew he had stumped it.

"Little girls must not swear." It said thoughtfully as if it was some great truth. "You are correct." It said in that same mechanical, but warm tone. Why did it creep him out so much? "We will start with your hair."

"Start with my? What are you doing?" The robot began to run a brush through his hair, which seemed ridiculous with how short it was. "Stop! I'm not a fugging girl!"

"Little girls must not swear." The robot announced.

"Well, I'm not a little girl! I'm a dude!"

"A dude?"

"A boy! I have, y'know, boy parts."

"You are a little girl." The robot replied matter-of-factly. "And little girls must be punished for swearing." It easily overpowered him, bending him over and smacking his bottom with a paddle.

"What? Stop that! That hurts!" The paddle itself did not hurt as much as being forced to bend over, but Peter tried to get free all the same.

"Promise to be a good little girl?" Peter had to be imagining it, but there was almost a teasing tone to the robot's voice.

"I am not a girl!" He yelled, yanking his arms free from its clutches. He stumbled away, not even daring to blink as he stared it down. Unfortunately, the robot stood between him and his escape. He had to figure something out.

"Come here, young lady." The robot said, brandishing the paddle threateningly.

"No chance!" Peter darted to the left, but then quickly switched to the right, hoping to trick the robot. It worked. He slipped around the robot and was nearly to the door when he stepped on his shoelace and fell to the tiled floor with an oomph. The robot all but pounced, lifting him to his feet.

"Are you hurt, little girl?" It asked.

"No, I" he stammered. "I'm not a little girl! Let me go!" The robot ignored him, examining his knee and placing a Barbie bandage on it where he had scuffed it when he fell. "Let me go!" He demanded again.

"Little girls must not yell." The robot declared, giving his bottom a smack with its paddle.

"God, you love that stupid thing."

"Little girls must not swear."

"Stupid is not a swear word!" The robot kept hitting him with the paddle.

"Promise to be a good little girl?"

"No!" The robot paddled him again. By now, he had realized it was less about pain and more about annoying him into good behavior. Well, he would never give in. "Let me go! Don't you have some kinda shut down command?"

"That requires administrator access."

"Adminy-what? What's that mean?"

"Mommies and daddies can shut down the system. Little girls cannot." The robot whirred. "Proceeding with caretaking procedures."

"Stop!" Peter yelled as the robot snapped into action.

He had no idea what triggered it, but all at once, the machine began to cut the clothes off of him. Even his sneakers were shredded, which struck him as especially unfair.

"See? Told you I'm not a little girl!" Peter exclaimed, yelping as the robot's only response was to smack his now bare bottom with a paddle before dressing him in delicate pink rhumba panties and a matching training bra. Peter did not know why, but the idea of wearing a bra made him blush more than the panties themselves. He squirmed out of both embarrassment and a determined effort to get free of the robot, even if his boy clothes lay in tatters on the tiled floor. "No, no, not a dress!" He complained as the machine pulled a white sundress with lots of yellow flowers all over it over his head. If Peter had been more detail-oriented, he might have noticed that, despite being pink, his training bra had

scrumptiously lacey white straps to perfectly accent the white and yellow straps of the sundress. He also might have discovered that the dress fell to just the right length that the pink bandage just below his knee remained visible. All the helpless boy noticed, however, was the large white cylinder descending down to cover his entire head.

Peter remained in the dark for what felt like an hour being poked and prodded. He felt like his hair was being pulled in every direction at once as small appendages covered his face smothered in cream after cream. Worst of all, he could hear the robot right in his ears, whispering to him that he was such a pretty little girl, a good little girl.

"Ugh!" Peter exclaimed, wincing as the cylinder finally came off. The room seemed so bright now and he had to squint until his eyes could adjust. The robot patiently waited until he could see again before holding up a mirror. Peter gasped in horror. It took him a moment to even recognize himself. His hair was long and curly now, framing a face that was his, but not. He did not think he was wearing much make-up, but his eyebrows had been tamed and the creams had made his skin softer. Tears flowed down his glowing cheeks as the robot eased the defeated boy's feet into a pair of white sandals, completing his outfit.

The door opened and Peter froze as a stranger walked in. She wore a lab coat and was studying a clipboard that seemed to be overflowing with papers. She murmured to herself, but then stopped. Suddenly aware that she was not alone, she looked up and gasped as she saw him and hurried over.

Reaching behind the head of the robot, she turned it off and helped remove the claws that held his wrists.

"Well, you've had quite the adventure, haven't you?" She said with a chuckle. Still fighting back tears, Peter could only nod. The scientist looked him up and down. "Hmm, well, no worse for the wear. It's a good thing you didn't stumble across one of our home defense robots. Those can really hurt you!" She smiled and patted his shoulder. "My name's Dr. Gallagher. C'mon, my office is right down the hall. We'll get you a drink of water, kay?" Peter nodded and followed her, almost breaking down again as he felt the unfamiliar sensations of the dress and his hair moving with him.

Peter sat in her office, rubbing at his eyes with the heel of his hand as Dr. Gallagher brought him a Dixie cup of water from the employee lounge.

"Here you go." She said. Peter sipped at it. "So, I take it you were just exploring?" Peter nodded. "Yeah, that particular robot's a little rough. It's supposed to be a caretaker, but once it gets set on a target, it can be a little overbearing." She sighed. "We're working on it. With dolls and mannequins, not actual people." She laughed. "Need some more water?"

"No." Peter cleared his throat. "Uh, no, thank you. Can I go back to the lobby now? My mom's probably waiting for me. She was doing an interview for the news."

"Of course." Dr. Gallagher extended her hand and Peter, still feeling very vulnerable, took it. He winced as they went past room 105, but the robot seemed shut off for good. "And

here's the lobby."

"He must have wandered off." He heard his mom saying at the front desk. "But where could he have gone? Don't you have cameras or something?"

"Not really." The receptionist said.

"Uh, hi, mom." Peter said, raising his hand sheepishly. He knew how he looked, but the confusion on his mom's face that slowly transformed into realization was still something to behold.

"Oh, my god. Peter? What happened?"

"Wait." Dr. Gallagher dropped down to Peter's level and looked him right in the eye, as if searching for something deep within him. "You're a boy?"

Peter had thought that the lobby meant the end of his ordeal, but he soon found himself, still wearing the dress and everything, sitting in Dr. Gallagher's office as he explained the whole situation to her and his mom. Neither of them seemed all that concerned with his outfit. His mom focused far more on the fact that he had wandered off and gone somewhere he should not have and Dr. Gallagher was a blend of confused and giddy that the robot had detected a boy and tried its hardest to turn him into a good little girl.

“Of course, it’s quite unethical, but I can’t help to wonder just what the SBM-416 would do if given Peter for a full day.”

“Oh, god.” Peter muttered. Dr. Gallagher smiled at him.

“Don’t worry. I could never get board approval to test that sort of thing. We’re nowhere near human trials and, well, this kind of proves why.”

“Fat lot of good that does me.” Peter muttered.

“Peter.” His mom scolded. “We’d better get you home.” Peter nodded eagerly. Escape at last. “The dress and all that comes off, but we’ll have to make you an appointment at the barber for this, won’t we?”

“Yeah, I guess.” Peter wished he could push his mom out of the room. The sooner he got home, the better.

“You’ll just have to wear a ponytail or something for baseball tryouts tonight.” She said, clearly thinking out loud.

"A ponytail? Mom!"

"We'll talk about it later." She said. “Well, thank you, Dr. Gallagher. I promise I won’t let Peter’s misadventure affect my report on the company.” She squeezed Peter’s shoulder, still amazed her son had not had an absolute meltdown over his attire. He was upset, sure, but he was holding it together a lot better than she would have expected. Expected? What parent expected something like this? She shook her head, bemused. “Say bye to Dr. Gallagher.”

“Bye.” Peter mumbled. Dr. Gallagher smiled as the two left, hearing Peter’s mom telling him how to hold his dress down in the spring breeze outside. She looked at the photos of Peter on her monitor, still unsure just how the robot had taken the boy from the lobby and turned him into the downright pretty

girl who had been sitting in her office. Did it know something they did not? She chuckled to herself and accessed the logs for the robot. New priority. She typed. Reactivate SBM-416 programming to distinguish between boys and girls.