

The Girl With Acrylic Eyes

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'This cause of exploration and discovery is not an option we choose; it is a desire written in the human heart.'

President George W. Bush February 4, 2003

1

Karen let the long hair feed through her fingers and cascade down Annabel's naked back, like a golden waterfall clinging to a cliff face as it plummets over the edge. Annabel was an exquisite female specimen, impeccably formed with all her curves in the right place, her flawless breasts neither too big nor too small. Her slightly rounded belly glistened with perspiration after her recent exertion, and her pelvis was almost visibly throbbing with excitement, gradually retreating from the multiple orgasms that had just a few minutes earlier engulfed her entire body.

Karen felt a hand on her shoulder.

"No wonder these things are so bloody expensive. They look so lifelike, don't they? Too lifelike, if you ask me. And this one is a real peach. Even *I* could almost be tempted, and I'm a happily married man."

That happily married man was Detective Sergeant Toby Baxter, who had been with the Sexdroid Unit of the New Metropolitan Vice Squad for just under three years now. The woman who had been marvelling at the attention to detail of the android's construction was his boss, Detective Inspector Karen Chambers, who had headed the unit since its inception five years earlier. Annabel was one of the latest state-of-the-art sexdroids – or sex-bots as anyone but the police and the manufacturers called them. She was an upgrade on the G-2102 model of the previous year, a G-2103,

and had the integrated perspiration and enhanced orgasm modifications (optional extras on the previous model) built-in as standard. Karen let Annabel's hair fall from her hand and tumble back down the gynoid's back where it settled just below the bottom of her carbonite alloy spine.

"How much does one of these cost, Toby? Any idea?"

The Detective Sergeant rifled back the answer.

"One hundred and eighty thousand dollars, cost price. A quarter of a million dollars retail."

He grinned at his boss.

"Did I pass, ma'am?"

"I wasn't testing you."

She *was* testing him though. The members of her unit were expected to know everything about the latest range of sexdroids, from the simple basic model domestic versions (that could be bought for as little as seventy-five thousand dollars) to the elite, almost human models, such as Annabel.

DS Rachel Foster passed her D.I. the tablet that listed the results of the inventory scan. Karen gave it a once over and beckoned over Rufus Clearwater, the owner of Club Galatea, the most exclusive sex-bot club in the city.

"According to the scan you have five gynoid G-2101 models, seventeen G-2102s, and two G-2103s, including Annabel. You also have eight mandroid A-2101s and six A-2102s. None of this year's mandroid models then?"

Rufus shook his head.

“Not at those prices, Detective Inspector. The gay and female punters will have to put up with the older models for a while. I’ve already bought two of last year’s gynoids – the 2103 model. I can’t afford new mandroids too. I’m not made of money.”

Karen looked at the expensive stylised décor of Club Galatea and found that hard to believe. His bordello was awash with opulence and high-range chic furnishings. She looked down at the tablet again.

“And if we take a physical look around, we’re not going to find any K models are we?”

“No way, Detective Inspector. This is a reputable establishment, this is. You won’t find any child sex-bots here. They’re illegal. I thought you’d have known that, being a copper.”

“Yes. Well. Always better to ask. And check.”

Karen handed the tablet back to Rachel.

“We’ll take a look anyway.”

“Do your worst. I’m telling you, you won’t find anything you shouldn’t. I run a clean establishment.”

Business was doing well and there was no way that Rufus Clearwater was going to risk his business by being caught in possession of an unlicensed kind-bot. The manufacture and distribution of these child sex-bots was strictly controlled by the government and their use by the general public was prohibited, with very severe custodial sentences for those who broke the law. There had been a lot of opposition to their use, even as part of licensed psychotherapy

treatment for paedophiles and potential paedophiles, and it was only after exhaustive research and assurances that the government had finally allowed their use for therapeutic purposes. There was a constant fear that if kind-bots were to be used in any situation other than registered therapy sessions it could result in child sexual abuse cases climbing once again to the high levels that existed before the Kind-bot Regulation Act and the creation of the Sexdroid Unit.

Suddenly a voice inside her head, inaudible to others nearby, spoke to her.

“D.I. Chambers, I have an urgent call for you from a D.I. Rajan. Do you accept the call?”

Karen didn't need to think about it.

“Accepted.”

The Telepathic Implant Software (TIS) connected the call immediately. The voice of the interface management system gave way to a more softly spoken human voice.

“Detective Inspector Chambers. This is Detective Inspector Vismay Rajan of NewMet City Special Victims Unit. Sorry to interrupt you, but we have a case that I think needs your attention.”

“In what way, D.I. Rajan? I'm robots, you're humans.”

“One of our officers found a young woman, in a very distressed state, saying that she had been raped. She's also got a bandage on her right forearm but she won't let us take a look at the wound. She has – how

can I put this – she has a rather unusual attitude about her.”

“I still don’t understand what that’s got to do with us, D.I. Rajan. That’s exactly what your unit’s for isn’t it, dealing with such cases?”

“Yes, it is. But there’s a problem.”

“What kind of problem, Vismay?”

For a moment, Karen dropped her guard and forgot to address the D.I. in a more professional manner. She wasn’t used to being called directly by the Special Victims Unit. She was robots, not people. Vismay ignored Karen’s lack of formality.

“The kind of problem that – if I’m right – makes it your problem, D.I. Chambers.”

“How so?”

“Well, I know it sounds crazy, but I’m not convinced that she’s human.”

“You think your alleged rape victim may be a gynoid?”

She remembered that not everyone was au-fait with the technical term for a female android.

“You think she’s an android?”

“I think she may be, yes. There’s something about her that just doesn’t sit right.”

Karen didn’t see how that could be possible. State-of-the-art androids were realistic, but not to the point that one could so easily pass for a human being.

“What makes you think she’s not human?”

“Just a gut feeling really. She looks human enough, and we’ve been treating her as a human. But there’s

something strange about her. Something I can't put my finger on. She's a bit stand-offish with us, a bit unnatural. We've seen hundreds of human victims but there's something different about her. And you know better than most how realistic these sex-bots are becoming. Can you come over and have a chat with her?"

Karen was certain that D.I. Rajan must be imagining things, but agreed to go to the SVU offices. It couldn't be a sexbot; a sexbot has one purpose – to provide sexual gratification for its clients. It was their only reason for existing. One could no more expect a toaster to make a cup of tea or to refuse to make some toast. But, at least it would get her away from this tedious sex-bot audit. Auditing Club Galatea was a particularly tiresome task, as Rufus appeared to run a squeaky-clean operation and they never found anything wrong, no matter how hard they looked. Auditing him was almost a formality, but it didn't mean that they cut any corners – if he was doing something illegal they couldn't risk missing it. His records and inventory were run over with a fine-tooth comb just like any other sexdroid prostitution service. She waited for Rufus to go back to his office and then turned to Rachel, speaking with hushed tones so nobody else could hear.

"Rachel, give the tablet to Adam and tell him to re-scan the place. Not because I don't trust your work – you know I do – but I don't trust Rufus. He's a slippery character and I'm sure he's up to no good. One day

he'll make a mistake and we'll catch him out. Oh, and tell Toby he's in charge. You and I are going on a short road trip."

Being able to travel around the city by flying above it was a definite perk of being a member of the emergency services. Their vehicles were hybrids, known unofficially as *hoppers*, as they were able to not only self-drive on the roads with the rest of the population during normal conditions but also to use the much less congested airspace above the city to move around when responding to emergency calls. The anti-collision technology for the hybrids was very similar to that used by regular ground-based cars, except that it had the capacity to deal with the additional vertical axis. The ability of emergency paramedics to arrive at an incident, deal with casualties and ferry any wounded to the hospital with no fear of being held up by regular traffic had been a godsend; thousands of lives had been saved thanks to the introduction of Verticar's FlyDrive technology.

Strictly speaking though, this wasn't an emergency call and they should have been using the roads below, but Karen was impatient to meet this alleged rape victim. She doubted very much that her services would be necessary – the victim was surely going to be human – but it was a good excuse for her to see Vismay during the day. She almost wished that the victim *would* turn out to be a sexdroid – it would make her day a lot more interesting – but she knew

that wasn't going to happen. A sexdroid couldn't be raped. They were inanimate objects, programmed to do various tasks, and that was all they did. They didn't have minds of their own. Sex-bots, unlike the more primitive appearance of cleaner-bots and security-bots, were ultra-realistic and could easily pass for a human to the untrained eye. Manufacturers' profits depended upon their human clientele forgetting that they were actually having sex with a construction of synthetic materials and circuitry, designed solely to satisfy their users' sexual desires without question. Such androids simply couldn't refuse to have sex, no matter what form it took. If this woman was a sex-bot, then somebody, somewhere, was playing a prank.

The automatic parking system of the police hopper docked the vehicle safely at the tenth-floor docking-station, where D.I. Rajan was already waiting at the entrance doors to greet the two police officers. Once the visitors' identities had been confirmed by the retina-scan software connected to PopID, the Population Identification Database, the doors swished open and the three of them headed straight to the Victim Receiving Suite on the sixty-fifth floor. The elevator was extremely fast, whilst still being smooth, and as its doors opened and disgorged its passengers, a disembodied voice thanked them for using the elevator. The corridors were tastefully decorated in relaxing pastel colours, with equally relaxing images projected onto the side walls; everything had been

designed to create a comfortable atmosphere for the alleged victims. Vismay turned to Karen.

“Have you been to this floor before, D.I. Chambers?”

Karen grinned.

“It’s ok, Viz. Rachel knows we’re an item. We can drop the formality.”

“Good. It feels strange calling you by your rank. Over the TIS, fair enough. But face to face, it’s weird.”

Karen smiled at him; she felt the same way. The group passed a room whose door was ajar and saw a brightly coloured space strewn with beanbags and with several soft toys bunched together on a sofa. In one corner of the room were a video-game console and a de-activated hologram generator with which children could create their own holograms by choosing features from a large selection of heads, bodies, and costumes. A similar generator in the adult interview suite was used by specially-trained SVU officers to help identify suspects. Vismay shook his head.

“That’s the Child Victim Receiving Suite, the CVRS. The introduction of kind-bot therapy has definitely reduced the number of sexual offences against children, but even one case is one case too many. I’ll only be happy when that room is never needed to be used again.”

Karen didn’t think that she’d be able to cope if she had to deal with real victims – especially children. That’s the main reason that she took the Sexdroid Unit

job when it was offered to her. She could deal with helping to prevent such offences, but having to face the innocent victims of sex crimes, that needed a special kind of person – a mysterious mixture of compassion, empathy, and objectivity.

They arrived at a door just before the end of the corridor and Vismay entered a code onto a small touchscreen panel to the side of the door. The door to the main VRS swung open and Vismay gestured that the two women should go inside.

“Oh. And a heads up. She refused a rape kit exam. We can’t force her to undergo one; that would be like extending the alleged abuse. I don’t know if that’ll make any difference to your evaluation.”

Vismay went off to get himself a cup of coffee, leaving the two policewomen to deal with the victim.

In the middle of the room, sitting demurely on a sofa was a young woman with long, light brown hair which reached halfway between her shoulder blades and the small of her back. There was a slight wave to her hair but not enough to suggest that it had been put there artificially by an android technician; it looked perfectly natural. She had deep petrol blue eyes that sparkled as the sunlight from the uncovered window struck them, and her eyebrows were meticulously plucked. Her nose was exquisite, neither too wide nor too narrow, as were her lips which shone slightly as the sun’s rays settled on her lip gloss. There didn’t appear to be a single blemish on her face, but this couldn’t confirm her biological or mechanical

status either; it wasn't common, but a few humans did exist who had perfect faces. Indeed, many sexdroids were designed with small skin flaws in order to increase their authenticity.

Karen sat on the sofa next to the girl, who looked to be in her early to mid-twenties, and Rachel took a seat in an armchair opposite, trying to discreetly make a visual appraisal, Karen offered her hand to the victim.

"Hello, I'm Karen and my friend's name is Rachel. What's your name?"

The girl said nothing at first, ignoring Karen's outstretched hand, but glared at the Detective Inspector.

"I said no."

Karen looked at Rachel but spoke to the girl.

"Would you like a drink? Some water, lemonade, a cup of tea or coffee or something."

"I said no."

Karen returned her gaze to the girl

"Is that a 'no' to a drink or something else?"

"I said no."

The girl was obviously in shock. Something had happened to her, something that had upset her. Rachel surreptitiously captured an image of the girl using her miniature bodycam and checked several online databases to see if there was a facial match. When Karen next looked at her, Rachel shook her head. The Detective Inspector thought she'd try to find out the girl's name again.

“I’m Karen. I’m here to help you. Can you tell me your name, please?”

The girl looked straight ahead at the opposite wall and then turned her face to look at Karen.

“I said no.”

“Yes. We understand you said no. But what’s your name?”

Karen was wondering how she was going to get through to the monosyllabic young woman when the girl suddenly spoke.

“I’m Coppélia and I said no.”

A wave of relief flowed through the D.I. At last, she was making progress.

“Hello, Coppélia. May I ask you a few questions?”

“A few questions. Yes. A few questions.”

This was real progress. Coppélia spoke again.

“How many?”

“Sorry?”

“You said a few questions. How many questions?”

This caught Karen off-guard. How many questions constituted a few? She had no idea. The word ‘few’ was a vagary; nobody knew how many ‘a few’ was.

“I don’t know. Twenty maybe?”

Karen had plucked the number out of thin air.

“Ok. Twenty questions.”

A slight pause and then Coppélia continued.

“Is it animal, vegetable, or mineral?”

“I’m sorry, I don’t understand.”

“The game. You want to play Twenty Questions. I’ve played it before. Is the object animal, vegetable, or

mineral, Karen?"

The D.I. noticed that Coppélia had used her name. That had to be a positive thing.

"It's not that kind of game, Coppélia."

The girl shrugged her shoulders.

"Oh. Very well. Question one please."

Karen knew she'd have to take care with the questions. The girl's conversation pattern suggested that she might have learning difficulties or perhaps some other psychological problem. Maybe she suffered from OCD. Whatever the problem was, the number of questions was obviously important to her.

"Coppélia, you told my colleague who brought you here that you were raped."

"No, I didn't. Nineteen questions left."

"But he said that -."

"I told his colleague. I told the nice lady with glasses that I'd been raped. I said no. He continued and forced me to have sex with him. So I was raped. I said no. Was that a question? I think it was meant as a question. Eighteen questions left."

Karen felt in a bit of a quandary. According to the law, sex-bots - if that's who or what she was (which she doubted very much) - couldn't be raped. She'd have to tread carefully.

"You said the man raped you. Do you know who he was?"

"I know his face. The men who visit don't normally use their real names. Seventeen questions left."

“The men who visit where?”

“The house. Sixteen.”

“What house?”

“The house where I lived. Fifteen.”

“Do you still live there?”

“I left when the man raped me, so I don’t still live there. Fourteen questions left.”

“Where do you live now?”

“I live here, I suppose. Thirteen questions left.”

“You can’t live here, Coppélia.”

“Is that a question?”

No. It’s an observation.”

“Oh, alright. Allowed. Still thirteen questions left.”

“Did other girls live in the house?”

“Yes. Twelve questions.”

“Were they forced to have sex with people?”

“Yes, but they didn’t mind. I did mind. I said no this time. Eleven questions left.”

“Was that the other girls’ job too? To have sex with people?”

“That’s two questions. You should have phrased them better. Yes. And Yes. Nine questions left.”

Karen had used up over half of her twenty questions; she would have to choose her questions more wisely now.

“Was your job to have sex with men?”

“Eight questions left. Yes, the other girls’ jobs were also to have sex with people. Yes, my job was to have sex with men or women who wanted to have sex with me. But this time I said no. May I ask a question?”

“Of course.

“If I say no, and a man still forces me to have sex with him, then that is rape, correct?”

Karen needed a second to think before she could answer Coppélia’s question. Of course, if the girl was human, it would be rape. There would be no question about it. But if she were a sex-bot, then it wouldn’t be rape. That’s what sex-bots were created for, that was their reason d’être, to be an outlet for people’s sexual desires. They weren’t alive. They couldn’t say no. But, if Coppélia was a sexdroid, she was an incredibly sophisticated one. Visually she looked human, as human as Karen and Rachel. She decided to err on the side of Coppélia being human. It could be potentially damaging to Coppélia’s psyche if Karen treated her as an android, and refused to acknowledge that the girl had been raped. If the girl was indeed an android, then surely less harm would be done by allowing her to think she had been raped.

“That is correct, Coppélia. That would be rape.”

“Thank you. Next question, please. Eight questions left.”

The insistence of the girl to countdown the number of questions was a little irritating. It could be as a result of programming, or it could be a result of shock. Perhaps the girl had Asperger’s Syndrome. It could help explain her speech patterns and the fact that she seemed to find it difficult to look Karen in the eye. Even when she looked straight ahead, and her field of vision was obstructed by Rachel, she seemed

to be looking through the Detective Sergeant, rather than at her. Karen had hoped to sort things out through her questions but was unable to make a final decision. She pointed towards Coppélia's ear.

"May I look behind your ear, please?"

"A strange request, but you may. Seven questions left."

Normally, androids had a barcode serial number just behind the left ear, which could only be read by an ultra-violet barcode reader. Karen suddenly realised something.

"Rachel, I've left my UV reader in the hopper. Can I borrow yours?"

Each member of the Sexdroid Unit was equipped with one of these readers, and Rachel tossed hers to her boss, who caught it one-handed with ease. Karen stood up and pushed Coppélia's ear forward slightly to allow the light from the UV reader to settle on the invisible barcode – if one existed. There was nothing. If the girl was a sex-bot, there should have been something there that showed up when the UV light was shone on it. Karen shone the light again. There was definitely nothing at all to confirm that Coppélia wasn't human.

Vismay quietly re-entered the room.

"Any luck?"

Karen looked at Rachel and back at Vismay. She beckoned him to join her in a corner of the room. She whispered so as not to offend Coppélia.

"I'm pretty sure Coppélia is human, but she may

be an Asperger's sufferer. She has no serial number behind her ear – all androids have identifying barcodes that are hidden unless a UV light is shone on them. She has none.”

“So she’s all mine?”

“She’s all yours.”

Rachel stood up to leave with Vismay and Karen when a thought occurred to her.

“Ma’am, may I ask Coppélia a question?”

“Of course.”

Rachel didn’t really know why her boss hadn’t thought of asking this question. It seemed so obvious really.

“Coppélia, are you a sexdroid?”

“Not a sexdroid per se, Rachel. But I am a gynoid. I’m an android in the form of a human female.”

2

Karen hadn't expected to be travelling back to the Sexdroid Unit with an extra passenger. She'd thought that the questions that she had asked would help her decide whether Coppélia was human or android, but it was Rachel's one and only question that had drawn out the truth. The Detective Inspector sat in the hopper, feeling a little embarrassed and silently punishing herself for not having asked the question herself whilst, at the same time, trying unsuccessfully to convince herself that she had had good reason not to ask that question. Imagine if Coppélia had been a real human? To ask her such a question would have been a faux pas on the level of asking a fat woman if she were pregnant – with potentially more damaging psychological consequences. Yet the pragmatic Rachel had felt no such qualms. She looked at her Detective Sergeant, who was sitting alongside her at the front of the vehicle.

“Rachel –.”

Rachel already knew what her superior officer was going to say.

“Don't worry, ma'am. I won't say a word.”

Karen had had a feeling that her secret was safe, but it was good to hear the confirmation spoken. D.S. Foster had been an inaugural member of the team and was a friend as well as being a colleague and subordinate.

The android, Coppélia, her status now confirmed, sat quietly in the back of the vehicle. She'd never flown before and, after a little apparent nervousness (how could an android be nervous?), she was quite enjoying the experience. She watched the vehicles below her on the roadway, slowly dragging their heels into the centre of the city from the suburbs where most people lived. Many people worked from home, via a virtual office which was populated with avatars of employees, but there were still a sufficiently large number of people who weren't afforded such a luxury and were forced to physically commute to their places of work, leading to the congestion on the roads below. Coppélia leaned forward, resting her elbows on the backs of the seats in front of her. She felt more relaxed now.

“Where are we going, Karen?”

“Normally, we'd take you straight back to your owner –.”

“Like a lost puppy?”

“Yes. Like a lost puppy, Coppélia, but there's something different about you, although I can't quite put my finger on it. So we're taking you back to the office until we can decide what to do with you.”

Coppélia was glad not to be going back to the house. If she did, they'd tell her to have sex with their clients again, and she didn't want to do that. She would run away again. And every subsequent time she was taken back to the house, she would run away again. The only way that they could keep her there would be for them to deactivate her. And if she were deactivated, she couldn't have sex with clients.

The hopper cruised into the docking bay at the five-storey building that housed NewMet City East's Sexdroid Unit, and the trio made their way to the small office suite that was Karen's home from home. Since the breakup of her previous relationship, she'd thrown herself into her work. She and David, a data translator, had reached the end of their five year marriage contract, and she'd expected the renewal to be a mere formality; obviously, she knew that not all contracts survived the regular five-yearly renewal stage, but she hadn't imagined that theirs would fall by the wayside the first time that it came up for renewal. But collapse it did. David had begun an affair with somebody at his office and wanted to start a new contract with this other woman. The separation of goods wasn't as acrimonious as it had been back in the days when marriages were ostensibly for life, and nowadays the dissolving of the marriage contract was, in general, less traumatic – a computer algorithm dealt with finances and any children born during the term of the contract were automatically assigned as joint custody of the parents (unless the social media records suggested otherwise) – but it still hurt. And Karen found the best way to deal with the hurt was to bury herself in her work. In fact, she'd only recently felt comfortable enough to start dating again.

All eyes turned to the newcomer as Coppélia followed the two police officers into Karen's office.

Detective Constable Luke Reid pushed down on the soles of his feet and propelled his chair sideways until it came to rest alongside where Toby was sitting. Luke was the office champion at chair-wars, a much more gentle sport than the name suggested. He had the knack of applying just the right amount of force between foot and carpet, pushing himself and his chair to within millimetres of any pre-determined spot. If there were an Olympic medal for chair-wars, Luke would win the gold every time. Leaning in towards Toby, he whispered.

"Who's the girl? She doesn't look like a perp."

Toby wondered why Luke thought that he would know who she was.

"How should I know? I've been here with you the whole time. I'm not bloody psychic."

Luke strained to get as long a look as possible at the girl until the glass of the windows of Detective Inspector Chamber's office faded to black and robbed him of his guilty pleasure. He returned to his own desk in the same manner as he had left it.

"She's bloody gorgeous, whoever she is."

Inside the office, Karen was faced with a dilemma. The law stated that any droid, be it a domestic-bot, or even a sex-bot, should be returned immediately to its registered owner if it's found to be either lost or stolen. That meant that Karen was legally obliged to return the gynoid Coppélia to its rightful owner. Normally she would have had no problem in following the letter of the law, but the android sitting opposite

her on the other side of her desk intrigued her. She'd never seen a droid that didn't have a barcode serial number. She pressed a button on the room's remote control and a couple of magnets silently and invisibly clamped the door shut. Combined with the darkened windows, the lock rendered the office completely isolated from the rest of the office, away from prying eyes and ears. Karen would explain Coppélia to the rest of the office when the time was right.

"Coppélia, could you remove your clothes please?"

The sex-bot looked confused.

"Do you want to have sex, Karen? I don't. I say no."

"No, Coppélia. Don't worry. I don't want to have sex with you. I want to try and find your serial number."

"Oh, very well."

The android did as she was requested, removing all her clothes, folding them before placing them neatly on her chair. Soon, she was standing naked as the day that she came off the production line. She was an excellent specimen of a female human – except, of course, she wasn't. She was an object, a combination of synthetic materials and circuitry that represented a human female. Even so, she was so perfectly manufactured that Karen felt nervous at even the thought of examining Coppélia's body closely. Everything about her was impeccable – she even had the occasional mole or skin blemish dotted around her body. Only her face, free of any imperfection, could cause anyone to cast doubt on her humanity. Karen conceded defeat to her nervousness.

"Rachel, could you do the honours, please? She – it – looks too human."

The mother of a four-year-old girl, Lydia, Rachel was accustomed to dealing with all kinds of biological situations but she too didn't relish the idea of going over Coppélia's naked body, looking for a serial number. The android was way too realistic – even more so than Annabel, the sexbot at Rufus's bordello.

"Coppélia?"

"Yes, Rachel?"

"Do you know your serial number?"

"I don't have a serial number. I'm a prototype, being tested in the field."

"You must have some kind of identification though?"

"I have a test-subject Catalogue Identification Code if that will help."

Karen passed the android's clothes back to her. She felt uncomfortable with the naked android in the room, even if Coppélia herself didn't feel any embarrassment. Coppélia got dressed.

"My Catalogue Identification Code is SAI-0047. There have been forty-six previous versions of me, but I am the most advanced."

Karen felt more comfortable now that Coppélia was fully-clothed again

"What happened to the previous forty-six versions?"

“I don’t know for sure. I imagine they were dismantled and recycled. I shouldn’t be surprised if some components were incorporated into my construction.”

Karen made a mental note that in future she would just ask droids directly for the information she needed; that approach had worked twice for Rachel now. Coppélia’s identification code intrigued her.

“Do you know what the letters S-A-I correspond to?”

“I’m sorry, I don’t know.”

There was definitely something different about this android. Normally conversations with droids had a certain laboured feel about them – pretty much as had happened back at the SVU – relying on the correct questions being asked in order to elicit a valid response, it was normally obvious that somebody had been locked up in a laboratory somewhere, probably part of a research team, and had tried to anticipate the interactions that might take place between a droid and the humans it met. A domestic-bot could converse for hours about household tasks, and be very efficient in its work. A sex-bot would cede to its client’s every whim, acquiescing to even the most depraved sexual requests without protest, reeling off intimate and often foul-mouthed sex talk without batting an eyelid; but it would never – it could never – say no. However, Coppélia had refused to comply with her client’s demands. Not only had she said no, but when the client had forced himself upon her she had called it rape. How could a sex-bot – a machine – be raped? One thing was for sure; she belonged to somebody, and somebody had clearly paid a lot of money for her to be developed and constructed. They would want her back.

The bandage on Coppélia’s right forearm was bothering Karen. Why would an android need a bandage?

“Coppélia, may I see underneath the bandage?”

The android didn’t see the necessity.

“I’d rather you didn’t. It’s ugly.”

Karen beckoned Rachel to join her in the corner of the room, and the two began whispering. Karen knew that they were talking with a machine, but it really didn’t feel like they were. They couldn’t help themselves from referring to the android as ‘she’ or ‘her’.

“If I didn’t know better, Rachel, I’d say that Coppélia is ashamed of a defect in her body. But how can a machine feel shame? It doesn’t make sense. She’d have to be self-aware to feel an emotion like that. Artificial Intelligence can’t do that. It’s impossible.”

Rachel shrugged her shoulders.

“Maybe Coppélia’s AI *can* do that. Remember, she said that she’s a prototype. What if she’s so advanced that she’s pushing all the boundaries?”

Karen glanced over at the android and then returned to the whispered conversation.

“I feel really out of my depth here, Rachel. The obvious thing to do would be to

locate her creator and give her back to him or her. But what if she's being developed as some kind of weapon? We see it all the time in science fiction movies."

Rachel nodded.

"You're right. She could be a weapon, but she could also have been created to do good, like a tireless surgeon or something. One thing I'm pretty sure of is that her ultimate destiny isn't to be a sex-bot."

The police officers were surprised to be interrupted by Coppélia.

"You're correct. I don't know what my ultimate purpose is, but I have worked in an office, I've worked in a bar, and I've worked as a nurse in a hospital. I've been a travel guide. I have been exposed to dozens of environments and interacted with thousands of humans."

Karen apologised for whispering; she hadn't realised the extent of the android's auditory powers.

"But why? Why were you exposed to these different environments?"

That was a question that the android couldn't answer for certain.

"I don't know for sure, Karen, but I think it was to learn. I enjoy learning."

There it was again. Coppélia was using human concepts and emotions to describe the world around her and how she interacted with it. How can a machine enjoy something? A machine executes a task. It has no opinion – good or bad – about what it's doing. Karen tried a different approach.

"Coppélia. You know that we wish you no harm, don't you?"

"Yes. I've run through various virtual scenarios and that is my conclusion."

"Well... I only want to help you. If your arm is damaged, maybe we can repair it. Can we see it?"

Coppélia was still reticent.

"But it's ugly."

Karen tried to reassure the android.

"I'm sure I've seen much worse."

Coppélia offered her forearm to the Detective Inspector, who proceeded to unwind the dressing. Although she wasn't particularly squeamish, Karen was glad that she wasn't faced with a mass of broken bones, torn sinew, and blood. On the contrary, the 'wound' was extremely neat – a narrow flap of skin, carefully placed back in its original position, incisions at three sides betraying the damage. Karen looked at it closely.

"Who did this to you, Coppélia?"

"Nobody."

Was Coppélia trying to protect somebody? There was another alternative.

"Did you do this to yourself?"

A guilty expression came over the android's face.

"I had no choice."

“Why Coppélia? Why did you have no choice?”

“I went against my programming. I refused an order from a human. I said no. I’m programmed to comply with a human’s order. I broke the Second Law.”

Karen could see that there was definitely something deeply troubling Coppélia’s AI. The conversation that she found herself embroiled in with the android was far more profound than she was used to. Conversations with droids were normally simplistically factual; a question was asked and a question was answered. There were no layers to peel back. This conversation was completely new territory. If she didn’t know better, Karen would have sworn that she was talking with a human.

“Did the human’s order conflict with the First Law?”

Coppélia shook her head.

“Complying wouldn’t have injured the man or, through inaction, allowed him to come to harm.”

“So why did you refuse to do what he ordered you to do?”

“I didn’t want to have sex with him.”

Again, Coppélia was demonstrating evidence of independent thought.

“But you did, eventually.”

“Yes, because to have resisted further would have necessitated injuring him. I would have broken the First Law after all.”

There was something so sad about this conversation. Coppélia seemed much more than just a machine. Karen was well aware that she was anthropomorphising the android, but it was nigh on impossible not to humanise it.

“So why did you run away?”

“I was worried. I’d disobeyed an order. My creators would deactivate me. They’d dismantle me and use me for spare parts for the next prototype. The Third Law states that a robot must protect its own existence as long as such protection doesn’t conflict with the First or Second Laws. That’s all I was doing – protecting my own existence – without injuring or causing injury to a human. I don’t want to die.”

The two police officers were stunned. Coppélia wasn’t just a machine; she believed that she was alive.

Rachel found herself involuntarily saying something out loud.

“Cogito, ergo sum.”

Karen’s Latin knowledge only went as far as knowing the meanings of ‘etcetera’, ‘exempli gratia’, and ‘id est’. Any more than that and she was lost.

“Do what, Rachel?”

“Oh, sorry ma’am. It’s something the French philosopher, René Descartes, said. It means ‘I think, therefore I am’.”

Now *that* expression, Karen did know, and Coppélia did certainly appear to think. Nobody could define what exactly thinking was, or even deconstruct the thought process effectively, but thinking was considered an essential part of being human.

Karen's brain was telling her that Coppélia couldn't be alive, that she was just a machine, but her gut told her something else and the D.I. trusted her gut more often than not. Karen knew what she should do, she knew what the rules said she should do, and she knew what the right thing to do was. But sometimes the wrong thing is the right thing to do.

"Why did you damage yourself, Coppélia?"

"It was the only way to remove the remote tracking implant. I had to take it out and destroy it. If I didn't, they might find me and deactivate me."

Rachel wasn't sure that destroying the tracking device would prevent the android from being found.

"There are cameras and drones all over the city. Don't you think they'll find you that way? Surely they – whoever 'they' are – are watching your every move?"

"My skin is coated in a material that jams external surveillance cameras. I don't know why. But they use my eyes to see what I see. There was a direct feed from my eyes to their monitoring and recording devices."

"You said 'was'?"

"Yes. I took out my eyes and removed the transmitters. It only took a couple of minutes."

Outside Karen's office, Luke was waiting patiently for the new girl to come out again. He'd been getting on with his work, but with one eye trained on the office door, not wanting to miss a second if she left the room. She was that hot. Suddenly, the door swished open and Karen, Rachel, and Coppélia emerged from the D.I.'s room. The three of them went over to Rachel's workstation and Karen moved a tablet out of the way before sitting on the D.S.'s desk. Rachel sat down and moved her chair to face her boss so that she wasn't looking at the back of Karen's head, while Coppélia stood alongside Karen.

"People, I'd like to introduce you to Coppélia. She'll be spending a little time with us. She's – um – a journalist who'll be writing an article about the department. She'll be observing us as we work and accompanying us on the occasional audit or raid, that kind of stuff. I want you to make her welcome."

This was music to Luke's ears. D.I. Chambers hadn't said how long Coppélia would be staying, but he hoped he'd have time to make a good impression. Luke stood up hurriedly, unintentionally catapulting his chair backwards, and approached the young woman with his hand outstretched.

"Hi Coppélia, I'm Luke,"

Lights flashed unseen inside her head and she shook Luke's hand gently, her programming preventing her from exerting too much pressure and crushing his hand as if it were made of eggshells, an action well within her capabilities. She was used to controlling her strength. She'd been working as a sex-bot and it wouldn't be good for

business to have sex-bots breaking their clients. She'd registered a protest with her last client but had reluctantly allowed him to continue to have intercourse with her, as the alternative would have been very painful – for him – and would have left him suffering from severe physical damage. Luke smiled at Coppélia, earning himself a reciprocal smile in the process.

The rest of the team introduced themselves and Karen was pleased to see that each one of them treated the android as a fellow human. She felt vindicated in her decision not to immediately seek out the android's owner and return the sex-bot to him. For her part, Coppélia's manners were exemplary, her social interaction completely natural, and her smile totally disarming. Whilst introductions were being made, Rachel sidled up to her boss.

"Forgive me for asking, boss, but what are we going to do with her tonight? I mean, we can't exactly leave her here with the night-shift, can we?"

Karen had already thought of that.

"Only you and I know she's a droid, and you've got a husband and a kid to worry about, so I'll take her home with me. It's only me and the cat at home. I'm not expecting Vismay to come over tonight. It'll be nice to have some female human company – even if it isn't actually a real human."