

A CATHERINE

June 22nd, 2031
10:50 AM

Another call from dispatch sent us to a stone house on Aberdeen Avenue in Westmount. My partner Dan and I hopped out of the ambulance. I lugged the trauma kit. It was cumbersome for someone as petite as me. At least all the heavier equipment was rolled in by the MediBot, a droid I still thought could pass as Wall-E's big brother, only without the arms and the sad puppy eyes. The diagnostics scanner, the oxygen tank, the defib, the foldable backboard, stuff we sometimes never use... they were all in it. We didn't know what we were getting into except that the victim was female.

Name: Amara.

Age: unknown.

Condition: unknown.

We sped walk to the front door, cutting through the trimmed lawn and passing the rose bushes. Dan's stethoscope bounced up and down around his neck, hanging onto him like the sweat in the middle of his back. The MediBot followed Dan's signal from his belt clip, the machine blazing a trail through the grass with its continuous track, avoiding the bushes.

Dan rang the doorbell. He didn't wait for an answer and he inserted the miracle key through the lock. The door swung opened.

"Miss Amara? We're first responders," he hollered, projecting a hint of a Quebec French accent. It echoed between the cream gilded walls. I peeked in from behind. Beyond the sliding closet doors, the home security system was defused, wires poking out of the alarm cover like red and blue tentacles.

"Please, help me," we heard from the back of the house.

Dan pulled out his latex gloves from his pocket and slipped them on in two seconds. We ran through the corridor, the matching hallway lights trembling to our quickened step. Our feet sidestepped a smashed painting on the hardwood floor. We passed an opened safe built into the wall. The safe was empty, a clear break in.

Ahead of us was the living room, complete with a fireplace. The back door opened to a terrace. Dark vertical blinds danced a macabre number to the breeze blowing in. A TV screen by the corner played a show with firefighters running back and forth.

We made it to the kitchen and there she was, a slender woman sitting on the floor in a dainty maid's outfit, her back leaning against the kitchen island counter in between the mess of chrome bar chairs. Dan stopped dead in his tracks. I didn't ask him why and barged in like the rookie I was, crouching next to the woman with the trauma kit, reaching into my pocket for my own gloves. I heard the MediBot rolling in, crushing the painting on the way.

"It's okay, Miss Amara," I said.

Half of her pixie face seemed of porcelain perfection until I moved one of the bar chairs and saw the other half. My body recoiled, believing for half a second that she was the female version of Harvey Dent from some alternate universe.

She was an android.

Plastic on the outside, metal and tech on the inside... with the nasty automaton half of her face smashed in. Her eye was gone, leaving a deep gash, exposing her internal circuitry, sparking at irregular intervals while her good eye stared at the TV. She looked half dead, half in a trance. Her blond wig tied in short frilly pigtails slid to the side of her head, and her maid headpiece fell on her bare lap. Her left arm dangled from her shoulder, staying attached to the rest of her body by a few wires.

I couldn't believe it: the scene of a fantasy fetish droid gone wrong. Dan closed his eyes, panting. He was a burly fellow whose cardio wasn't his forte, but if it meant saving a life, he did it, only there was no life to save this time. He stood there with his hands on his waist.

"If not for the damages, she looks so real, beautiful even," I said.

"*Someone broke into my house,*" said the android, but her lips didn't move. Instead, it came from her throat where little holes were perforated through her silicone skin. Another spark escaped her metal skull.

"*Please, I'm hurt. It hurts so much. I'm so cold.*"

She sounded human with all the right pauses and intonations at the right places.

"Not human. She's a Catherine," Dan said. His gaze was intense and his reprimand exposed a distaste I had never seen before. He took out his phone and mumbled to Dispatch to call it off.

"My name is Amara," she said, correcting Dan.

"What's a Catherine?" I asked him.

"She learns to speak by mimicking. A 'copycat.' I thought they were only available in Japan."

Two police officers walked in, sweating under their blue collared shirts, clad in black pants and bulletproof vests. One was tall and built, the other stout and shorter than Dan. They both had one hand on their holster, the other gripping their transceiver clipped above their collarbone. I stood up, hitting one of the chairs.

"Nothing here?" the taller one asked, her French accent thicker than Dan's.

"False alarm," Dan told them.

"Ah. Ok," she said, her dialect a common sound, even in the wealthiest Anglophone suburb in Montreal. She stood to the side, dictating her report to a tablet in French, the speech-to-text software filling up the form on her screen. Dan and the other officer conversed in French, a casual and lively speech with slang and grammatical shortcuts, making it difficult for me to follow.

"Please help me."

We all looked at her. The men shook their heads. The taller officer turned off her tablet.

"Someone broke into my house. Please, I'm hurt. It hurts so much."

Dan motioned us to leave.

"We're done," he said.

"I'm so cold."

I hoisted the strap of my trauma kit up my shoulder.

"I don't want to die."

A chill crawled up my spine. I turned around to look again. Her chin slacked and her eyelid closed over her one good eye, just like a doll I had when I was a kid whenever I laid it down, pretending to put it to sleep. My mood sloshed to gloom and helplessness, as if I had just seen a real person take their last breath.

"Remember, she's not human. Let's go," Dan said, patting my shoulder.

Indeed. I can save lives, but forget robots. Just then, her head released one last spark. I turned to Dan and resisted the urge to look.

"I don't get it," I said.

“Tell me.”

“Whoever broke in, they stole what’s in that safe over there, but they won’t take her? Even in her state, she must be worth... I don’t know...”

Dan shrugged.

“We take it from here,” said the tall officer, waving us off.

The police stayed behind. It was just a case of a house robbed in broad daylight when no one was home, no one except an android. I dragged my feet out of the upscale house, following Dan’s lead, her dialogue playing over and over again in my head like a voice recording on loop, canceling the drum of the MediBot behind me. I gave in and stole a last look over my shoulder. With the bar chairs all around her, she looked caged.

Dan crossed the lawn and walked around the ambulance to the driver’s side.

“Last I heard, the most basic model is selling for maybe 20K.”

“Like buying a diesel car,” I said, walking to the back of the ambulance.

“And a lot to cause us problems. They make these androids sound so human that even the dispatcher can’t tell a droid from a human. Crazy.”

I gestured to him with my free hand to suggest I got mind-blown. I opened the backdoors of the truck and shoved the trauma kit on the stretcher, slammed the doors shut and loaded the MediBot back in its bay on the side. I joined Dan in the passenger seat, catching him scrolling through his cellphone. He smacked his palm on the steering wheel.

“There aren’t enough of us to run around. If we keep meeting androids who dial for help because they think they’re human, real people are going to die, just because we couldn’t get to them in time. What a waste.”

“You don’t say—”

“Wait a minute,” he said, reading his phone. He lifted his eyes to check the house’s address then dove back to his phone. “Jacques Roy lives here. THE Jacques Roy.”

“Who?”

“He’s one of the lead developers who created Catherine!”

“No way ...”

“Yes way. My god ... whatever was in that safe could be worth billions. What if it’s next-gen android programming?”

“I don’t know. Who keeps it in a safe in their house?”

“Beats me. It’s like how people used to keep money in their mattress.”

“Shouldn’t we tell the police?”

“Nah,” he said, after a moment of hesitation. “They’ll figure it out.”

We buckled our seatbelts and Dan pulled out of the neighbourhood. I asked him: “Why is she called a Catherine?”

“She looks like this character by the same name in some Japanese game from back in the day. Blond, curly pigtails, sexy... so the name stuck.”

“You seem to know a lot about this.”

“Well, when a guy like me doesn’t have a girlfriend ... ”

“Nope, stop right there.”

“Sorry. TMI?”

“I don’t wanna know,” I said.

Right then, we got another call from dispatch. Dan acknowledged the request and we were on to our next location. The sirens wailed, but all I heard instead were the echoes of Catherine’s voice.

I’m so cold.

I don’t want to die.

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