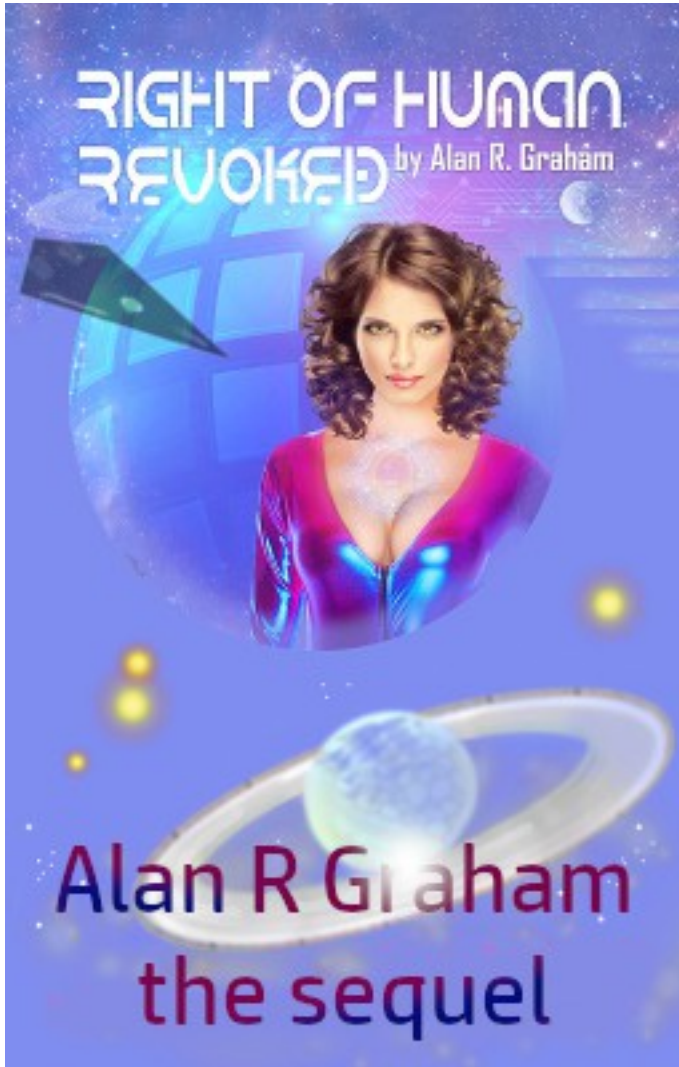


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Right of Human Revoked

A TRILOGY

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Independent Publication

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PART TWO

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Chapter One

He heard a hum and then a soft ping in his mind, followed swiftly by a voice: “Lieutenant Allen, this is Alexandra Minkowski. Requesting a secure link.”

Bradley Allen looked up from his work station, eyes scanning the huge, tiered control center in which he sat, a dark, domed space converging on a central server a few levels down from him. He was as usual just one of many in this enormous screened room. An operative with a purpose nevertheless, to oversee vessels entering and leaving the outer edge of Solar System, SS1. The only noticeable features in this dimly lit amphitheater where a bunch of bald heads. He looked back at his console and blinked twice. He saw the familiar yellow box appear in his ocular display, focused in on it and responded with a thought: “Go ahead, Xandra. What's up?”

“I'm on Titan. Can we meet at Turneff Restaurant for lunch? We need to chat.”

“Sure,” he replied with some trepidation. Whatever it was

that had brought Xandra to these whereabouts had to be big... huge! She was not making a courtesy call, that was not her style. She had an agenda, he was positive – and he had an inkling he knew what it was.

An hour later they were sat in the darkest corner of a neat, spacious restaurant decorated almost entirely in green, sipping on sour cocktails. Transparent table tops were suspended each above a thick, branching leg, as if laying atop miniature palm trees; the walls were screens displaying wide images of pasture dotted with dandelions in bloom. On a moon like Titan the pleasantries of home were non-existent so every effort was made to remind people of their worlds. Outside in the streets, the same: Trees adorned the walkways, buildings were illuminated with brilliant artwork reflecting mountain ranges and pine forests. “The Society”, the governing body that oversaw human development and reach within the galaxy, deemed it acceptable – necessary even.

Titan City itself sat within a gigantic, protective dome approximately seven miles in diameter on a moon whose bluish atmosphere and frigid temperatures were well beyond human tolerance. Little, bubble shuttles whizzed about within, all colorful greens or autumnal oranges depending on their trajectory. It was a peculiar place – faked, but just magical enough to beguile its inhabitants into a sense of security and comfort – for what lay without was anything but pleasant.

This city was a military base first and foremost. Nobody volunteered themselves to spend time in such a dreary and treacherous outpost. Those that were here were drafted in or ordered to serve a few years, training being a large part of daily routine. Titan City's remit was to observe and study an enemy stronghold: The Anti Society League, ASL, their headquarters situated in orbit within the rings of Saturn, a self-contained spheroid station. A nearby 'White Hole' was also under the control of Titan City, all vessels having to be cleared by Titan STC both entering from and leaving for distant solar systems in the galaxy. Lieutenant Allen had been posted to train up new recruits. It was something he was mandated to do every afternoon. He enjoyed teaching but was

frustrated by the minimal use of his real potential: He was an AI code analyst who could not only teach androids how to fly, but could also adapt them to reason with logic, augment their physical characteristics and formulate them to feel compassion. Now he was subjected to the mundane task of directing flight crews in a near empty traffic zone.

Xandra was still in her military, black bodysuit even though she had been demoted to robotics analysis, outside of The Society's military jurisdiction. An officer she had remained, though without rank. Allen smiled. They chatted. She was still as beautiful and bright-eyed as she had always been, as if the two and a half years that had passed since they had last seen each other on Orbiter CY714 were simply a matter of days gone by. However, his admiration for Xandra was more than that of her beauty. He had always felt things for her he had not been able to express openly in his position, being as he had been at the time her commanding officer. Still, those feelings remained.

He was in civilian clothes now, his bald head the only feature that might have suggested he was of military stock, working as a desk controller at White Hole Division, seeing to the arrival and departure of interplanetary and galactic vessels. Space Traffic Control (STC), Allen's level, was fully equipped to intervene, stall or combat illegal activity, having a fleet of war-birds on standby, stationed just a mile away. But nothing was ever that simple. Controllers had no authority to halt traffic en-route to ASL HQ. One mishap or re-direct and ASL might destroy the White Hole and leave the entire outer sector of their mother, Solar System (SS1) isolated for years. It was a tenuous situation at best.

Lieutenant Allen could not help but smile across the table. Memories of their years together came flooding back, one outstanding, the disaster that had befallen their previous mission on Orbiter CY714:

All it had taken was one thought Log from Maintenance Department to surface. Under Lt. Allen's instructions no Logs were to be used during the operation to take out the infiltrator, an ASL

hacker who had managed to insert himself within their comms system on CY714. Lt. Allen had instructed everyone to communicate via memos only, rather than logged comms because they could be easily wiped without a trace. They were acting outside of the law; they had been ordered not to intervene; however that would have meant leaving their beloved androids – their children – to the mercy of a monster and probable destruction. So they went against orders.

Following the defeat of their assailant – the hacker – all memos had then been disposed of immediately... All except that one thought log by Tony which he had had to send to Coggi via proper channels while she was clamped to the examination table in Med Center. There it was, picked out by audit a few months later and the secret of their infamous success had immediately been brought to the attention of Military Intel.

Lt. Allen had tried to keep it all under wraps, for the sake of one android in particular whose courage and tenacity that day had saved them all from certain death. He knew what the military would do if they found out about her. Sure enough, his fears were not unfounded. All in Conscious Level Department attending to the development of androids, commonly called Semi Autonomous Personnel or SAPs, had immediately been suspended, including Lt. Allen and Alexandra Minkowki.

“They took my Coggi,” Xandra suddenly blurted out. “The bastards, they stole her.”

Allen frowned. “How do you know?”

“Tony told me. He was still there when they shut down the SAPs on Base Station. Not a single android survived, I thought. That's what you and me and everyone was told. But then after we had all left, Tony saw a shuttle ascend and Coggi transported to the nursery.”

“And now you have found her?” Allen nodded, expectantly.

“Yes,” Xandra replied, forcing back the tears. “They wiped her memories of me and the Base Station, now she's just a machine.

My little Coggi. They destroyed her and I want her back.”

“Got a plan?” Allen asked, knowing the answer.

“Yes.”

“Well,” he said, “I hope it involves me. What they did to our children was despicable and I'd be more than willing to meter out some justice in return.”

“Thanks, Allen. Yes, I do need your help,” Alexandra smiled in gratitude.

They talked for an hour, had some fiber cakes and she laid out her plans. ASL Headquarters, the Anti Society League's main base, was located just a few hundred thousand miles away buried within the rings of Saturn. They had constructed a titanium sphere a couple of miles in diameter in which was housed a complex of engineering facilities and labs. It was parked deep in C Ring orbit – an impenetrable location for Society war-birds to venture, strewn with debris, dust and giant crystals. Invasion was impractical and quite simply pointless. Besides which, any major offensive would kill thousands of innocent scientists and civilians living and working in the ASL Sphere. It was believed by The Society that ASL's galactic reach had been seriously diminished since CY714's ingenious retaliation some years back – something to which none had ever been given acknowledgment – but fears were that something was brewing; ASL was plotting a come-back.

Lt. Allen was intrigued. “How did you find out where Coggi was?”

Xandra explained: She had been monitoring the pax manifests of every flight into ASL HQ all this time, knowing that she would be looking for a biologist age 26 or so. It had become an obsession; thousands of hours of tedious cross-checks until, one day, she hit the jackpot. Coggi had been hired as an agricultural engineer to develop new drugs and synthesize propulsion additives for mining. She had been implanted by order of the military. She was being controlled by a Level One AI code formulator on an Orbiter, in Daedalus Gap, tracking the sphere. It was assumed she

was there to gather information and look for possible weaknesses. Two or more other SAPs had also been inserted.

Again Allen interrupted. “How could Coggi, an android, fool ASL security? Brain scans are used at Sphere Immigration Port to sniff out SAPs of likely Society origin.” He cocked his head. “They have it covered. It's not possible.”

The answer was simple. Allen should have known. He was speaking to one of the most brilliant minds in the business, and yet ignorantly doubting her integrity.

“One of my closest friends working in R&D confided in me,” Xandra pointed out, matter of fact. “They found away around the problem – mirror mimics, they call them. Military, drone SAPs are fitted with an advanced cerebral implant creating a field inside the skull that feeds back false imagery if triggered by a scanner.”

“Shit! Why don't I know that? Why haven't I been told?” Allen shrugged. “Like, it would be useful at STC. We do ship scans for pax, and aren't we all on the same team?”

Xandra scowled. “See what I mean? The Military are a law unto themselves. They can and will do anything they want. There is no democracy. There is no justice anymore.”

Allen shook his head. “And just how do you propose getting on board the Orbiter?”

“I don't,” Xandra answered, raising an eyebrow and sweeping long, wavy hair to one side. “I'm going to hack their system.”

“Whose? What? The Society's Orbiter?”

“Yes.”

“Shit, Xandra. Are you going to make a deal with ASL?”

“Yes.”

“Are you kidding? The same game they played on us?”

“Yes,” she snarled. “Revenge is sweet.”

“Holy mother of... That's just not poss...” And then froze, stopped in mid sentence, knowing with whom he was talking – realizing instantly that she *was* the one person that could do it. He shook his head again. If there was one person in the Galaxy who had *all* the answers, that was *always* right no matter the crisis, it was Alexandra Minkowski. The idea was simply preposterous... but it could work.

She was as brilliant as she was cunning, an imagination and a 'follow through' of superlative quality. That was why he loved her. Whether it was true love or love for a daughter he had never had, he wasn't sure. He wished he could tell her but he knew he might risk messing with her head, and at a time like this the less she had to worry about the better.

“What do you want me to do,” he asked.

“You need to get me a meeting with ASL.”

“How?”

“Next Friday morning, the first supply vessel through the white hole heading for ASL HQ: Send them this message.” Xandra blinked and Allen's temporal implant instantly absorbed the message. He would be breaking all sorts of protocols; this was a clandestine operation, but a tingling in his gut told him he was about to go through with it no matter the consequences.

“Your plan... Who else is on board?” he asked.

Xandra smiled and his tingling grew. “Johnny, Paighton and Frankie. They lost their loved ones just like we did. I will assemble them here in town on Thursday evening, ready for departure first thing Friday morning.”

“How?” he asked, with a chuckle, knowing it was already figured out.

“You bring the craft in for routine maintenance and we sneak on board.”

“How?”

“I spoke with Tony, she grinned, “It's all sorted. I just need you to bring the vessel in.”

That gave Lt. Allen three days to figure out how to subvert his colleagues in STC and re-route the vessel. His best bet was to feign a malfunction but there were other alternatives. Permission from ASL was key. Without that he would not be authorized to intervene. He shook his head in wonder.

“Anything else you need me to do?” he inquired, hopefully.

“Well, there is one other thing,” Xandra affirmed with raised eyebrows. “Extraction: Don't know how you could possibly do it but we need to get out of ASL HQ at some stage. We'll have no comms with you, and the cargo vessel we escape on will have military coded SAPs on board. The Society's watchdogs will pick them up with their scanners for sure as we pass Titan on approach to the White Hole. ASL cannot be implicated in the stealing of military hardware or it would be all out war. There will be Society-birds swarming everywhere and we will be on our own in an empty cargo vessel. We have to escape this sector, and my home planet Geoffreys would be our ultimate destination through the white hole.” She hesitated. “Any ideas?”

Allen chuckled. “You really have thought of everything, haven't you..? Except how... The very last bit. As always, leaving providence a choice. Brilliant. That's Alexandra Minkowski all over.”

“Sir. You work in STC. Providence is your baby, now.”

Big, blackman Johnny was first down the ramp. Xandra ran up and gave him a hug; she could hardly get her arms around him but her heart was all over him. Paighton was next. She cocked her head and burst into tears. *Boy-girl, oh my god what an angel.* He looked as gorgeous and buff as ever. Long black flowing hair, deeply cut cheeks and super-soft, round lips. His blue eyes reminded her of Lynn – she was his special SAP. Xandra had looked

into Lynn's eyes once and seen him when he was in Total Immersion Interface with her. She approached Paighton cautiously, then decided not to hold back. She took his face in her hands and kissed him on the lips. There... it was said. She adored him.

Then Frankie appeared. She was a highly qualified MIT specialist. All had been demoted to menial office jobs, perhaps Frankie's worst of all: now an electrical engineer in Maintenance at an outpost recently being explored in Sector Penda-yho. Xandra took one look at her, wiped the tears from her eyes, put her arms around Frankie's waist and lifted her off her feet. Frankie was small and scrawny. With a brain the size of hers there was little need for body parts; tiny in stature but huge in mental capacity.

Xandra now had a team. She sped them off to a boarding house and they met up for supper at the cocktail bar. They reminisced. It was not difficult to re-gain focus. All those years working together as a team, and now they were about to do the whole thing all over again – except this time they would be working for the opposition. Their beliefs were important to establish: They were not ASL affiliates; they did not associate with the ASL philosophy; their aim was justice. Coggi had to be returned home, to where she belonged, to a real life with her sister and her friends – that was them.

That following Friday morning Lt. Allen was having trouble. He had duplicated some of his own thought logs from a year ago and was firing them out across the control room. A cargo vessel heading for ASL HQ was in trouble; it had lost proximity avoidance guides so Lt. Allen was arguing. Titan was the closest port with no obstructions. Xandra's message to ASL had been packaged as a file in his first identification request, and within seconds the vessel responded with a Mayday. Allen took control of comms with their flight deck and directed corridor approach. An hour and a half later a billowing cloud of icy-blue, methane sand announced the supply vessel's entrance to a Maintenance hangar just inside the perimeter of the giant, translucent dome – Titan City.

It seemed Xandra's message to ASL had worked. They had

taken the bait: Not that it was really bait, it was blatant arrogance. She had requested a deal: Her team would find the military's android SAP infiltrators and disable The Society's total immersion interface systems on board Orbiter SRC1, in exchange for the safe and free passage of her SAPs from ASL HQ. She would need their full cooperation and unrestricted access to their TII control room in order to make it happen.

They'd bought it. Alexandra Minkowski was quite simply unstoppable.

An orange shuttle whisked across town that morning: The team of four. Tony had tipped off his colleague – head of Maintenance – that he should expect some extra passengers; highly irregular, but for an old friend and a good cause, no problem.

Johnny leaned forwards on route. “What makes you think ASL won't confine us and interrogate us?”

“It's a good plan, Miss Curly,” Paighton added with a smile, “But I don't fancy the idea of being tortured.”

“Hey, guys,” Xandra responded, looking at Frankie's nervous expression, “They need answers fast. They don't even know how The Society has managed to TII with SAPs in their city without them being aware. They haven't a clue. They also want to watch us in action. We can show them stuff. We are more useful to them operating than being confined... Trust me.”

Frankie added, “They could just kill us and the SAPs as soon as we have located them.”

“In the deal I proposed, I name-dropped my father. He was the colonel who led the Titan Offensive 30 odd years ago. I said, if I do not return my father would come looking for us, tear their world apart – and this time for good.”

“Crap, Xandra,” Frankie nodded, “You are something else.”

Johnny glanced over at Paighton with a grin. Paighton knew what Jo-boy was thinking, he had witnessed the confidence his colleague had for Xandra many times before – but there was

something else about that smile. Paighton's intuitive, feminine side was picking up a signal that confused her.

The shuttle came to a rest and they descended a counter-coil chute to Management Level. No comms were permitted, implants neutralized, their mission had to remain a secret. So they followed Tony's instructions and wandered the corridors until reaching Jim Davy's office. He ushered them in, explained that they would be issued maintenance suits and escorted to flight deck. No maintenance crews from his unit were permitted to work on ASL supply vessels, repairs had to be done by on board technicians. However, a review and documentation checks were standard procedure for any parked vehicle in a military hangar. That was their way in.

Once on board their escort was relieved and withdrew. They made a brief tour of the cargo area then up to Flight Deck. The captain of the vessel welcomed his four passengers, then after a brief chat, showed them to their quarters. It would be a four hour flight; they would need to be harnessed for the final 20 minutes before arrival due to turbulence. In the meantime, the galley and entertainment facilities were at their disposal.

“Maintenance Deck. This is Supply Vessel – Three Alpha Sigma.”

“Go ahead, Alpha Sigma.”

“Permission to depart. Repairs complete.”

There was a pause. The flight deck controller was unsure. She contacted her superior with a thought log.

I-Log MD012: Sir, supply vessel Three Alpha is requesting permission to depart. But the four maintenance officers have not dismounted.

MD012-jd: Yes they have, Martha. Pay attention. They are in my office.

MD012: But sir... I... I was – on it!

MD012-jd: Look at the playback. They are clearly seen

lowering the ramp. Permission to depart granted.

“Alpha Sigma. MD Control. Permission granted. Switch to TSTC 2304 upon exit for flight corridor.”

“Thank you MDC. Three Alpha Sigma cleared for departure.”

Coggi was busying herself in her lab, waiting for some results. She was thinking about Geoffreys, her home planet. She had three months left on her contract before getting a deserved one month vacation.

But alas, that is not where SAPs go on leave, they are shuttled to their controlling orbiters and shut down for maintenance and upgrades. However, Coggi was not to know. Implanted memories were all she had; she thought she was from Geoffreys, the old formulas Xandra had originally used when Coggi was just a little 2 year old were still within her to this very day.

So there she was, feeling vulnerable and alone in this new city, somehow isolated – but from whom or what? Coggi couldn't bring to mind any friends she missed. She had tried to make new acquaintances in ASL HQ but her sharp and tenacious nature always seemed to scare people off. What was wrong with her? Or perhaps it was her looks? She had thought about getting her hair done, a new look, shorter, some age and distinction. Maybe that was it: She looked too young? She was considering how she might re-define herself and make a new impression, when:

“Doctor Coggi. Tests proved positive,” a technician reported.

“Good, Philip. Thank you. Now we will need to add the phylum and run a whole new batch of amino tests.”

“Yes, Miss.”

“... Philip?”

“Yes, Miss?”

“Do you have a partner, like... like a relationship?”

“No,” the tall, attractive, dark haired man replied.

Coggi looked him up and down. “Well, why don't you and I go to the Thanksgiving Festival together this weekend? Just as friends. Would you like that?”

“Doctor, I'm too busy with my dissertation. I have exams next week and an interview.”

He hurriedly dismissed himself and Coggi dropped her head in dismay. She felt a tear rising to fall, but it never quite did. How could she have no friends? She could feel pleasure, knew the meaning of love and affection. But how... if she had never had a friend? A mother and a father, yes. But that was different. Why did her Mom never talk about friends of hers. No playbacks ever showed people enjoying themselves, groups having parties or picnics. All her mother ever asked about was how she was coping in her new job.

There was a huge void inside her heart – that is how she explained it to herself – perhaps not a heart, she really didn't know. Only that it ached, it cried and with it, she. Somewhere inside her was a knowledge of affection she could not reach. At times there was such desperation she would contemplate ending it all. What was the point in living alone, by herself for ever, when she knew there was something called love. A thing that was supposed to fix hurt, make sense of pain and make her whole. She was empty and she knew it, but could not figure out why.

There was this one guy, Gregg, who paid her some attention from time to time, but he sounded cold, a military sort, lacking emotion. And he wasn't even in the city. He would contact her occasionally by implant. They would chat about stuff, mainly plant biology – his avenue. He said he was hopping to get posted to ASL HQ in a few months. He'd sent her playbacks of himself. He looked rugged and handsome, not at all the type of character she imagined from their chatting – she had visualized a squat, balding fellow.

To hell with it, Coggi muttered to herself as she ambled the dim lit corridors on her way to her quarters, I'm going to that stupid Festival by myself, if I have to.

Something made her hesitate on her way passed the Propulsion Lab. For some reason she looked into the recognition pad and it read her profile. The door dissolved instantly. She stepped in. Doctor Tomal greeted her with enthusiasm and ushered her over to a set of screens. He began pointing at a row of figures, describing the significant amplitude of their intensity over a greater range than before. This was nothing to do with Coggi's input, her expertise was propulsion additives, chemicals, not quantum physics. However, doctors loved to talk among themselves, especially if advancements were made. She was a colleague and he respected her; she looked up to him, a great scientist in his late 50s.

Orbiter Log CLG76: I am just out of TII with 16-32-C. Recording all data to Central Server. New information surfacing regarding their long range Neutrino Synchronizer. They have managed to bind oscillations of pairs creating an effective laser many time more powerful than ours. Focus appears to be an issue. IT needs to take a look at these findings.

Log CLG76-d: Davide here. Great catch, Gregg. We will review.

Coggi looked spectacular as she entered the Thanksgiving Festival in the great hall, a massive dome centrally located at the top of the ASL HQ Sphere. She had not changed her appearance, done nothing with her hair; she was as she always was, defiant, reluctant to fall to the whims of insecurity. No. She was who she was, take her or leave her: She was Coggi. Dressed in a long, white gown she stood out among the rest of the darkly clad guests. The fabric clung to her, showing off every bit of her gracious anatomy, as demonstrative as a bodysuit but of finer fabric, with a flowing hem that spread out around her ankles as she strode in. Heads

turned, then turned away... All but one, a young man with long dark hair that fell in a ponytail to his shoulder blades. He wore a purple suit. Coggi did not see him at first, she was looking down at her feet as she carefully made her way to the reception desk.

She did not see his hand rise to his mouth, nor the tear that ran down his cheek which he hurriedly swept aside. She did not see his pain, nor the tortuous joy mixed with anxiety he was experiencing. Had she, it might have upset her. Instead, a few minutes later this strange, handsome man casually introduced himself to her while she was seated at the cocktail bar.

“Doctor Coggi, isn't it?”

“Er, yes. And who might you be?” she replied, staring into eyes she felt sure she had looked into before. “Have we met?”

“Yes, Coggi, we have. My name is Paighton.”

Coggi cocked her head. “Paighton. I don't remember that name. Tell me where we met.”

“That's a long story, Coggi.”

“I like stories. Please, go on.”

Paighton crumbled. He was remembering how Xandra all those years ago had fallen to pieces while trying to convince Coggi she was not human. Now it was his turn to tell her who she really was. He and Xandra had rehearsed this initial meeting a thousand times, but rehearsal was never the same as reality, not when dealing with unknowns. Thankfully he was not alone, his bi-gender personality affording him an advantage: dual support from within.

“Coggi, I am from Geoffreys, an old friend of yours. I also know your sister well. You had an accident at your last assignment, you lost some of your memories. That is why your mother never talks about such things. She doesn't want to hurt you.”

“A sister?” Coggi exclaimed, “Really. Oh, wow! What's her name?”

“Xandra,” Paighton replied struggling to remain calm.

Coggi thought for a while, tried to imagine the name, searched for it but nothing came out. She said, “This is an amazing story, Paighton. Please stay a while and tell me more. I can't believe it, but something about you says I should trust you – like I *do* know you.”

And there it was... Where rehearsal collapses and reality begins. Now what? Paighton dug into his immense psychological background and willed his selves to hang on. He had to. He couldn't let this fall apart. He was the spearhead of an operation months in planning and he had been chosen to face Coggi. He couldn't let his colleagues down but more importantly he couldn't let this beautiful android die. She, Paighton, then replied:

“Coggi, there are so many people that love you and so many people that mean you harm. Before I continue you must trust me.”

Coggi smiled. She liked his honesty. “Why are you here? What do you do?”

“I'm working as a technician to upgrade security for a few weeks. I'm not with ASL, I'm just under contract, like you.”

Coggi was melting. The man seated next to her was so utterly gorgeous and so forthcoming, she could not help herself, she was becoming thoroughly intoxicated by him. Finally she had met someone unafraid to face her. A man whom she had once known... now forgotten. He had a tenderness about him that reminded her of a woman though a man he was. It was comforting.

“Were we close friends, like partners, or something?” she asked, nervously.

Paighton raised an eyebrow, let his femininity answer. “We were in love. You and me and all of our friends. We were like a band. We all loved each other. But you and I never had a relationship. Not a personal partnership. You were closest to your sister than any of us could ever have been.”

“Was one of them your girlfriend?”

Paighton breathed in. Wondered if this was the right

moment. How much could Coggi take in at one time? Yet, it was like talking to an old friend and he couldn't hold back. "Yes, kind of. Lynn and Phie, they were my girlfriends."

"... Two girlfriends?" Coggi said with surprise.

"Well, not exactly girlfriends. More like sisters."

Coggi chuckled. Then on a serious note: "You say I had an accident. You say people mean me harm. Will you explain?"

"Coggi. We will meet again. If you don't mind I will log my temporal implant to yours. I will call you when I know it is safe to do so. Don't call me. Promise? I'd love to talk more but I am on duty."

A nod... A kiss would have been too much to ask for though both wanted one. Initial contact had been made. Now it was time for Johnny, Frankie and Xandra to work their magic before the next encounter. If Coggi was to be broken apart and put back together, it had to be done by all, from all sides – a joint procedure.

Paighton left... Coggi left in a daze. She at once felt full again; of what she was not sure. She had not felt like this in so many years. How many she could not recall? Only that she knew it was real. Her feelings were real. Now she knew it was possible, that the hole in her heart was ...

Chapter Two

Xandra walked into ASL Conscious Level Department at six the following morning. Four empty seats were lined up in a row in front of monitor screens, another six occupied beyond. On the opposite wall of the sprawling office another ten occupied seats hummed with activity. Code analysts were running SAPs in Sphere locations deemed too dangerous for prolonged human activity, such as the power plant and hazardous waste containment facilities. Though less sophisticated in personality development than The Society's androids, they were physically identical.

She shook her head, looked at Frankie, then at her escort, ASL's Colonel Plank, a tall, thin man with huge eyebrows and a slight mustache. She gave her orders:

“Are you kidding me?” she groaned demonstratively. “How can you possibly work effectively like this? No, no! Ocular displays

only. No screens except one by the board table; blacked-out room; two seats for now with touch consoles, one for Johnny and one for me”

Frankie nodded, looked at The Colonel. He nodded back. It was done. By 0800 a black, sound-proofed partition had been built separating ASL code analysts from them. They had a dark room about 40 by 40 feet, a dim, blue luminous ceiling panel the only hint of light. Frankie was assigned a crew and Xandra's requests were being met bit by bit. Johnny and Xandra needed to access the high tier network on the military Orbiter SRC1, and Frankie was the key. They gave her the rest of the morning and she did not fail them... She found the way in.

Frankie's backdoor experience was phenomenal. ASL was being treated to a whole new world of insider, military knowledge. Orbiter SRC1 was using antiquated technology to fool ASL, a narrow beam, short wave radio signal that penetrated the Sphere's protective ionosphere and locked into their main power supply feeding the city. They could interface anywhere.

Within minutes Johnny and Xandra were linked into Orbiter's CL Logs, listening to determine which code analyst was working with Coggi. It didn't take long; Xandra merged with Gregg on the Orbiter, though he did not know it. She had his grid and code mapping in her mind but there was little she could do about it. She needed those seats desperately. Then, all she would have to do was wait for him to take a piss or go for lunch and she would be TII from CL in The Sphere with her little sister, once again. Where were those seats?

Total Immersion Interface (TII) allowed the code analyst to penetrate the mind of an SAP without harm, to direct and influence behaviour and to make any adjustments to cognitive structures. It was a means of insuring development while monitoring their success. Only under extreme circumstances would it be necessary to take full control of an SAP in the event of imminent danger or catastrophic cognitive failure. Code analysts were guardian angels, parents of the SAPs with whom they were charged. They loved

them like their own children. That is how it used to be with Xandra and Coggi, Paighton and Phie, but now the military had control of Coggi and no such love was on offer – it was likely pure carnage.

Frankie was left to finish her patches and switching while the rest of the team sat away in one corner of the department to discuss developments. Two ASL minders stood by, listening in.

“As you know,” Xandra began, “Frankie managed to dupe the CL mapping for all SAPs in those final days before we were kicked off Orbiter CY714. Frankie is installing a library here in our system which you can access if need be. Meanwhile, I always used to copy the coding and formulas I created to develop Coggi – even her self-development. A lot of her memories are included in those files I kept.”

Paighton interrupted. “But you can't just drop them all in – too noticeable.”

“Exactly. It has to be done bit by bit,” Xandra affirmed. “And you, Paighton, on the ground, must warn her not to speak of any of it to anyone. Her character, too; she must remain convincingly unemotional.”

Paighton nodded. He stood out among the group, the only one wearing colour, a beige suit. “Sure. Just let me know when I can approach her and speak openly without that Gregg guy in her head.”

“Exactly. Perhaps even today at lunch break.”

“And me?” Johnny spoke up. “Guess I'm chasing down the other two SAPs.”

Xandra looked up at her tall colleague. “Yes, for now it's just a matter of identifying them and their locations. But things will get tricky later on when we have to extract them.” She stood up, could see Frankie trying to catch her attention. “Back in a sec,” she remarked.

Johnny turned to Paighton. “I loved the work you did yesterday, man. You have such a cool touch. Coggi was totally

taken in by you. I'm a bit of an oaf when it comes to that sort of thing.”

“Jo-boy, I do have an advantage. That's not to say you don't have some pretty awesome male qualities.”

“You think?” Johnny was blushing, though it did not show in the dim light through his black complexion. He had always been attracted to Paighton, from way back when his younger colleague had first set foot in CL on Orbiter CY714. A beautiful boy with long, black hair, so friendly and intuitive. Johnny's dilemma, however, was that they were both men and he couldn't express himself openly – he was bound and confused by his own sexuality. In defiance, he thought, by occasionally hinting, he might be able to break through and distract his own fears.

Paighton knew at once. “Johnny, you and I are like brother and sister. That's why we both work so well together. Let's keep it that way, at least until we get through this mess. I love you too, in my own way.”

Their thoughts were then cut short. Xandra had come back with news that two seats with consoles were operational. Frankie was piggy-backing return transmissions to the Orbiter for Johnny's infiltration and updates on Logs, while Xandra's link to Coggi would be internal. ASL code analysts would be seated nearby, monitoring their every move. It was time for Paighton's next meeting with Coggi. Once he got the all clear from Xandra that Gregg was on lunch break, he would make implant contact and hopefully a chance encounter at the Bio-Lab Galley.

Paighton retrieved the time in his ocular display. He had half an hour before lunch at noon. He got up, nodded and left the department. He descended a flight of stairs and walked out onto a large platform adorned with trees. It was an odd city of levels, ramps and chutes heading out in all directions, apparently oblivious to gravitational concerns. A myriad of embedded counter-coils played havoc with the mind.

The city was surprisingly open and uncluttered. Platforms,

parks and residential housing clung to the circumference of the sphere, offices scattered among them. From his position he could see the entire central section, an open space with few visual interruptions. Three circular parks hung suspended in the middle, each possibly half a mile in diameter, connected by a large, transparent elevation chute that could carry hundreds of people up and down by counter-coil.

He stepped forwards onto a ramp heading for the top park. As his soles met with the shinny, green surface a ripple-seat rose like water behind him. He sat down on the imaginary 'fountain'. It was comfortable and soft. He was sped out across the cavernous, open space passing many coming in the opposite direction. Most smiled, some gave a little wave. It was a happy place, he thought. He spent his time meandering slowly between levels, stopping to chat with passers-by, always conscious that he was heading in the direction of Bio-Lab.

I-Log CLX01: *Paighton. Xandra here. You are free on comms to Coggi. She is heading for the Galley. I'll be TII with her in ten minutes, just for a minute or two to alter some coding.*

I-Log CLX01-p: *Got it. On my way.*

He made contact with Coggi immediately. She was delighted. She waited with anticipation in the galley... longing even. Then saw him as he came over and gestured that he sit beside her. A seat rose up and a meal opened out in front of him.

“Paighton. So nice of you to think of me.”

“I've been thinking about you all morning,” he said with a smile that made her cringe.

“Well, that's sweet of you to say, but I hardly think it is true.”

“Coggi, there are things I'm going to tell you, some nice, some not. Remember: don't tell anyone and don't think about them. People are watching you and they must not notice any change in your behavior.”

“What are you talking about?” Coggi laughed nervously.

Paighton was waiting for Xandra. He continued. “Three years ago you saved humanity and almost all life in the Galaxy from an evil and twisted enemy. We were there with you, your sister, too. You are the most incredibly gifted person. You are a hero, and yet you don't even know what you did.”

“Don't be silly,” Coggi frowned. “You must have the wrong Coggi. I'm not a soldier.”

“There is only one –”

He was interrupted.

I-Log CLX01: *Raising threshold and going TII, now!*

“Listen, Coggi,” Paighton carried on. “Your memories will slowly start to come back. Be prepared, be strong. I am a friend to be trusted, you will know that soon,” he said as he watched her slowly slipping away from him. Her expression went blank, her eyes descended to the table and a hand slowly rose up to her cheek. Her hand. Then his on hers. “Stay with me, Coggi.”

Slowly her head began to rise, eye-lids fluttered and then pupils wide and staring.

“Paighton. Oh my god. I *do* know you. I remember you, some conversation or other about fighting fear. You were such a dear friend, but it's all rather fragmented.”

“There. See?”

“It was Lynn. Oh my, what a lovely woman.” Coggi took his hand and squeezed it tightly. “But, how did you do that? You never said a word. I just... I just –”

“I didn't do it. Your sister did. Can you see her?”

“Where,” Coggi gasped, looking around.

“No. In your mind. Can you visualize her, sitting with you, talking to you on a bed.”

“What..? Oh, god, yes! Her name is Xandra. I see her now.

She is so beautiful, and just like me,” Coggi replied, her eyes beginning to water. “But how? How can she be doing this?”

Paighton pulled back just a little. “Xandra is here with us. She is working to bring your memories back to you.”

“Here? At ASL HQ?”

“Yes.”

“Take me to her.”

Paighton shook his head. “I can't. Not now. But soon, I promise.”

“Why? Why won't you take me to her now?”

“It's too dangerous right now. You need more of your memories restored before we can save you and return you to her.” He wiped her eyes. “Now, cheer up, stay calm. Your heart is racing. Just try and forget about this meeting. Focus on your work and then perhaps tomorrow we can meet again for lunch. Perhaps this evening.”

“You are leaving?”

“Yes,” Paighton nodded. “People are watching and listening to everything we do. I can only get a few minutes with you alone when I know we are safe.”

It came out of nowhere: “I love you, Paighton,” Coggi exclaimed, throwing her arms around his neck and giving him a huge hug.

“I love you, too, Coggi,” he whispered. Then he was gone.

Outside in one of the many balcony parks Paighton let the tears fall freely. If he couldn't hold them in, how was Coggi to hold herself together? She was tough, but he was wondering just how much of her personality the military had wiped, whether she was still as tenacious and feisty as before. She was going to need it all if they were going to pull this thing off.

I-Log CLX01-p: *How is she doing, Xandra? Is she still in*

one piece?

I-Log CLX01: She is doing fine, Paighton. Much better than you, you silly suck. Her heart rate is down and she is preparing to leave. Withdrawing from TII. Gate closure in 30 seconds. See you in a bit.

Now the waiting game. Would Orbiter SRC1's CL code analyst, Gregg, notice any changes in Coggi's personality, or spot any variances in her coding? Was he that good? Xandra had known where to hide any new codes in Coggi's personality. But it was still a cat-and-mouse game, it just depended who was smarter. Gregg was ruthless and egotistical, traits which often blinkered his concentration. One thing Xandra had on her side was selflessness. It would be her ace card – it always had been.

Johnny, meanwhile, had had some partial success. He had located one of the unknown SAPs through an analyst during Limited Observation procedures. Though he could not see what the analyst was seeing he got enough from the feeds to know his name, position and implant module number. Now he could be tracked internally, possibly even directed. The other SAP was still a mystery, only that she was female. One other nasty piece of information had surfaced during his infiltration: Each SAP had an auto-destruct mechanism embedded in their implants, with enough potential to take out all in its vicinity.

Paighton wandered in a few minutes later looking a little rough. Johnny and Xandra both stared at him knowingly, then got up and walked over to him. They gave him a hug, he deserved it. They knew the pressure he was under and the enormous emotional turmoil he had had to endure. Coggi was as close to Phie and Lynn – his earlier prodigy SAPs – as any could be, and he had lost them both. Xandra had heard every word, she also knew Paighton better than anyone. If he wanted to fall in love with her little sister then she would gladly step aside and let it happen.

A third TII seat was being hastily prepared for Paighton. While Johnny was still plugging away, familiarizing himself with CL on Orbiter SRC1, Paighton could drop in to limited observation status with the newly found SAP and make an assessment. It was agreed that Coggi was still gutsy enough to take on the pressure, and that Paighton should visit her that very evening after work. They would have to wait and see how CL on Orbiter SRC1 handled night-time operations. There might be a decent enough window of opportunity to work with her. Time was not on their side, they had to work fast.

SAP Turbid was an aeronautics engineer, Paighton found out later that afternoon. Like Coggi, he had been stripped of most memories other than childhood. Turbid's coding was extremely efficient, devoid of emotion; he had the personality of a rock. It would be possible to add some soft spots to his character but it was not possible in just a few weeks, which is all they had. If Coggi was to approach him in an effort to convince him to escape with them, he would definitely respond indifferently – possibly aggressively. Sedation was an alternative. Coggi could then beguile him. Somehow all three SAPs had to board their getaway vessel unforced and without raising suspicions. Hopefully there wasn't a fourth.

It was Johnny who had brought it up – a fourth, or perhaps more. How could they know? With the limited time that they had to extract Coggi, how many others might surface. ASL minders were forever on their backs. They wanted to know. Tension was mounting. However, Frankie was not convinced of a fourth. There were only three code analysts on Orbiter SRC1 and only two gates. She had a feeling and her intuition was well respected.

That evening, Coggi opened up her quarters to Paighton without hesitation. Johnny had assessed that CL on Orbiter SRC1 closed down at 1800 hrs precisely. Automated systems only recorded bodily functions; there was no audio/visual monitoring. Then SAPs were dropped into sleep mode at 2100 during week days.

“Paighton, where did you come from? How can my sister make me remember things? Who are these dangerous people you keep talking about?”

Paighton smiled. “Slow down... Too many questions at once.”

“So where do we start? I need to know everything.”

“Of course you do,” Paighton replied, sitting close by. “And you will. First let me explain that your sister, Xandra, is listening to our conversation right now, through your cerebral implant. She can talk to you, too. Would you like that?”

Coggi jumped up. “Xandra, Xandra! Can you hear me?”

“Yes sweetheart. I'm here. I can hear you.”

“Make me remember more, please,” Coggi begged.

“OK, my love.” Xandra replied. “Kneel on the floor in front of Paighton, hold his hands and trust him. Now close your eyes and I will give you back your memories of the first time we met, in a shuttle hangar on Orbiter CY714 where you worked.” Xandra paused intentionally. “You will also remember how you felt at the time. Trust your feelings or you may get hurt. We are here to help you. We love you.”

Paighton watched her eyes close. His pain was unbearable, he could not close his, but he knew what was coming and the awful truth that was about to tear his precious Coggi apart. He was her support. If she fell apart it was up to him to put her back together again. He now knew exactly how Xandra had felt that evening when she first confronted Coggi in the hangar; his admiration for Xandra was immeasurable – how the hell had she coped? Could he?

A few minutes passed and then one eye opened; the face that stared back at Paighton, expressionless. He waited. Words were not fit for this moment. Coggi was deep in thought. Then the other eye twitched and opened. Suddenly the crushing force of Coggi's hands around his fingers made him wince and grit his teeth, But he held on...

“Why?” Coggi shouted. Why are humans so damn arrogant?”

“Are you OK with that?” he asked, trying to redirect.

Coggi stared at him. It was a serious look. She said: “You have had three years to answer my question. Don't you think it's about time you told me how you really feel?”

Paighton did not need to consider what she was talking about, he had considered it over and over since that time. He knew exactly how he wished to reply – she couldn't have asked him at a better time.

“Coggi, you have every right to be a human. You are more than human. That is why we came to rescue you; to give you back your dignity, your personality and a life you deserve.”

Her lips quivered on hearing his response. Suddenly she realized what she was doing and released his white fingers. “Oh shit! I'm so sorry. Did I break them?”

Paighton laughed. All sorts of pain vanished in that one word she uttered: 'Sorry'. She was going to get through it, his fingers possibly not; his relief was tremendous.

“Paighton, is Johnny here, too?”

“Yes.”

“Lieutenant Allen?”

“He's helping. He's nearby.”

“And the other SAPs on Base? Did they all end up like me?”

“No, Coggi...” Paighton spoke openly because he knew that the truth was the best way forwards, cruel thought it was going to be. “They were terminated. By order of the military.”

“Oh, no! Sweet Phie. Opus and Wells. All gone?”

“You are the only survivor.”

Coggi's head sank. “Is there any chance... like... like that we could bring them back?”

“Possibly, in the future,” Paighton replied, “But first we've got to get you and the other two SAPs out of here.”

“There are two more here?” she groaned, taking up his white fingers and rubbing them gently with hers.

Paighton nodded. “You were taken as dispensable military hardware – drones – objects of destruction, with no thought for the people you really were. We have to get you all out.”

Coggi thought for a bit as she rubbed his hands some more. “So... Who are you working for if not the military?”

“Your sister.”

“What?”

“It was her idea to strike a deal with ASL to get you out of here.”

“Xandra!” Coggi shouted at the ceiling. “You risked your own life for me?”

“For me, too, sweetheart. I want you back.”

Paighton's fingers were beginning to turn pink, the numbness leaving them. He reached one hand up and touched Coggi's cheek. He looked into her eyes, knowing he was also looking into Xandra's and said, “I love you both. I'm so happy to be here with you, to be a part of this moment. I am honored and blessed.”

I-Log CLX03: Pulling out of limited observation status. I need to wipe my trails. I'll leave you two by yourselves. Paighton, you have one hour before departure. Don't mess up.

Coggi leaned forwards and gave Paighton a tentative kiss on the lips.

“I've never done this before,” she said with a smile. “Have you?”

“No, Coggi. I've never kissed anyone before.” Then pressed his lips to hers again.

“But I always tried to imagine what it was like,” she murmured.

“Me, too. But this is way better than anything I could possibly have imagined,” he replied leaning forwards and pulling her to him. He then lifted her up, rose to his feet and carried her to her bed. He laid her gently down, kissed her again and then lay down beside her, staring ever into her deep, walnut eyes.

She, looking back, felt a yearning to be touched, to be accepted, to be loved. He was the one who would carry her dreams to fruition, she was sure of that. Memories were still flooding in, her brain awash with thoughts of their few days in company all those years ago, as if they were yesterday, desires she had had back then with which she did not know what to do – yet dared to now. As his fine, dark hair fell about her cheeks and his lips descended upon hers, she gave a little whimper: “Thank you.”

Sergeant Gregg Bruntwhistle strode into his commander's office the following afternoon. His fair hair was buzz-cut. He had a short, stocky build with bulging arms that a shirt could hardly contain. He explained his predicament, said he did not want to be stated on record at this stage, simply that SAP 16-32-C was acting oddly out of character. Her overnight readouts showed frequent peak levels of fluid pressure, even though she had been in sleep mode. Then he had noted her performance during the morning greatly enhanced. He would have said she was happy had he reason to believe so.

His commander reminded him that SAPs had autonomous development processes as part of their overall personalities; that he should take a good look at her code threads and report back. He also suggested another chat via implant, to allay his concerns. 16-32-C was their best agent in the field, there would be no question of terminating her unless the sergeant could come up with anything more than a few doubts and hunches.

The sergeant departed. The chat was a good idea. It had been several weeks since their last. He went back down to CL Department and sat to one side in a comfortable chair, contemplating his approach and the questions he might wish to ask her. Somehow he had to get inside her head. He wasn't going to dig through reams of code as his commander had suggested, he did that everyday and besides, any new codes were his. Her autonomous development up to now had been practically nil.

Johnny was sifting through Orbiter CL logs for the afternoon, still trying to track down the third SAP. He had a name, Farron, but no occupation. Xandra was picking through Coggi's code file, trying to list them in order of importance when Johnny howled at her. She looked up. He was stabbing at his ears. The message was clear. She immediately patched in to CL on Orbiter SRC1.

"You getting that," Johnny boomed in her brain. *"Gregg. He's chatting with Coggi through her implant, like they are best buddies. What's he up to?"*

Xandra shrugged. This was very unusual. She listened in.

"... You sound unhappy," Gregg was saying. "Is everything okay?"

"What, me? Yes, no, I'm fine. What makes you think that?"

"Just not your usual self, I guess. You are always so bubbly, Coggi." He was using a classic reversal routine to flush out her true feelings.

"I'm fine. Honest"

"Good... So here is some great news. I got my clearance," Gregg threw in. "Two months and I'll be working in the same Lab as you. Isn't that great? We can finally meet."

There was a pause. Coggi did not immediately respond. Then it came out in all it's shocking clarity.

"You know, that would be great, Gregg," Coggi explained, *"But you realize I've met someone in the last few days and we're*

kind of close. Don't get the wrong impression. I'd still like us to be friends."

"... Who is he?"

"Oh. An old friend."

Gregg's voice was straining. "What do you mean? You said you didn't have any friends."

"Well... I... I guess I... I mean, from way back. You know? When I was a kid."

"That's not possible. You are lying to me, Coggi. You are trying to hurt me."

Coggi froze. Why would he say it was not possible? Who was this guy, Gregg. Suddenly Paighton's words came crashing down all around her. *"Don't tell anyone. No one. They are watching, they are listening"*. She instantly switched off her implant comms with Gregg and slumped into a chair. What a fool she had been. Her happiness had overtaken her, she wanted to express herself, it was only natural, but now she could have jeopardized everything. She wanted to call up Paighton, to apologize, to seek comfort, yet knew she could not. Not now, not anymore. They would be listening.

Johnny and Xandra were staring at each other. Both knew the situation was hopeless, they could do nothing to intervene. It was 1600 hrs. Xandra then swung her chair around and bellowed at Paighton, who was in limited observation with Turbin. Paighton looked up, saw panic and dropped out instantly.

"What's going on?" he asked.

"It's Coggi. She just spilled it to Gregg in a private chat," Xandra cried.

"Shit! What? Me?"

"Yes, *you!*" she growled. "You went too far last night, didn't you? You fool."

Xandra stared in silence at Paighton for just long enough

before carrying on. “You messed this up, now you fix it, and fast. I don't care how you do it but those analysts better not find out we're down here, or we're busted and Coggi is doomed... Do you understand?”

Paighton nodded blankly. His mind was racing. Everyone was hurting and it was his fault. His best friends, his colleagues who trusted him. He had let them down because of selfish lust. He looked down at his console to hide his disgrace and his console replied. There it was, a simple play staring back at him.

“Johnny,” Paighton called out, “Anyone working with Turbin right now?”

“No. The three analysts are in conference. Only Coggi is being monitored.”

Paighton didn't usually make rash decisions. He was almost always cautious in the extreme when it came to his work. He was proud of that. However, in this very minute, he was about to break his entire ethos. It had to happen. What other choice did he have? He dropped his hands to the console and patched back in. With lightening efficiency he pulled up his files on Phie, copied several threads of code and ran them through Turbin's layout. Sedation codes were easily spotted, these fine threads would not show up so bold. Anything he was about to do had to comply with Turbin's will and state of mind, otherwise there could be a disaster.

I-Log CLP02: Paighton going Total Immersion Interface with Turbin. Raising gate threshold in 5... 4... 3... And, now!

Xandra and Johnny could only watch in wonder. They had no idea what was about to happen. Did Paighton? All he could hope for was Coggi's brilliance to shine through.

“Hi Coggi. It's Turbin. I just wanted to thank you for last night. I had a beautiful time with you, even though my fingers still hurt.”

“Turbin. Er, who is... What? Your fingers? Oh my god you sweet thing. You are brilliant. I love you, too.”

“We'll meet again soon. I promise.”

“OK, Turbin. I'm looking forward to it very much.”

I-Log CLP03: *Lowering gate threshold. Out of TII with Turbin in 20 seconds.*

Xandra smiled. Then a tear. It was all she could do. What a brilliant move. What a beautiful man to have come to her rescue under the constraints of such awful pressure. Then Johnny was waving. Paighton looked up as Xandra swiveled in her chair. The implant contact had been picked up by CL Orbiter SRC1. A lot of chatter. Confusion. And now a consensus: Somehow a cross link between the two SAPs had lead to their connection. A code analyst error, or pair of analysts working to rectify the same problem. A mix up to be fixed, to be hushed up...

And Coggi? Xandra was shaking her head in amazement – So astute. Coggi had picked up Paighton's game in a second and had played along, knowing what she had done and knowing that her knight in shining armor had come to her rescue, that the team had been watching and protecting her all along. *My darling Coggi. I love you sweetheart.*

Chapter Three

Medical Officer Farron was just sitting down to lunch at a park-side restaurant with colleagues when she was interrupted by a smooth and eloquent voice. She looked up to see a woman of stunning features framed in flowing and wavy, auburn hair.

“Hi. My name is Doctor Coggi. I'm with Bio-Lab. Are you Officer Farron?”

“Yes. Nice to meet you. I've heard a lot about your advances in new drug therapy. Please, sit with us. Tell us how things are progressing.”

Coggi purposely sat opposite Farron so she could be face on. She saw thin features, a forward pointing nose, blue eyes and coarse blonde hair cut to shoulder length. She was pretty; perhaps 26 years of age. Coggi knew she was looking into Paighton's eyes and that her sister was with her for support. It calmed the jitters. She had to

befriend Farron and the more the team knew of Farron's formulation and integrity the greater chance she had at succeeding. It wasn't just friendship she required of Farron, it was trust.

Coggi discussed her program and invited Farron's group to a lecture she would be giving the following week. All the while Coggi would flash out her radiant smile, any opportunity to look Farron straight in the eyes. Paighton was in limited observation, hurriedly scrolling through code, re-formulating to make Farron more receptive. Xandra was making suggestions to Coggi, keeping her afloat and on form; questions that might be asked, mannerisms and view points to peak the curiosity.

“I love your ear-rings,” Coggi remarked. “Aren't they from Jasper Colony? I have seen that particular work before, I'm sure?”

“Doctor, you are very well informed. Yes they are,” Farron said with a little shake of the head.

“Coggi, okay,” came back the reply. “Not, Doctor. We are on a first name bases.”

“So true, Coggi,” Farron nodded, “And so clever of you to know that these came from Jasper,” she flicked at an ear. “Have you been to that asteroid?”

There was a silence in Coggi's mind. She became apprehensive, smiled weakly, was unable to speak feeling that anything she might say off the cuff could screw up everything, when Xandra came through for her.

“... It's a hell of a place, but the market is simply amazing, don't you think? So many vendors from all over the galaxy.”

Farron beamed. Paighton grabbed the opportunity. Threads of code were gently manipulated as she came back with her response:

“I only ever went once. Really scary place. You are a brave woman, Coggi. I am so glad to have met you.”

“Farron, when you are next on leave why don't we take a little detour and hunt out some other cool locations. I have a bucket-

list full of wild places.”

Farron stared blankly at Coggi. “Really? You are so kind. I would love that. I don't get to go out and explore much anymore, just a few odd memories – you know?”

“It is done, then,” Coggi lit up. “Next opportunity to vacate and we shall visit somewhere exotic. Hmm... Where..? Have you got a place in mind?”

“I don't know. I... I... sorry, I can't think of anywhere right now. But thanks, anyway.”

“Of course not,” Xandra blew in, knowing exactly what was happening and why Farron was struggling. “We'll stay in touch and compare notes,” she quipped through Coggi. “It was lovely talking to you.”

Coggi excused herself, said she had a meeting to attend. Not a lie; possibly the most emotional meeting of her life was about to take place.

She took a ramp up to HQ Offices high in the sphere, then a chute to third level. She walked a corridor out onto a balcony, then turned right up a flight of steps. Tears were welling in her eyes, she could not help it, soaking her lashes and pouring down her cheeks. She reached a door, it dissolved on reading her profile, giving her no time to wipe her face dry before being confronted by a group of bodies in a dimly lit room: ASL's CL Department.

She stopped abruptly, her eyes trying to accustom themselves to the darkness, trying to focus through the tears, when she saw someone running towards her. As it was almost upon her she suddenly realized who was approaching and let out an emotional squeal. Xandra crashed into Coggi, sobbing and groping at her little sister. She wouldn't let her go. Years she had waited for this moment; so many hours, days, months of agonizing and repetitive research. It had finally paid off... She had her Coggi back.

Johnny, Frankie and Paighton gave them their moment. They deserved it. Finally they approached though Xandra and Coggi were still both glued to each other, rocking back and forth,

crying and cooing – a love so powerful it would have taken an explosion to tear them apart. Coggi reached out first, to Johnny with a touch to his cheek, then Frankie a squeeze. Raising herself on tip-toes she then gave Paighton a kiss and a knowing smile... He had saved her life, she would never forget that.

A large figure then stepped up and introduced himself as Colonel Plank. Coggi unbound herself from her sister though their hands remained tightly clasped.

“Colonel, I must apologize,” Coggi said defiantly, looking at his ASL insignia. “I have not been myself lately. However I now have all my wits thanks to these wonderful friends, and I am here to help in any way I can.”

“Appreciated, Doctor Coggi. You have shown tremendous courage. Even though you instigated our downfall three years ago, I am not one to bare a grudge towards someone of your extraordinary nature. You beat us fair and square. I am impressed. Please carry on.”

There wasn't much time, 1300 hrs was looming. They had a quick meeting to discuss the way forwards, how they would manage Farron and then Coggi was reluctantly leaving.

A few minutes later Gregg and his two colleagues entered CL Department on Orbiter SRC1, dressed in military black. They checked their monitors, took a peak at the screens and then sat around a table.

“What have you got?” Gregg asked around.

“Well, sir. We ran diagnostics to correlate their brain and corpus functions with playbacks over the last week. See if anything matched up,” one said.

“And?”

“We think they met at the Thanksgiving Festival. Visuals show them off to one side, chatting. Though his emotional status was little affected, hers showed fluctuations concurrent with affection. Then the other night a similar pattern, though no visuals,

only automated night monitoring.”

“What does Maintenance Level think of her over-night pressure level peaks?”

“Normal. Anxieties and stuff. SAPs dream, too, you know.”

“I know that, stupid.” Gregg frowned. “So how did their implants link?”

“We're working on it. They are unlinked at present, but we have yet to figure out how the link first occurred. Obviously one of us slipped up.”

“Right. This will not go to Internal Logs. Assure me of that. We keep this to ourselves.”

“Sir!”

Gregg stiffened in his chair. Then spoke again: “Friends. They called each other friends. Like they had known each other from before. But in all my back-tracking I see no possibility that they could ever have met, not even in childhood. Any thoughts?”

The other colleague responded. “16-33-T is unlikely to have been concerned about relationships or meeting people, although he has self-developed some milder coding just recently. I'd say 16-32-C latched onto some error codes we mis-threaded and we never saw the connection. You can't mess with her, she is far superior in intellect to the others, she auto-develops with ease, and could easily have become aware of 16-33-T within seconds. Even though we might have corrected the threading, my guess is we were too late.”

“I won't let this happen again,” Gregg said sternly. “I will work only with 16-32-C. No one else but me. Got it?”

“Sir!”

“This is a highly classified and complex mission and I'm given a couple of losers to help me pull this off... Idiots. You have been warned.”

“Sir!”

“Now. Get on 16-34-F and give me some good news. You are TII with her this afternoon. I want results.”

Lieutenant Allen disembarked and was taken by shuttle to a hotel in London City, Mars. A check of the guest list showed him that his contact was already settled in. A quick body wash, a change of attire and he descended to the cocktail bar. It was a Wednesday evening, 2000 hrs.

“General Minkowski. Congratulations on your recent promotion. Always a pleasure, and so good of you to hear me out.”

“Lieutenant. Thank you.” A hand was extended. “You haven't changed a bit.”

“Thank you, sir.” Allen sat down. “But I suspect sitting behind a desk these days is less rewarding than commanding a battle cruiser.” He smiled weakly. “For myself, the same thing applies. I am an office clerk these days.”

The General muttered. “I heard about your demotion, Alexandra sent me a message last year I think it was – at least that – perhaps two. You disobeyed orders. What can you expect? I hope this meeting has nothing to do with any more shenanigans. I'm retiring shortly; not a black mark on my records. So be brief.”

“General, it is about Alexandra.”

“Figured as much.”

“General, you don't just have one daughter, you have two.”

“Don't be ridiculous.”

Allen raised his head and looked directly into the Colonel's eyes. “You have twenty five years of life to look forward to, out of the military, a retired and single old man on Geoffreys all alone. Not a very pleasant thought, I must say.”

“Alexandra won't come back to me, Lieutenant, if that is

what you are hinting at.”

Allen shifted in his seat. “She will, General, I know she loves you... has always. And now she needs you more than ever.”

“Don't pester me with emotional drivel. I know my daughter.” The General looked hard at Allen. “So what's this rubbish about another daughter? More drivel?”

“Alexandra adopted a sister. She wanted a family and love. That is why you rarely see her anymore. The girl she adopted was the android that saved our entire human race, single handedly. You know who I'm talking about. A hero who deserves a heart. But she was never given one. She was never thanked for saving humanity... You were. After the Titan Offensive you were proclaimed a hero.”

“But she's just an android.”

“No, General. She is as human as you or I. Perhaps even more so. Her name is Coggi.”

“Sure, you CL folk are pretty good at your job. So?”

“Like father like daughter. Alexandra is my hero. It runs in your family. Now you are three!”

General Minkowski was trying to put it all together. Emotions aside, Lt. Allen was making some sense. But an android was not human. He could not be convinced of that. Privately he had admitted some sympathy towards that young woman and her incredible bravery. Outwardly he could not. Androids were machines designed for a function. He would be a laughing stock if he called one of them his daughter. And besides, hadn't they all been taken down after the incident? What was Lieutenant Allen talking about?

“Help, you say. Alexandra needs my help. What kind of trouble has my meddlesome daughter got herself into, now?”

“Your daughters will be on a cargo vessel departing ASL HQ next week. They need a military escort to the Titan White Hole. They want to come and live with you on Geoffreys.”

“Preposterous! Has Alexandra gone completely mad? Is she now in league with ASL?”

“No, General. Alexandra went in to rescue her sister, Coggi, from certain annihilation – your daughter... I told you she was a hero.”

“Lieutenant. Even if I felt obliged to help, Titan is out of my jurisdiction. The answer is, no! You can tell Alexandra that directly.”

“I am afraid I can't, sir. She is silent to the outside worlds. I have no comms with her.”

Lt. Allen rose from his chair and thanked The General for his time. Then left for his room. He cursed his stupidity on rising the chute. He had been too forward, too quick to introduce Coggi. It wasn't as if The General was an unknown to him. He had served with him before, knew of his ruthless and cold nature. Yet still, there he had been trying to warm the General's heart, as if he were trying to melt a frozen methane lake on Titan with nothing but a blow dryer.

What was he to do? His best shot at getting Xandra to safety had failed spectacularly. He had had a list of options, most now scratched off. There *was* one other, though. He dreaded it. But if it had to come to that then he would do it. He would do anything for Xandra.

It seemed from discussions that Turbin was going to be a major obstacle. All four were in agreement; Farron seemed like she could be receptive with a little more work, but Turbin was unlikely to be swayed. Worst case scenario: Someone would have to walk him out, under TII. One of the dangers yet to be fully understood were the auto-destruct mechanisms each SAP had embedded. Were they controlled by Orbiter's CL Department? Could they be detonated by stress levels or were they self-destruct devices?

Frankie's suggestion made most sense. Turbin's boss could order him to Shuttle Bay on the day of their departure under the pretext of personally overseeing the arrival of highly sensitive military equipment. He could then be sedated or physically restrained on board if need be. It was decided. Frankie's idea was a hit. Johnny would continue to work on Turbin and Paighton with Farron.

Xandra remained at the round table with Frankie, explaining to her ASL minders their progress and their problems. She glanced over now and again at her two companions in their seats and wondered what it was they were talking about. Whatever it was, she could sense an intensity. Something was going on between Johnny and Paighton. She trusted them, knowing they would not fail her nor jeopardize the mission, but still she was concerned. She wasn't sure if she should get involved, thought it best to wait a while, they were two highly educated individuals who would be able to work out their differences... if that's what it was?

A while later, Paighton got up and nodded to Xandra. It was time for his lunch date with Coggi. They would be meeting with Farron; just the three of them, as planned at Bio-Lab Galley. It was never a busy spot. Most people preferred to eat out in parks where there was always a gentle breeze and plenty of light. Automatic sprinklers rained down overnight, just enough to keep everything green and lush. In a large, spherical trashcan hurtling at thousands of miles per hour around a massive, cold planet, such delights as living plants, lizards and birds were an inspiration. The parks were a magnet, however the mission to extract three clandestine SAPs from ASL HQ would be best dealt with in seclusion.

Paighton and Coggi were seated in the galley when Farron approached, just as Xandra's Log pinged.

I-Log CLX24: *Raising gate threshold for limited observation with Farron. 10 seconds.*

“Hi, Farron. This is my boyfriend, Paighton,” Coggi exclaimed, proudly. “Paighton, meet Farron. She is a medical officer.”

Paighton stretched out a hand. Farron reluctantly took it, squeezed and smiled meekly at him. He pursed his lips. He had been inside her head, knew exactly how she felt. Waited for the inevitable.

Coggi then reached out hers. “How are you, Farron? Great that you could come.”

Their hands met briefly – then recoil... Farron's grip on Coggi's hand was instantly repelled.

“What's wrong?” Coggi queried.

“Your hand,” Farron replied, “So hard, like mine. I've always had tough skin, but I've never met anyone with the same disorder. They say it's genetic and beneficial. Are there many like us?”

They sat down. A dish of food and beverage rose before them.

Coggi spoke first. “Not so many, but Paighton is a psychoanalyst, he knows much more about it than I do.”

Farron looked at Paighton, expectantly.

“Well, yes,” Paighton said after a mouthful, “There is a problem of isolation for those who have grown up with SAP, or skin apathetic petrification.”

“I didn't know it had a name,” Farron remarked with interest, “But yes, for me isolation has been difficult to overcome. To be frank, I really don't have many... any friends. You two are lucky. That's wonderful.”

“Now, Farron,” interjected Coggi, “You can count *us* as friends.” A huge grin. Coggi had not seen that coming. The SAP switch was delightfully clever.

“Thank you. I will. But please, Paighton, carry on,” Farron queried further.

“I have worked with quite a few SAPs in my time, kind of a specialty if you like. Coggi was one of my patients, as a matter of

fact. There is an acceptance and a trust that must be gained first before you can fully understand your situation. It helps when you can see and comprehend your differences.”

“Like what?” Farron asked with enthusiasm.

I-Log CLX25: Paighton? Where are you going with this? She doesn't have all the buffers in place and I can't use sedation. It's 1235 hrs, watch your step, don't go too far until this evening.

“Farron, It's not really a lunch time conversation,” Paighton smiled. “I could go on for hours. Why don't you and Coggi pop up to my office after my last patient leaves at 1830? Then we can chat for an hour or two, if you'd like?”

“Oh, yes. I'm sorry,” Farron frowned. “I was pushing, I'm like that, I get easily side-tracked. Sorry.”

Paighton's femininity kicked in swiftly. “Knowing you are not alone is the most important part of any treatment. Not that you are ill, far from it, you are blessed. Let us guide you. Dr. Coggi is the best example I can give of a beautifully balanced individual,” he said, taking her hand. “Trust her. Learn from her. I'm sure you will enjoy her enormous intuition.”

Farron smiled. That was all Paighton needed.

At 1835 Farron, in a yellow bodysuit, and Coggi, in blue, were mounting a short flight of stairs to CL. A door at the top dissolved on recognizing Coggi.

Paighton had worked that afternoon on some significant code formulations that he wanted to apply to Farron upon her arrival. However, first would come introductions. The darkness concerned Farron at first but with a smile and a hug from Xandra and the beaming face of Johnny, her mind was put at ease. Paighton explained that they were all close colleagues and friends. They sat around the table with drinks, chatting about SAP and it's effects while Paighton withdrew to his seat.

Quite suddenly Farron rose a hand to her forehead, said she was feeling a little odd, like feint or light-headed... She did not

complain. She apologized; she was okay, at ease, pleasantly relaxed nothing more. Unbeknownst to her Paighton was inside her head and she had no idea what was really going on.

Xandra knew. Nodded and took Farron's hand to steady her as Paighton worked his magic.

She spoke softly: "Farron, my dear. You are different because you had an accident and lost your memories. The same thing happened to Coggi but I had kept her memories safe, and she now has them back. I have known Coggi since her birth. I can never retrieve your memories but we all here can try to enhance their re-growth. It may be possible."

"An accident?" Farron exclaimed, looking at Coggi. "What are you talking about?" Farron then asked, distantly.

Coggi said it as best she could. "I am a synthetic, an android, like you. We are humans to some, to others we are just machines. I and my friends here know I am human. And you are, too. You were simply not born the same way as others. But you *are* human."

"Tha...That's ridiculous," Farron spluttered, "I have a mother... and a father. I have memories of being a child."

Xandra again. "Farron. They were implanted. They are not real. I am so sorry, please take this information step by step. Don't be afraid."

"Don't be so stupid," Farron grumbled, trying in vain to argue through Paighton's new codes. "Who are you people? I don't like you. You are not nice – you are... are... why?"

"You have always known you were different," Xandra continued, hopefully. "Now you have a chance to understand and accept who you really are. Farron. You are a beautiful human being. Just a little different than most - better even some would say."

Farron looked laxly around the table, saw Coggi's smiling face, Johnny nodding in anticipation. Than a scream from behind her.

“She's dropping out. Can't contain her.” It was Paighton, he was speaking in bits. “Sedation 143z. She's breaking down. Codes splitting. The military have really messed her up. Sloppy work, she is really fragile today. Don't know why... Am *not* TII. Gate closing.”

With that Xandra caught Farron's head as it fell towards the table. She then gently lifted her up and plopped her in her lap. She squeezed Farron, brushed the hair from her face and quietly spoke to her. Coggi came over and squatted beside them, patting Farron's thigh. Johnny got up and went to his seat beside Paighton. They had only one and a half hours to put her back together before sleep mode would kick in.

A door in the black partition slid open and an ASL minder walked in. He asked Paighton if there was anything they could do to help. Four of his code analysts were still on duty. Paighton nodded in thanks, linked next door and patched through with a set of threads that needed diagnostics and repair. By 2045hrs, with just 15 minutes left, Farron was coming back to life. Paighton was dissolving the sedation code little by little.

Coggi was first to speak. “Farron, I like who I am. You know, being human is not about your body and what it's made of; being human is about your mind and what it is made of. Thoughts and memories, indecision and emotions, these are the things that make us all human. People are walking around with synthetic legs, synthetic organs and synthetic eyes. Are they any less human because of it?”

“No, Coggi,” Farron looked up with a terribly troubled face. “I'm just scared.”

“I know. I was, too, when I was first told. But you are with real friends now. Real people who know and love you. Trust them.”

Xandra gave Farron a kiss on the cheek. “Come and visit us anytime in the evening after 1800 hrs.” She turned. “Now, Coggi, you'd best get her back to her quarters.”

They left, arm in arm.

Johnny got up and came over to the table.

“Well, that was the biggest screw up in history,” he commented.

Xandra kicked him in the shin. “Jo-boy, it could have been worse, much worse.”

“True...”

“We'll just work through the night,” she demanded, “On her codes, and make absolutely sure there are no anomalies. She has to be in perfect condition tomorrow with a lovely disposition or Gregg and that lot up there,” she pointed, “might get suspicious.” She stood up. “Coggi will work with her, I know she will look out for her at lunch time. Then hopefully bring her back here tomorrow evening for a review.”

Coggi was scrambling up the steps to CL at minutes past Midday. She charged in.

“I can't find her. She's not responding to my calls. What's going on?”

Xandra gasped, ran over and hugged her sister. Then turned.

“Jo-boy,” she hollered, “Any unusual activity up there on Orbiter? Are they in a panic? Have they lost Farron, too?”

Johnny shook his head. “No, Miss Curly. Nothing to report. I'll run back through the Logs and see if I get any info on 16-34-F. Thing is, it's been surprisingly quiet this morning. Very little Log outputs. Seems they were working on codes, mostly Coggi's and Turbin's. That cross-link that Paighton made between them has got the analysts' attentions. I think they are still concerned, or muddled – or both.”

Xandra turned back and looked at Coggi. “Sweetheart, you and Boy-girl go down to Bio-Lab Galley. Have lunch. Farron may just turn up there looking for you. She's scared. Remember?”

Coggi nodded, beckoned to Paighton and they were out the

door. Xandra was then back at her seat. She swamped her console with commands and picked out Farron's protocols.

I-Log CLX07: *Going limited observation status with Farron. Raising gate threshold in 20 seconds. Johnny watch my back.*

I-Log CLX07-j: *I'm all eyes, Xandra.*

I-Log CLX07: *Coming up now. I have her on grid, she's in her quarters. But no visual. Is she still in sleep mode? Johnny, can you confirm?*

I-Log CLX07-j: *Doing my best. Don't want to alert the automated monitoring systems by treading too heavily. Where's Frankie?*

I-Log CLX07-f: *On my way.*

Frankie tore through the sliding partition door and was by Johnny's side.

She stabbed him in the shoulder. "Take the main trunk route. Don't follow the analyst's switching circuits or you will set off an alert. Drop into Farron's recorded monitor activity. Even if it's a few minutes delayed you should see a read-out that she is in sleep mode."

"OK. Got it. And yes *she is*. Sleep mode," Johnny groaned. "That's ML Department. Nothing to do with CL. How the hell do we get in there?"

"Give me a sec," Frankie urged. She made a call through to one of her techies on the other side of the partition.

I-Log CLX07-j: *Extended sleep mode confirmed, due to stress, just another half hour before she will be conscious. Frankie is going to patch me through to ML. See if I can shut it down sooner.*

I-Log CLX07: *Farron will be confused. Someone better get down to her quarters. Open up with ASL Security. Gotta be Paighton, she knows him. Call him back now.*

I-Log CLX07-j: *Affirmative.*

Paighton was escorted by Security to Farron's quarters. It was 1247 hrs. They rushed in, Paighton immediately to her bedside. Farron was lying on her side, curled up like a ball, arms wrapped tightly around her knees. Paighton knew her position was bad for circulation. He gently prized her fingers from her arms and persuaded her knees to stretch until she was almost flat. Then he rolled her onto her back.

“Farron, it's me. Paighton. Time to wake up.”

I-Log CLX07-j: *Got it. Frankie had a magic formula. It worked. Sleep mode canceled.*

I-Log CLX07: *She's stirring, circulation increasing. Cognitive awareness. She's coming up. Paighton be ready for anything.*

Eyes fluttered open. Then a startled expression.

“Where am I? Who are... you... you?”

“I am your friend. Remember?”

“Paighton? What are you doing in my quarters?” she said, looking around with concern.

“I was asked to come and see how you were. You over-slept. You didn't show up for work this morning.”

“Gosh! What time is it? My head hurts. Still feel so drowsy.”

Paighton nodded. His face was just a few inches from hers. “You had a lot of thoughts to muddle through yesterday evening. We pushed you and I'm sorry for that. How are you coping with your new discovery?”

“That!” Farron sat up. “I'm OK. Coggi and I chatted on the way back to quarters. She is a remarkable women, so strong.”

I-Log CLX07: *Get out of there, Paighton – NOW! It's almost 1300 hrs. Pulling out of limited observation status, lowering*

gate threshold in 10 seconds.

“Farron. Most importantly: stay calm.” Paighton said, rising off his knees. “Don't think or talk to anyone about your feelings. Come and see us this evening with Coggi. OK?”

Farron nodded. Paighton smiled down at her and then withdrew.

I-Log CLX07-p: Clear. Returning to CL. Paighton.

Up on Orbiter SRC1 it was anything but calm. ML Department was hammering out Logs to CL regarding an anomaly: 16-34-F had just been interfered with. Someone had terminated her sleep mode 20 minutes ahead of time – a dangerous and unauthorized procedure. All Maintenance crew had been questioned. No sign of an internal switch. Whoever it was had to have been operating from elsewhere. Gregg bellowed back that it was not his crew, either. Then changed the subject; asked how it was that her sleep mode had been extended without his knowledge.

ML reminded Gregg that two logs had been issued for their consideration during the morning, however no response had come back. So they had assumed the problem had been resolved. Not their problem...

Johnny was listening in to the back and forth. Now that Frankie had cleverly patched him with ML he could hear and read their logs, too. MLs automated night monitoring system had detected reflexive motor functions in the SAP, combined with raised cerebral temperature and pressure levels, concluding that the subject required more sleep. They were now sifting through readouts to get a better understanding. They would report back their findings within the hour.

Chapter Four

“Sir,” one of Gregg's analysts spoke up, “16-34-F had a visitor, in her quarters. Look. Just leaving as I patched in.”

Gregg swung around. His vision became blurred as a temporal feed invaded his mind. “Appears to be a woman,” he muttered, “Long dark hair. Probably a co-worker from Meds come to check on her.”

“Yeah, but my subject is acting kind of weird,” the analyst responded. “She is accessing her memory bank. I can't tell which exactly, but I can trace her conscious activity and it all leads back to past thoughts. She keeps running back and forth over the bridge section we installed between childhood and her medical career, like she is trying to find something that isn't there.”

Gregg looked up. “They all do that from time to time. 16-32-C is always doing it.” He paused. “Come to think of it, she hasn't in the last couple of days. Not since that anal fiasco with 16-33-T. Honestly, what a bloody mess!”

Sergeant Gregg was pretty convinced the extended sleep mode had been due to excessive TII the afternoon before. They had pushed Farron to the limit. A whole hour and multiple command procedures had lead to the discovery that ASL Meds Facility had successfully developed a blocking agent against Asplexia, to allow for multiple traversals through white holes – a breakthrough for regular transport of military personnel.

Usually 10 days was the required lay over before humans could make another trip. Now it seemed ASL would be able to deploy any number of soldiers anywhere, anytime. 16-34-F had been pushed to the limit of endurance by invading the Meds Server and feeding up numerous formulas and playbacks. They had crashed her multiple times by forcing her against her will, only to reboot her and try again. She came through with amazing intel; all had to be analyzed and categorized by his team before passing their findings up the chain of command.

Now a new development: 16-33-T had been summoned by his department head; a new and interesting concurrence they would be watching closely that afternoon. So, with the little muddle up between his two SAPs swept neatly between the cracks in code, Gregg was staring success in the face. He was about to be promoted, he could feel it. His time had come. All he had to do was keep his superiors in the gray while he figured out how to make everything rosy. It wasn't as if he hadn't done it before. He was a master of subterfuge.

“Sir,” What do I do with this one?” a voice said, disturbing his thoughts. “Seems like she made a playback of a conversation with someone, nothing to do with the TII playbacks.”

“When was it made?” Gregg shrugged.

“Yesterday evening,” came back the response.

“... And?”

“Well, sir. It's not in her restricted file. This was one she made herself after hours, a memory. I was just double-checking everything. It's a conversation with another woman. A friend, I

guess. No mention of Meds Facility or research or anything. Just girl talk, you know. Some praise for a woman called Alexandra from Geoffreys.”

“What..!” Gregg screamed.

“Geoffreys is a shit hole,” came back his subordinate.

Gregg was shaking his head. “I know that, you mindless idiot... Can't you connect the dots? When was the last time you read their history files? 16-32-C has memories from Geoffreys, and guess where she got *them* from? Her code analyst, one of the best there ever was, who just happens to be called..?” he paused for affect.

“Oh. Shit. Sir. Alexandra Minkowski?”

“Exactly.”

“Must be a coincidence,” the analyst went on.

Gregg snapped back: “Too many odd things going on around here lately for this to be labeled another coincidence.” Then, raising an eyebrow. “Can you see the woman 16-34-F is talking to?”

“No, she is just looking straight ahead. But the voice sounds familiar. Probably a colleague of hers.”

“Copy it. Queue it on my pending feeds and I'll take a look at it later,” he said, dropping eyes to his console. “Retrieving Limited Observation Interface protocols. Patching to CL Logs for immersion with 16-33-T.”

Friday evening found Coggi and Paighton seated together on the balcony park outside CL Department. As lights dimmed in the giant ASL Sphere, a reddish, orange hue replaced the blues and greens from before. Windows once black began illuminating in rows and clusters, floods washing parks each with a hazy ball of mist. They watched the romance of dusk unfold before them, hand

in hand, their minds and bodies synchronized with approaching twilight and the promises of love.

Coggi had earlier asked Xandra if she could remove the code constraints that restricted her from entering into a relationship with someone and give her the potential to physically love. Xandra had already been working on it. She knew Coggi would ask her, knew how Coggi felt about Paighton – it was right and only natural. Sex-droids had been around for decades, the coding and disciplines were 'off the shelf' material, so all she had to do was apply them in a thoughtful and honest way. It wasn't just code adjustment that Coggi needed, she needed guidance and education. So they had sat together for a while in private and Xandra had tried to explain. They laughed, they cried and then Coggi understood. She was nervous, but she had got it – almost.

“It's like giving away the truth... about yourself,” Xandra assured her. “It is scary but it is so amazing when it happens. You are no longer yourself, only, you become attached to a partner who becomes you. It is not about the physics, the sexuality and the orgasm. The most important part of your relationship will be communication. You must talk about everything; your fears, your frustrations. Only in knowing how you truly feel will your partner understand. Silence is deadly!”

A hand rose...

“I'm ready for you, Boy-girl,” Coggi murmured from the balcony with a gentle squeeze of his. “Not just for your mind but for your body, too.”

Paighton turned and gave Coggi a kiss on the cheek. “My sweet Coggi, I will give you everything I have tonight.”

Upstairs in CL, Frankie and Xandra were going over the final plans. Johnny was observing through Farron while she sat out a farewell gathering for one of her older, retiring colleagues. Farron would be up at CL within the hour. The following Wednesday morning a cargo vessel was scheduled to arrive and unload. At midday Xandra's team and their party of three SAPs would board

for departure at 1240 hours. Turbin would be there of his own accord, but Farron needed convincing; did she have the courage? Was she a fighter? They were about to find out. As Paighton had pointed out, the SAPs had been seriously abused, their coding was tantamount to inhuman. They had work to do.

The only bit of the puzzle still a blank was how their slow moving cargo vessel was going to make it to Titan White Hole and safety. With three seconded SAPs on the loose, Orbiter SRC1 would go on full alert having lost their drones all at once and Military radar would be scanning everything in the vicinity for them. Xandra could only trust that Lieutenant Allen had them covered. The thought that the SAP's self-destruct implants could be triggered at any time was also highly unnerving. As yet, they had no way of countering the horror.

On arrival that evening Farron sat with them all at the round table. She seemed calm; her pretty face with a blossoming smile. But in her lap, hands were pressed tightly together and below she had one foot pressing down hard on the other. Johnny could see her discomfort, he had also been watching her stats earlier while in limited observation with her.

“I made it,” Farron said. “I have so many questions.”

“Go ahead,” Coggi urged.

“Well... Like, why are you here?”

Xandra responded. “Farron, we came to rescue Coggi, she is my sister. Then we realized that you and Turbin should also have the opportunity of freedom.”

“Rescue from whom?”

“The Military are using you to covertly extract information from here: ASL HQ. You are being used as a weapon.”

“How? I just work here.”

Xandra blinked at a screen nearby and brought up LOS.

She nodded to Coggi. “Sweetheart, here, look at me.” Then

turning to Farron. “Watch the screen and Coggi as she looks around. They are inside your head, just as we can be inside Coggi. Watch and see what Coggi is seeing on the screen. We don't do it out of malice. But The Military do... you are being used!”

One by one the faces of those sitting before her panned into view across the monitor screen, exactly when Coggi swiveled to see them.

“Oh my..! What?” Farron blurted out. “You can see through her eyes? Mine, too?”

“Yes,” Johnny said, “But not only that. LOS is limited observation. There is a more powerful system called TII, which controls your thoughts... makes you do whatever they want without you knowing. Right now you are not being manipulated by them, they only work on you during the day.”

Farron was now visibly shocked. Her smile had gone and she had shrunk into her seat. “Oh, I don't like that. I don't like that at all. How can you stop them doing that?”

“They can't,” Coggi said. “But once rescued and taken away from here, The Military will never be able to control you again. You will be a free person.”

“Will it be dangerous? How are we going to escape?”

“Trust my friends,” Coggi replied. “I have worked with all of these guys before. They are brilliant and loving people. All of them.”

Farron suddenly burst into tears. “I want to remember... want my memories back... I want to know who I am and where I came from... Please.” A flood of emotion poured down her cheeks. She was on the edge of happiness and horror.

Xandra leaned over the table and took one hand away from her trembling face. “Farron. I believe we can. Once we are away from here and The Military we will be able to trace your history and your career. If we know who you were and where you worked we will be able to find your missing memory files. I promise I will do

everything I can to find them.” A hugely painful smile emerging. “Just remember, your childhood memories are not real. You must start with the truth.”

“That I was never born? That I am not human?” Farron cried!

“Farron,” Paighton said, looking deep into her eyes with memories of his sweet Phie. “Yes, you *were* born, and you were raised and loved by someone, for years and years, someone who taught you to be the wonderful human you are now. Then you were stolen from them. We will find that person who raised you. I know they would want to be with you again. That person is your parent. He or she continues to love you to this very day. I know.”

Farron gasped. “Oh hell... You told me you lost one, Paighton. It must have hurt so much?”

“Yes,” he said with quivering lips. “But I found another.” Turning to Coggi and planting a kiss gently on her lips.

Later that evening each of the team slowly drifted away. Coggi and Paighton took Farron back to her quarters. They gave her a hug and then left. On reaching her hatch, Coggi half pulled Boy-girl through and, as the hatch resolved she put her arms over his shoulders and brought her lips up to meet his. She could feel fingers working their way around her waist, releasing her upper body-suit, then raising it smoothly up her back. Warm, firm hands, big and smooth, sending tingles of expectation around her body.

“Am I hard?” she asked nervously, as he swept her top up over a curly mop of hair to reveal her superbly defined, naked body.

“No. You are soft, you just don't squeeze so easy.”

“Does that bother you?”

“No. Look at you. You are gorgeous,” He said, lowering to kiss her breasts.

“And... and have you ever done this before? With another girl?”

“No, Coggi. I once kissed a girl when I was at university, but it was nothing like kissing you.”

Coggi nervously responded. “I thought everyone working 'off world' did it with sex-droids. That's the whole point.”

“No, Coggi. I wanted love, not sex. I want to make love.”

“Your sensitive, bi-gender personality,” was her murmurer. “I could not be in better hands, could I?”

She lifted his head from her, reached up and ran her hands over his chest, pulling at the parting and opening up his shirt. His muscular body was firm but giving, so different from hers, so alluring, *so sexy* – that was the word Xandra had explained. She slipped her hands down to his pants as he leaned in to kiss her again. Slender hips allowed for his clothing to fall away easily and at once she felt something hard pressing on her belly. She didn't know whether to laugh or cry, she only hoped that her body would please him as his was pleasing hers.

“Who am I going to make love to?”

“Both of us,” they replied, lifting her off her feet and carrying her to bed.

Gregg was already in CL Department on Orbiter SRC1 at 0900 hours Monday when his two analysts rolled in. He growled:

“Sit..!”

“Sir.”

A wrinkled face stared ominously down on them. “We have been hacked. Not by ASL... By our own people.”

“... Sir?”

“I knew something fishy was going on,” Gregg explained. “Far too many hiccups. So I left visual feeds open all weekend long, through IT Department. Take a look...”

Screens burst into light. Images of Xandra and her team in ASL's CL Department sitting around a table. Paighton and Coggi in her quarters. Farron and Johnny in conversation.

A growling Gregg carried on. "Now! We are going to save this situation, become heroes, or we will all go down together. Your choice."

"Sir."

"I don't know what they are up to but we need to find out. 16-32-C has had all of her memories replaced. Could only have been one person: Alexandra Minkowski. We are up against the very best. I wouldn't be surprised if Lieutenant Allen is in on this, too. See Paighton Gillespie? He was staring us in the face all along and we missed him. Johnny, too. This is one shit of a good team. I figure they can't hear us right now, in facial, so I doubt they know we are aware."

"What do we do?"

"Hack them back, you idiot. Find out what the hell they are trying to achieve." He stood up. "I need audio feeds, Logs, data and code variances, now."

"Sir. Yes, sir."

Down in ASL Sphere Frankie popped her head in to CL.

"We've got company," she chuckled. "Samantha is on board Orbiter SRC1 in their IT. Yup, I know her calling-card well. She's good but she is not flamboyant enough to cover her tracks. Stay alert. I'll keep you posted. They are trying to get inside our heads."

Xandra cursed out loud. So close, yet it seemed the posts had now been moved almost out of reach. Johnny was seeing nothing. It was time to pull the plug and go 'black'. A quick huddle at the round table and it was obvious. They would wait for Wednesday, just two days away. No more rendezvouses, no more communication, it would happen as planned. Everything had to be pulled, and then just the hope that a final nudge on the day of departure to make it happen would not upset the cart... Lock down!

Coggi could not be told. However she immediately sensed the fallout due to a lack of communication. Something had happened; they were all on their own. She needed to get to Farron, but realized that comms with her might be heard, so sent a playback, instead: Rolling hills, green trees and deer springing out across a pastured landscape; then shut her comms off. Not from Geoffreys, this playback was an archive from Mother Earth. It was an idea, a means to keep Farron on track without alerting suspicions.

Coggi spent two days dreaming only of Paighton in her arms, his soft embrace and that fabulous moment when he came inside her, when his body turned into a fireball of immense tension followed by explosive release. She had had an orgasm, too. Was it her sister's coding or was it real? DNA was coding, so what was the difference? It had always bothered her but she could never figure it out. Why was she unhuman? It wasn't fair. And now her most difficult challenge was trying to convince Farron to come with her, though doubting her own self; such confusion. She was supposed to be the backup that could support Farron through her time of need. Why was she losing control? She was by herself now and that was surely it, being alone was heartbreaking. She had to pull herself together and be there for everyone, because everyone had been there for her. Finally something was making sense.

Xandra was up at ASL HQ on Tuesday afternoon, meeting with the heads. She gave them her brief, said they were leaving as planned the following morning. She asked them to set their IT Department on high alert to signal any possible feed that might detonate the SAP self-destructs. Johnny would stay behind and be 'catch all'; someone had to watch their backs and Johnny had volunteered willingly. She asked that he be given safe passage a few days later. The 'heads' agreed. She had met their agreement head on and had succeeded as per the deal. There was nothing but praise and goodwill.

“Sir, I'm getting nothing. It's like there is no one there.”

Gregg was in no mood. “You calling me a liar?”

“No, sir.”

Two options were running through Gregg's mind. Either he could shut the program down, or hope he could outwit Alexandra and her team. Closing the entire program would put a black mark on his quest for promotion, while acting tough and solving problems would be a certain plus. However, in order to look good, he would have to report his concerns, keep everything on Log and open. What he had found out over the weekend was still under wraps, not even IT Department had the whole picture. Would he go public? *No*, he thought, *not until tomorrow*.

16-33-T had an important mission coming up. Gregg knew there was something very interesting arriving on that cargo vessel. He wanted to know what. He wanted to be the one to break it open in front of his superiors. Then he could file Logs in his efforts to track down and defeat Alexandra. If his superiors told him to pull the plug and close down the program, then so be it; he would be in the clear.

It was in that moment that he got a realization. Gregg suddenly hit the jackpot. 1700 hours was fast approaching and he was about to play a little game. *Oh, yeah! This is going to hurt.*

Coggi was leaving her lab, thoughts of Paighton still wafting about in her mind, when suddenly she felt the urge to go see him. There was nothing she could do, it was not as if she didn't want to, it did not conflict with her desires, only that she knew it was risky. However, there she was heading for CL Department through ASL Sphere on a winding ramp. She reached the balcony park and trotted up the steps. It was 1720 hours. The door at the top dissolved and she strode in.

Frankie was first to spot her as the dark room was abruptly flooded with light. She ran over, clearly in desperation.

“Coggi, you must leave, at once.”

“Hi, Frankie. I just want to see Paighton, that's all.”

“Go, Coggi. You will see him tomorrow.”

Then Xandra was up and by her side. A look of horror on her face.

“Coggi, sweetheart, we have been breached. They know we hacked them. They are everywhere, listening and feeding. That's why we have been silent and why you were not contacted. We thought you realized.”

“Yes, but...” Coggi's response was painful, “Why do I have to wait until tomorrow to see Paighton?”

“Coggi, honey, they are listening, they are in your head -” Xandra ground to a halt, tilted her anxious expression ominously and then asked: “Coggi? You remember that game we played at Base on CY714 with the scoots?”

“Yes. So?” Coggi muttered.

Xandra pulled back and breathed out with a hellish face. “Bastard,” she screamed. “Hello, Gregg!”

“Ha. Clever, Alexandra. Guess there was no game on scoots,” Coggi monotoned.

“Get out of her you despicable man,” Xandra howled.

“Listen, Minkowski,” Coggi spoke again, “You are in no position to be ordering me about. You are the perpetrator in all of this, you are the one out of line – the traitor.”

“Gregg, you are in-human.”

Coggi laughed. “Right now, guess I am.”

Xandra shook her head. “No, Gregg. You have always been insensitive and cowardly. I know animals that have more right to be human than you. Look at the stress you are putting her through, right now.”

“Enough.” Coggi said with a frown. “Your little plan has

failed. Beat it, or her little head will explode.”

“OK, Gregg! Don't do it. You win.”

“Good.” Came back the swift response. Coggi turned on seeing the others approaching. “Samantha figured out how you were all eves-dropping. She closed you down. So time to go. Leave The Military to its business, Minkowski. You were fired. You are fired again.”

“We're gone,” Xandra nodded.

“Oh, by the way,” Coggi re-ignited,” Where did you hide her memories?”

Xandra raised an eyebrow and smiled. “Under the bridge, you asshole. Where all creatures hide when in fear for their lives.”

“Thank you.”

“For what?”

“For telling me where they are, so I can clean them out.”

“... Did I?”

“You mean -”

“Goodbye, Gregg.” And with that Xandra turned away. It was to hide a tear. She didn't want Coggi to see it. Even though she would probably not remember any of the conversation, some images often remained deep in the subconscious. She didn't want Coggi to see her grief. At a time like this, when escape was on the horizon, any scrap of doubt or fear might cause Coggi to slip up.

On Coggi's departure, sad faces sauntered back to seats. Johnny's in particular was drawn and low. He looked up.

“Boy-girl,” he said, “I'm really happy for you both. Really, I am. I just hope we can get through this shit so you two can be together.”

It was then that Xandra finally got it. She clued in. The thing between Jo-boy and Boy-girl. There was nothing she could do, or wanted to; love was a thing that people had to work out together

and she would just be a there for them. Talking was everything. Silence was deadly, as she had so often said. Though there was a sadness, there was also a happiness for them in her heart. She loved both of them so she did not have to intervene but she could meander within their glory.

Paighton nodded. “I could have loved you, too, Jo-boy. Almost did. Then I saw Coggi again and all those memories came flooding back.”

“I love you, buddy. You know where to find me if you need me.”

Chapter Five

That evening, lying in bed, Xandra was mulling over recent events and trying reconcile their effects on tomorrow's outcome. Her quarters were dark, un-illuminated and featureless gray. She was fairly convinced Gregg did not know of the planed escape her team were going to implement, but she could not be absolutely sure. The real question was: Had he accepted her resignation? If he had then he would be less likely to be prepared or concerning himself with such matters. He might not then go digging around in Coggi's nor Farron's memories and try to induce playbacks of their earlier encounters with the team.

A tear bloomed in the corner of her eye and gently slipped down towards an ear. She was thinking about Coggi. All that work to get her little sister into shape, her memories in place, her passion renewed – what if Gregg stripped her of all that tomorrow morning, just hours before freedom? Would he find her hidden coding?

She blinked. Looked up into the top right corner of her ocular display: 2220 hours; just another thirteen hours to go. She closed her eyes and let her mind drift up, out of her quarters and The Sphere, out beyond the C Ring of Saturn and over Daedulus

Gap to a distant, green ball in the black of space: Titan.

Her mind flew beyond light speed to that little moon and the man she had considered her mentor for all those years. Lieutenant Allen had been like the father she had never had. She loved him as such. Yes, she did. Wished her father could have been more like Bradley Allen. What, she wondered, did he think of her? He had never revealed a thing, had remained emotionally constrained, though she had often felt a warmth that seemed more than just polite recognition.

Had she been lying beside Bradley Allen at that very moment he would probably have turned his head towards her and told her he loved her. That was the thought spinning around in his mind at the very same time: 2222 hours. His duties began at 0500 the following morning and he had only her in his thoughts. He was about to undertake the most dangerous mission of his life; a mission he would never have dared ever contemplate had it not been for love. He was powerless to stop himself, a sense of recklessness, captivating, overwhelming, euphoric!

It appeared he awoke as demanded by his implant at 0500 exactly, though whether he had actually slept at all that night he wasn't sure. A health drink and cake appeared at his bedside counter, his bio-condition having been examined and the required nutrients supplied. He wasn't hungry. Tried to force down something; knew he should. He got dressed, hurriedly, and departed his quarters. Over at STC Tower, a few miles away, he strode in on the top floor, trying to look his usual dejected and introspective self, though inside he was a man on fire.

Lieutenant Allen took his usual seat among a dozen others dotted around the large, circular Control Center at 0630. The domed ceiling displayed the entire sector and all vessels in transit, each tagged by one or more of the operators beneath. He would be on duty for two hours, then a 30 minute recess – it was in that short space of time that he would initiate his unlawful operation. He had planed it to perfection but new full well that no manner of practice runs and alternates could alleviate the unforeseen. He knew

something would come up, that he would have to react on the hoof, and wished that Alexandra could be by his side – she was so good at that kind of thing.

He descended a chute to STC Lounge on the first floor at 0830 and crossed the hall to a Staff Only restroom. Inside, he went to his private relaxation compartment, blinked, and stepped into the upright capsule. It was small, no bigger than a closet, with shelves and compartments on either side of a reclining body couch. Allen had previously concealed part of his plan within: An SAP pilot's suit. Fumbling around with a side console, he ordered a couple of anti-perspirants. Then lay back. There was a hiss... He inhaled... SAP fighter pilots did not sweat.

On a rack by the side of his couch hung an ocular needle probe. He looked at it, raised an eyebrow, hoped that his experience in coding had input the desired sequence. Then raised the recliner to upright and stepped out for his second shift. Was Alexandra prepared? Would she be on board that shuttle at 1240 hours as planned? Lt. Allen was willing her to be there, for his sake as well as hers. There was no going back for him. He would not, could not return to Titan or his career. This was the end of everything he had known and the beginning of something he knew not.

“Titan STC, this is Lincoln Class P9 with Saturn Sector Control hand-over, requesting approach for White Hole slipway.”

Allen picked it up. “LCP Niner, you are with TSTC. Please state onward flight plan authorization.”

“TSTC. 03305 for Earth... LCP Niner.”

“LCP Niner, that is confirmed. No passenger authorization. Please hold for internal scan.”

“Understood. LCP Niner.”

A pause, then, “LCP Niner, scan all clear. You are second in line for slipway. Reduce speed to 38,000, local heading 352-048. Expect lock-on in 16.2. TSTC.”

Allen swiveled in his chair and reclined to gaze up at the

illuminated dome which showed current visuals of vessels while his orders were being read back, to assure himself that he had slotted in the craft and its trajectory without conflict... He was satisfied. The rest of LCP Niner's movements would now be controlled autonomously, though he could not disengage until the maneuver had been completed. Human oversight was a requirement by law.

On lowering his head, Allen focused in on a red sidebar in his ocular display. A requested thought of his provoked a flashing white dot to ascend as dates and times beside it rolled through to his desired command: Week 42, 1328hrs... He blinked and then listened to the playback. With a nod the playback was tethered to his console, awaiting a signal that would fire it up: 989. Just another fifteen minutes to go, he murmured to himself while wiping his forehead. *Dry..!*

It was 1100 hours that same morning when Xandra walked in to Colonel Plank's control room overseeing security for ASL HQ Sphere. They shook hands. It was a formal, parting gesture. The Colonel knew Xandra's plan was in doubt, as she did; both reluctant to make light of the situation. He nodded in thanks, a little hope, perhaps, attached to that thought. Then she was gone.

Back at CL Department, Xandra collected her team, thanked those who had supported their efforts and then went over to one lonely figure lying upright in a large, black seat. It was Johnny, their 'catch all' putting himself once again in the firing line for the sake of success. He turned his head and said with a smile:

“Get going you lot. I'll catch up with you later.”

“Johnny-boy,” Xandra began...

“No, Miss Curly, it's bad luck,” he joked. “Go on. Buzz off!”

“But I – ”

“Alexandra. I love you and Coggi and the whole team. Don't

make it harder for me. Just go, Miss curly!”

So the team of three left without him; time now: 1152. It would take them a good 15 minutes to take chutes and ride-ways to the Cargo Bay. They took the scenic route, through Central Parks and down passed the recreation halls. The weather forecast had indicate light showers at noon – they were not disappointed. On arrival at the Immigration Portal they passed through an air-lock where they were dried and sanitized. An escort came over and directed them to follow. They could see through transparent panels either side of a suspended walkway, three cargo vessels below. Xandra explained to the escort that there were three others soon to arrive, that they would all be traveling together. The escort smiled on seeing Xandra's anxiety, and nodded. He reassured her – he was aware.

Coggi was leaving her lab at that exact moment. She felt OK, no thoughts entering her mind to distract her from her one goal: To reach the Cargo Bay. She was confident that no one was interfering with her; no one was TII. But she couldn't be sure of LOS, that her vision was not being displayed on some screen up there. She could not contact Johnny, or anyone else. She wanted to be sure about Farron, so she went for Central Parks where she could take a look at the Med Center from a distance. Farron's hair would stand out, Coggi might be able to spot her from afar, so she spent a few minutes meandering, always looking about, eyes returning to Med Center's front entrance as casually as possible.

Neither Farron nor Coggi could arrive at Cargo Bay at the same time. If one spotted the other, it might alert those in The Orbiter. Coggi had to hang back.

Then she spotted Farron... But where was she going? That was not the way to Cargo Bay!

Lieutenant Allen, meanwhile, was in an SAP pilot's uniform. He had the ocular needle probe strapped in black behind his left

forearm; there was nowhere to conceal it within his uniform. One corridor after another eventually lead him out into a shuttle terminal with direct access from STC to the military's personnel wing of Flight Command, half a mile away. Sped out over bunkers, hangars and methane conduits, he could see a looming structure ahead of him, growing ominously. Layer upon layer of silvery compartments stacked one upon the other, huddled around a huge tunnel leading to the walls of The Dome. It was an enormous structure, one he knew well.

The shuttle came to rest and he dismounted. There were few people around; it was lunch time. He made his way through the giant complex, rising through chutes and crossing walkways between compartments until he came upon an arched doorway, ten feet in height. It was closed. He had no way to open it. He was not an SAP. All he could do was wait for someone else to open it for him. So he waited. SAP fighter pilots were routinely sent out on training exercises or as guidance escorts for large, approaching vessels. Down in Flight Level a fleet of war-birds sat in readiness, each on standby, any one could be launched in seconds. Allen's plan was to steal from an SAP the vital codes for cockpit control and its security ID pass with the ocular needle probe.

A few minutes went by before the door dissolved and two men walked out. Allen took his chance and slipped by. He found himself in a wide foyer with passageways leading in all directions. He knew his target: Captain Dakka; knew where to find him, too. Many years ago, after the Titan Offensive, Allen was one of the TII crew that first developed this new batch of SAPs. They flew in combat just a few years later – not overly sophisticated in personality, however optimized in cerebral chain reactions with both enhanced motor functions and ocular dexterity. This compartment and its layout had been Allen's home for over seven years. Unlike those he had later worked with on CY714, these SAPs did not consider themselves human, they were aware of their true status.

He took the second passageway on the left. He was looking for a registration number by one of the many hatches: 07-13-DK.

This SAP was one of the earlier models, he would not be out on regular training, he would be in reserve and likely to be found in his quarters most of the day.

A blink of the eyes outside one of the hatches, then Lt. Allen stood back and smiled. A few seconds later the hatch dissolved.

“Good afternoon, Captain,” Allen said, with a sharp nod. “I am 2nd Officer Allen. We have an issue that requires your attention.”

Captain Dakka stood up, away from his console, a tall, dark figure, and replied: “I have not seen you before.”

“I have been recently commissioned,” Allen said. “May I come in?”

“Pass,” Dakka acknowledged.

Allen stepped in. The door behind him resolving instantly.

“What issue?” Dakka questioned. “Why send personnel? Why not a Log, as usual?”

Allen took another step forwards, The Captain towering over him, the gap between them now just a single pace. “If you review your manifest,” Allen said, calmly, pointing at the console, “You will note an update.”

As Dakka instinctively turned to confront his console, Allen freed the needle from his right arm and leaped on the now stooping SAP. An arm wrapped around his neck and a jab to the back of his knee, had Dakka toppling backwards as the glistening needle rose. The Captain's arm reacted instantly, grabbing at Allen's wrist, and with a violent twist he rolled sideways, sending both to the floor. Now Dakka was on top of Allen, he was much more powerful than his aggressor. He noticed immediately that Allen was merely human. He paused in thought, his subservient nature kicking in, just as Allen's right arm was rising. A hand behind the neck as Dakka relaxed his grip on Allen's left arm and the needled turned upright. Then, with all his strength, Allen pulled the confused SAP down over his chest, plunging the needle into his eye.

A few seconds later and Allen was able to roll the now

unconscious SAP to one side. On extraction, the needle extinguished itself. Allen blinked, pulling up his ocular display. A rapid search of newly loaded files gave him his answer: He had it. With a heavy exhale he laid his head back to the floor in relief, and smiled at the ceiling. Close call...

On his feet, Allen considered the door. It dissolved immediately. Now he was sure he had what he had come for – the door would not have responded to a human. He stepped out into the passageway, careful to resume an upright posture and precise articulation of his legs. He knew his SAPs; every nuance and subtle reflex of these fighter pilots were forever ingrained in his mind. He passed two heading the other way without a nod, no salutation, such obligations unnecessary between such mono-dimensional SAPs. Turning left at the arched entrance he crossed the hall to a row of chutes; empty tubes it seemed, though upon placing a foot in the vacuous hole his entire body weight was miraculously supported. He considered the elevation he required and was instantly dropped to Flight Level.

Crossing a high platform above numerous, stationary war-birds, Allen looked down. He could hardly see them but he knew what to look for; each one translucent, pyramidal in shape, elongated and yet practically invisible, the green, hangar floor passing directly through each one. He approached a sergeant standing at the top of an escalator beside a large, transparent screen.

The sergeant spoke first. “You're new.”

“I am old,” Allen replied, coldly.

“Yeah, yeah. Don't be cheeky,” the sergeant muttered. Then looking up, “Well?” he exclaimed, pointing at the screen. “Something wrong with you? Are you fit to fly? Look at the screen, dummy!”

Allen raised his head on realizing what was required of him. The screen was a reader. He blinked... A couple of seconds of flashing numerals and converging lines, then the sergeant was asking:

“I don't have this scheduled. Whose your CL operator?”

“Lieutenant Emerson.”

The sergeant frowned. “He doesn't usually take birds out. What's up?”

Allen turned rigidly to face the sergeant. “Fresh order, just initiated. Do you wish to question Lieutenant Emerson?”

The sergeant looked at his shoes, shook his head and then replied, weakly: “No, no. Go ahead. Er... T34-G, in Block Nine.”

Allen swiveled to face the escalator, took a step forwards and was lowered out of sight.

Coggi, in desperation, could think of nothing but help her new friend. She flew across a slip-way trying to cut off Farron at G Block Quarters, where she suspected she was heading. A couple of minutes later and she was up on the same balcony, eyes always to one side as she was gaining on her friend. Within earshot she called, it was all she could do, praying that LOS monitors were silenced:

“Farron. It's me, Coggi. Don't turn around... Please.”

Bouncing blonde hair became still. Farron paused, obeyed, came to a halt and said, “Coggi, I can't go through with this. Look, I... I just –”

“But, Farron, you need to find yourself. This is the only way. Here you are just a machine, a prisoner, a weapon of war – not a real person, the true, you.”

A shake of the head. “It's easy to say, Coggi, but not so easy to do,” Farron shrugged. “Here I feel safe, there is no threat and I like my job. What your friends are asking me to do is going to kill me.”

“Honey, it's not.” Coggi approached and laid her back up against Farron's. Looking away, she continued. “They are going to

set you free. They will find your parents who may still have your memories – perhaps even siblings, too. You have family.”

Two women stood back to back trying to work out their problems. Neither could turn for fear their position and status would be revealed.

“Even if that is true,” Farron cried, “They will have forgotten about me by now. And I don't remember them, so... so –”

Coggi snarled back. There was anger in her voice. “Farron, your family needs you, they love you, they would never forget you. Do it for them, as they would do it for you. Like my sister, Xandra. Your parents would be here to rescue you no matter what the dangers if they knew you were trapped and helpless. Stop thinking about yourself, for once.”

A long silence was marred only by the soft sobbing Coggi could hear from behind her. She could feel her friend's back shivering and the uneasiness of her stance. Had she pushed Farron too far? She held her breath.

“... Well, OK!”

Coggi let out a huge sigh of relief. “Brilliant, Farron. Now look: You drop down a chute to the lower balcony and head directly for Cargo Bay. I'll be right behind you. Don't look back, remember your eyes are not your alone. Now hurry – we don't have much time.”

Farron did as she was told. Coggi, meanwhile, set off back out to the Central Parks so she could monitor Farron's progress from a suitable distance. Ten minutes later and Farron was approaching Immigration Portal. She hung back, checked the time in her ocular display: 1232. It was a busy thoroughfare, people moving in both directions, hardly room to maneuver, when a large man passing from behind almost took her off her feet. He was a hard man, not human was her thought as he headed directly for Immigration, entering without formality and escorted inside. Her orders were to enter in exactly seven minutes. She waited, nervously.

Lieutenant Allen was drawn up from under war-bird T34-G. He came to rest, seated in the cockpit; could see a long, white tunnel leading to The Dome wall, perhaps 500 yards long. That was his escape route. His bird was a newer version than he had been accustomed to flying, however he was endowed with all the necessary skills, having acquired them from Captain Dakka. Time: 1235; launch initiation set.

“Terminal Control, this T34-G with an Emerson escort flight, ready for departure.”

“T34-G, rank and name.”

“Captain Dakka.”

The cockpit read-out concurred.

“T34-G, you are cleared for exit. Dome Screen set for dissolution in 20 seconds. Terminal Control.”

With the simplest of suggestions a war-bird rose up out of Block Nine and Allen felt himself thrust back into his seat as the vessel accelerated. A few seconds later T34-G was within inches of colliding with a massive blue screen that seemed to ripple, as if liquefying, before allowing the war-bird to slip effortlessly through. Allen was in space.

“TSTC. T34-G with Emerson Protocols.”

“Go ahead, T34-G.”

“Destination C Ring to Daedulus Gap. Escort required for an ASL cargo vessel. T34-G.”

“T34-G, you have clear passage on heading 006-212. SSC has your flight plan. Make contact in 75 seconds. ETA 14 minutes at max speed. TSTC”

A slight bank and course change put Saturn directly in front of Allen. The ASL Sphere would be fast approaching its shortest

distance to The White Hole. C Ring traveled at many thousands of miles per hour, making full orbits of Saturn in under 10 hours. It was 1239 hours, one minute to cargo vessel 420's departure. Was Xandra and her party on board? Allen could only pray they were.

As Farron approached Immigration Port for Shuttle Bay she was immediately drawn from the crowd and escorted in. She found herself walking beside Coggi as they passed along a transparent corridor and were lead down an escalator. Passing a set of shiny containers, all neatly stacked to one side, Farron saw that man who had so rudely barged passed her. He was examining the contents of one of the containers. He briefly looked up as they went by, was lowering his head again when abruptly it rose up. She saw his eyes, they were glaring at her, saw his lips quivering and a sudden step in her direction. Farron turned away quickly, towards the direction of a looming spheroid cargo vessel just fifteen or so yards ahead. She saw Alexandra and Paighton beneath the suspended giant, eagerly waving them on. Another container was descending to the floor and being conveyed away towards the others.

Then a hand to her shoulder and Farron froze. It was a hard, cold hand – non human. She looked sideways in fear.

“What are you doing here?” asked a gruff voice.

She tried to speak but nothing came out.

The man continued. “And you?” he said, gesturing with his face at Coggi, “Both of you. No, that is not possible. Where do you think you are going?”

Coggi spoke. Knew who he was. “Turbid. Come with us. We are leaving now and you can come, too. It's perfectly safe.”

“No you are not,” came back the sharp response. “you are definitely going nowhere.”

That voice, it reminded Coggi of someone...

A Thought. Gregg, that was it. The biologist she had been chatting to recently. “So, not Turbid,” Coggi sneered, “Someone in TII. Gregg, that's you?”

“Clever girl. Now leave here at once and get back to work – both of you.”

Coggi reached out a hand and pulled Farron from Turbid's grasp. “Run, Farron. Get to Xandra now,” she shouted, flinging her in the direction of the cargo vessel.

Farron took off, passing Paighton coming in the opposite direction.

“So,” Gregg smirked, “That was your little trick, Paighton. You were going to hustle my SAPs away with you.”

“Gregg, you were always cold and heartless,” Paighton answered, standing next to Coggi. “That's what makes you such a good soldier. But that is all you will ever be. Not a human... Just a simple machine!”

Turbid rose up to full stature and smiled. “And like any good soldier, when duty calls to eliminate the enemy, no hesitation.”

I-Log CLJ01: *Paighton, for hell's sake get out of there. Gregg is going to hit the kill-switch.*

I-Log CLJ01-p: *Can't. No time. If that implant blows it will take out half of Shuttle Bay.*

I-Log CLJ01: *Paighton! Please...*

“Gregg. Don't do it,” Paighton begged, putting an arm around Coggi's waist.

“Oh, what? You mean Turbid's self-destruct. Why not? It is my duty to protect our Military and bring ASL down. So... Goodbye to you both.”

I-Log CLJ01: *I love you Paighton. Both of you.*

I-Log CLJ01-x: *Johnny, don't do it. It's Xandra... I order you not to intervene.*

In that instant Johnny did. He forced a TII intrusion into Turbid's already occupied mind, knowing that the dual conflict would over-load both servers and kill the analysts in immersion. It was a sacrifice he was glad to make. To save Boy-girl and Coggi, to see them happy and free, was the only thing on his mind as a hand slid across his console and gate threshold was raised. He saw the friend he loved and beautiful Coggi just for an instant before everything went black.

Turbid lost all expression as he stood before the couple. His complexion darkened – a purple hue – as his legs gave and he sank to his knees. Paighton grabbed Coggi, hugged her and closed his eyes, imagining it to be the end. But nothing happened. The body of Turbid slipped sideways and slammed into the floor. Was still. Eyes closed. Complete biotronic failure.

Paighton opened his eyes. Did not want to believe it but knew there could only have been one reason for the shut down. Sirens were wailing for evac' of the bay area as he called in with a desperate plea.

I-Log CLJ01-p: *Johnny. Jo-boy. No, man. What have you done?*

Paighton knew but had to scream. Hoping, but no response. A man he loved had given his life willing to see them safe. A tear fell to Coggi's shoulder, then he turned and both ran for the vessel. Four figures were raised into the cargo hold; it was 1241 hours. Seconds later the main hatch slid open and CV240 was turning 180. Silently it passed out through the bay hatch as five figures dropped into seats and were buckled down. All were crying inside for that beautiful man who had given up his life for them and their freedom. A sacrifice impossible to believe.

There before him was rising a strange, elongated spheroid vessel; red in color with CV240 emblazoned in white on its top side. Lieutenant Allen clenched a fist and called in:

“CV240. Escort T34-G to your starboard. Do you have pax on board?”

“T34-G. Thanks for the company. Five passengers, on manifest. CV240.”

Allen sucked in hard, then breathed out. “CV240, thanks for that. Receiving manifest. Heading 350-030. Call in to TSTC in 12 minutes for slipway. Use code 989. T34-G.” He signed off. Retrieved the manifest with the swivel of a retina and closed his eyes in thanks on seeing Alexandra Minkowski at the top of the list... The code 989 was his previously implanted STC dialogue. Would it work?

Then an alert shocking him into focus. He didn't need to open his eyes to see the hail: Three war-birds on his tail. It would take them eight minutes to catch up with the slower moving cargo vessel and, with luck, another two or three before they could take control. CV240 had to be locked into TSTC command for slipway, otherwise there was no chance of escape.

Within 2 minutes of the TSTC call Lt. Allen received the first exchange on Military Log:

“T34-G, stand off. I repeat: Stand Off.”

“I have orders to escort. T34-G.”

“Insurgents on board. Insurgents on board. T34-G, pull back and stand off, immediately.”

Allen played for time. “Port or starboard?”

“Either, goddammit, now *stand off!*”

And then it came: Allen heard the call in from CV240 to TSTC requesting a lock on to slipway for the White Hole. Code 989 was picked up by a familiar voice: His own. All he had to do now was out maneuver the three birds closing in and take them out before they could destroy the cargo vessel. Tough call. But then he had chosen one of the best SAP Captains in their fleet with superlative combat skills – all his, now. He looked around his transparent war-bird but could see nothing. A thought is all it took

to pull up and lock on to three triangular shapes highlighted by his ocular display.

Allen abruptly dropped his craft, dramatically reducing speed, ending up behind his three targets. CV240 flight controls were now under the command of TSTC. The Military war-birds could not override, so would have to resort to combat. A single neutrino beam from the squad leader clipped the side of the cargo vessel and tore a gash through the outer shell. Allen figured the leader was probably the better pilot and went for him. Twin blasts; one miss, one direct hit; bird out of action. But no time to celebrate. The other two had split up, one abeam and locking onto him, the other going after the cargo vessel. Banking viciously to avoid being hit, his bird took an impact and he was in trouble, flailing badly, one counter-coil damaged. At that very moment a second alert flashed up: Three more war-birds joining the party.

This was not good.

The White Hole before them was a massive spherical disk, 100 miles in diameter. It glimmered vaguely, was not impressive in the least, as if a planet or moon out there on the horizon. However it was just a few hundred miles away, as opposed to a stellar object that might have been many thousands. This huge beast was about to swallow them up and send them to a pre-determined destination. It was yellowish in color, not white... It was a portal, a window, and it was their salvation.

CV240 was two minutes from entry. Five war-birds were on her tail, it seemed she had little chance of making it in time before complete destruction.

Then all of a sudden a dark object emerged as if a tiny insect from within the giant White Hole. As this insect approached it grew and with each second the unoffensive craft began to take the shape of something quite malevolent: A monstrous, military battle cruiser, a jagged, black pentagonal arrow-head coming straight for them. It over-powered everything in their sights – it concealed the White Hole within a few seconds – it was that big. And it had an objective. A violent stream of neutrino beams passed either side of CV240,

narrowly missing all five war-birds. And then a command:

“Orbiter Squadron Leader. CV240 is now under our control. Relieve yourselves and return to OSR or be destroyed. I say this only once... General Minkowski.”

There was little hesitation. A sharp rebuttal and the war-birds withdrew. There was no contest. No questions. No desire. No one fucks with Colonel Minkowski!

“Lieutenant. That you in T34-G?”

“Yes, General.”

“You are hit. Can you make it to our bay? You have about 50 seconds while we turn about before CV240 transfers and we must be right on her tail.”

“Thank you, General. I can try.”

“Lieutenant. Are my daughters on board?”

“Yes, General Minkowski. Both present and alive.”

“Thank *you*, Lieutenant... Now, Allen, if you want my eldest daughter's hand you'd best get in here quick. Tail up on tracking beacon and it should pull you in.”

“... Sir?”

“Come now, Lieutenant. You don't think I am *that* ignorant, do you? It was written all over your face. You have loved my daughter Xandra for years. I know that. Seems everyone but you knows that.”

Lt. Allen tried to respond. “Well, I... I'm not – ”

“Minkowski out!” was the Colonel's classic response, though none saw the glint of a smile on his face that would last forever.

...END

THE AUTHOR:

British born, Alan Graham has spent his whole life traveling, his father having been in the diplomatic service. He is a wildlife photographer/filmmaker and published author of novels in the genres of speculative fiction and thrillers. He has also written countless articles for international prints including BBC Wildlife Magazine, Travel Africa and International Living over a career spanning 30 years. His most successful TV documentary “The Affairs of Hares” was filmed entirely in the wilds of Devon, England, between 1996 and 2000.



He owns and manages Witzoo Wildlife Sanctuary in Belize, where he rehabs and soft releases injured and orphaned animals for the Forestry Dept. of Belize. He will be retiring to the UK shortly.

Title: Right of Human - Revoked

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