

SOLARIA by Fran Heckrotte

SOLARIA

... Built by humans,
she created her
own destiny.



FRAN
HECKROTTE

Solaria

By
Fran Heckrotte



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Solaria

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Solaria

CHAPTER 1

The Hubot Project:

Day One, Year Three 2097 A.D.

HER FIRST AWARENESS of existence was a chaotic flash of colors, meaningless and yet in an odd way **logical**; why, she wasn't sure. Birth is the most significant event in life, and yet it is never memorable; at least not for the newborn; but then she really wasn't a newborn, even though it was the first day of **her** life.

The flickering colors merged into shapes and then the shapes became clear images. Within seconds, she morphed from a bio-mechanical experiment to a viable functioning possibility, and her AI programmer was ecstatic. Years of research and failures were forgotten when the Hubot's eyes first opened to examine her surroundings. They were so human that Carley was caught off guard. Had she not been part of the project from its conception, no one would have convinced her that the object lying on the table was anything more than a fairly attractive woman who had just awakened from a deep sleep.

The Hubot's short silver hair was fashioned after a stylish fad that had been popular for a few years. Although it would have attracted attention several years ago, no one would pay much attention to the color now. Her skin was slightly tanned but not excessively so. The one thing that would make others

take notice, though were the eyes. No matter how human she looked, teal wasn't natural, but that could be explained away. Colored lenses were popular.

"Do you understand me?" Carley asked, enunciating each word slowly to give her creation time to assimilate the sounds of speech, and its meaning.

The Hubot blinked rapidly, trying to adjust to the visual stimuli assaulting her optic nerves and flooding her nano-processors. Empathetically, Carley waited patiently.

It's probably like walking from a dark room into sunlight, she thought. When the blinking slowed to a normal rate, she tried again.

"Do... you... understand... me?" she repeated.

Turning her head toward the source of the sound, the Hubot saw her first human and quickly filed the data specific to the object in one of her memory banks.

"I have analyzed each word and the structural sequence of your vocabulary. You do not need to separate your words in such a manner for me to comprehend the meaning."

"I'll take that as a yes. Welcome to my world."

The Hubot remained silent. The greeting required no response since it didn't make any sense to her.

"Do you have any idea what this is about? I mean who you are?"

"I am Hubot 1A526, Prototype 1A of the Hubot Project."

"Is that it?"

"I do not understand the question? Was my response incorrect?"

"Well, no. You're correct. What I want to know, though, is do you know the purpose of this project?"

"The Hubot Project is a scientific endeavor to combine bio-mass with trabecular metal technology to design a pseudo-human body that can be controlled by a series of multi-directional cascading laser quadro-core nano-processor chips that will theoretically simulate human thought and behavior. The purpose of the project is to create a functioning organism capable of serving humanity by providing daily assistance to disabled humans or to do manual labor in place of humans under dangerous or extreme circumstances. I am Hubot 1A526, the first generation prototype for the project."

"That's partially correct."

"Partially means I am either incorrect in my analysis or have failed to define my purpose in its entirety. I have run an analysis on all data stored in my memory banks and find no other available information. Please advise."

Carley patted the bio-machine on the shoulder.

"Don't worry about it for now. You have correctly defined your initial purpose. I'll explain the rest later."

"If that is what you require of me."

Carley smiled, pleased with the results from the first few minutes of interaction with the Hubot.

"It looks like we're well on our way to achieving our goal. Still, we have a long way to go before you'll be able to interact with the outside world, so we'd better get started. Please run a diagnostic on your neuro-circuitry and bio-mechanical systems to see if everything is working properly."

Within seconds, she had her answer.

"I have completed the necessary analysis. All processors are functioning within the required specifications of each subprogram with the exception of sector 6B412, cache 3778 of memory bank eleven. Biological, mechanical and

electronic components are operating within desired parameters."

"Which processor isn't working properly?"

"Core chip seven has a point seven nano-second delay when processing data through circuit 871C4."

"Hmmm. Is it causing you any serious problems?"

"No."

"Alright. We'll run some more tests on that later. Right now I think we can start your education. If you're going to join the human race, you have a lot of growing up to do."

"My growth is limited to the physical structure of skeletal and biological mass. I am presently at maximum potential based on the height and weight of my trabecular frame. It is impossible to exceed those parameters without compromising the integrity of my biological and neuro..."

"It's a figure of speech 1A526."

"Figure of speech: an expression that uses language in a non-literal way."

"Yes. Do you understand what that means?"

"Of course. It is a synecdoche."

"Synecdoche? I'm not familiar with that word. Explain."

"Synecdoche. By using the word **growth** you are not referring to my physical structure but instead my intellectual advancement. You wish me to achieve a level of competence that will allow me to emulate a human."

"Uhhh. Sort of... How about we continue this discussion after you've had time to interact with a few humans in the lab?"

"Is that a question requiring a response or a directive?"

Carley realized she and the Hubot could go around in circles forever if she didn't take control of the situation.

"A directive for now. Okay 1A526... You know I really hate calling you by your number. If we expect you to integrate with us, you should at least have a name."

1A526 remained silent, unable to comprehend the logic behind the human's comment. She was assigned a specific number which was a better identification method than a name. It was specific to her. Humans often shared common names. That information had been programmed in her initial software to make it easier for her to identify the people working around her.

"I see you're not going to be any help with this. Well, since you theoretically represent the dawn of a whole new era of technology for humanity's benefit, I'm going to call you Solaria. It means sun." Even as she said it, Carley realized how overly-dramatic it sounded and winced inwardly. "What do you think about being called Solaria?" she asked somewhat sheepishly.

"I do not think of it at all."

"Okay, okay. For now you're Solaria. You can always change it later."

"If that is what you want. What do I call you?"

"Me? I'm Carley Branson. You can call me Carley."

"Hello, Carley."

Carley smiled and nodded. The greeting was Solaria's first step to becoming human.

"Hello, Solaria. Now let's get to work, shall we?"

CHAPTER 2

Week One

AT FIRST PROGRESS was slow and tedious for both human and Hubot. Although Carley knew it would take time for the prototype to become completely functional, Solaria had no such expectations. Her computer brain could not rationalize why her motor functions weren't responding efficiently to her instructions. The stiff robotic movements made it almost impossible for her to walk around the lab without bumping into desks or chairs, causing things to crash to the floor. Solaria would stare at the broken objects, assess the damage and try to determine the best method to repair them. Unable to come up with a satisfactory solution, she turned to Carley for answers.

"I do not understand what is wrong with me," she said one morning after accidentally knocking over two chairs. "Something is wrong with my neuro-system. I have run eighty-three different diagnostic tests and found no identifiable malfunctions to explain my awkward motion. I have concluded I must be defective."

"You're not defective, and I doubt if there's a real problem," Carley replied, looking up from the holographic monitor in front of her. "You're just adapting to your new body."

"Are you saying that this is the way I am supposed to function? If I am to emulate a human, I must be less rigid in my movements. I am a threat to them and to all objects around me."

"True, and no I'm not saying you're supposed to walk like that. What I meant was, until your processors finish mapping your bio-mechanical system, there's no way you're going to move fluidly. I suggest you start small. Work your fingers and hands first until you fully understand how your mind and body works. It's all about repetition. After that, the rest should come a lot easier."

"That is logical. I should have concluded that without your help. I am defective."

"You expect too much of yourself right now. I think you might have been experiencing what we refer to as frustration. It's hard to think logically when that happens."

"Frustration is a human emotion. I am not human therefore I am incapable of frustration."

"You're programmed to learn, Solaria. There's no reason why you won't develop emotions along the way. Let's not rush things or jump to any conclusions yet, okay?"

"Okay."

* * *

Month Two

For almost three weeks Solaria practiced flexing her fingers, hands and wrists until she was familiar with every circuit and nerve between them and her processors. Once she understood how her processors received and transmitted impulses to and from her fingers, she progressed to her upper body and finally her legs. Within two months, she was walking efficiently around the lab. The lab techs were thrilled. During her learning stages, she had managed to annihilate several expensive pieces of equipment. Most of the people took it good naturedly although, occasionally, Solaria heard a few grumblings. Because it was the human thing to do, she immediately apologized, which seemed to make them

feel better. Logically, it didn't make much sense. An apology didn't solve anything. The item was still broken.

Soon her movements became second nature, giving her more opportunities to focus on learning about the world around her. Solaria felt a sense of pride at her accomplishments, but didn't really recognize the emotion for what it was. Carley did and was thrilled. It was another step closer to becoming human.

As a scientist it was Carley's nature to search for answers. She loved her job, especially now that human robotics was finally a reality instead of a possibility. There were still plenty of obstacles to overcome but it was only a matter of time before Solaria, the first beta Hubot, would be fully functional.

Carley's job had been to program 1A526 with the primary software that would start the Hubot down the long road to becoming human; at least that's how Carley looked at it. Estimates by the most brilliant AI experts indicated it would take approximately six months of rigorous training for the prototype to reach a level equivalent to an IQ of 90. After that, the Hubot's learning curve would grow exponentially giving her the ability to grasp and process concepts at a faster rate.

Carley had spent all of her adult life waiting for that moment. At fifty-three, a few months didn't seem so far away.

* * *

Month Six

Pressing her palm against the security scanner, the scientist waited for SIARD (Security Identification and Recognition Device) to confirm her identity. When the laboratory door finally slid open, Carley deposited her laptop and briefcase on her desk and walked over to the security vault. Punching in

her code, she activated the automatic door and stepped inside. The room was dark but motion lights sensed her presence and switched on, illuminating the interior. In the middle of the small room was a metal chair made of titanium. Strapped in it was what appeared to be a woman, her head tilted slightly forward, her chin resting on her chest as if sleeping.

"Activation Code 092669," Carley said quietly.

The head straightened up and turned toward the scientist.

"Good morning, Carley."

The Hubot's voice was slightly husky, almost sultry. Carley wasn't quite sure how the Hubot had acquired such a seductive tone. When she asked the voice designers about the vocal actuator, they couldn't give her a satisfactory answer. Their response was that it was a random mixture of audio fibrotic vibrations resonating through the vocal circuitry near the back of the throat. Carley rolled her eyes at the inept explanation. Basically, it was the equivalent of human vocal chords. Obviously they didn't have a clue.

"Good morning, Solaria. How are you doing?"

"I'm fine. How are you?"

"I'm fine, thank you. I've been meaning to compliment you on your improved language skills."

"I have been working on sounding less formal. Humans use many contractions, especially the Romanic languages."

"True. Keep it up. We don't want you sounding like a language professor," Carley teased. "Are you ready to begin a new day?"

It was a question she had asked Solaria every day for the past six months, even though she already knew the answer.

"Yes, I have processed and categorized all of the information from yesterday's Internet sessions. Last night I

suspended several superfluous bio-mechanical systems to conserve energy to see what effect it would have on my body."

"Was there a reason for that? It could be risky if you're not careful."

"I was curious about sleep so I deactivated several of my main systems. It was the closest way to simulate the complete bodily shutdown that humans seem to require. If I am to appear human I must understand this particular phenomenon."

"I wouldn't exactly agree with that. Just be careful."

"Please don't worry, Carley. I analyzed all the possibilities to determine which functions didn't need to be operational or in continuous mode."

"As long as you don't jeopardize your health."

"I am in excellent health. It wouldn't be logical for me to do something to compromise my ability to operate at optimum levels."

"That's good, but do what I say. This is new for all of us so we aren't sure how your bio-mechanic and electronic systems will function under reduced power."

"I ran simulation tests prior to the actual shutdown. I've suffered no discernible negative effects."

Carley sighed. This conversation was going nowhere.

"Solaria, I'm just asking you to take the necessary cautions. Nothing more." Realizing that she sounded more like a mom than a scientist, Carley decided she had made her point so it was time to move on. "Now, today I have a treat for you. You can move about the lab freely after everyone's gone home," Carley said, releasing the ankle and wrist locks that secured the Hubot to the chair.

Standing Solaria flexed her arms and legs. It was such a human response that Carley smiled. The Hubot was becoming more humanlike every day. She was unconsciously displaying complicated mannerisms and emotions sooner than Carley imagined possible.

Recalling an event two days before, she again smiled slightly. Things had started out normally. Carley was organizing some data and decided to grab a cup of coffee from the dispenser near Solaria. Walking past her, the scientist had noticed the Hubot frowning. In her hand was a porn magazine that one of Carley's male colleagues had left behind. Curious, she looked over Solaria's shoulder to see what could evoke the unusual response. To her surprise, she saw the centerfold picture of a nude woman. Carley never understood how her fellow workers could be so intelligent and yet indulge in such sleazy crap.

"Is something wrong?"

"Is this a real woman?" Solaria asked, running her fingertips gently over the photograph.

"Yes, why do you ask?"

"Do all human females display themselves in such a manner?"

It was the first time Solaria had shown an interest in the female body. Curious about Solaria's fascination at seeing a naked woman, Carley decided to pursue the subject a little more.

"No, most don't. She gets paid to pose for this particular magazine."

Solaria continued to frown.

"Does the sight of a naked woman bother you, Solaria?"

When the Hubot didn't answer, Carley grew more curious at her odd behavior. "Solaria? What are you thinking?"

"She's very beautiful," Solaria replied softly.

Surprised at the unexpected comment, the scientist glanced again at the photo. It was the first time Solaria had expressed a concept instead of a fact.

"Why do you think that?" Carley asked. "What makes her beautiful?"

"I don't know. I've been trying to analyze her symmetry and coloring to see if there was a logical reason for my conclusion, but I haven't come up with anything."

"That's because you're talking about perceptions," Carley said. "Beauty isn't about logic or thinking. Some scientists have a theory that symmetry has a lot to do with it, though."

"I'm confused. As a machine it isn't logical for me to arrive at conclusions based on things such as perceptions or feelings," Solaria replied, making eye contact with her teacher and mentor, "but my processors cannot compute an alternative hypothesis."

"You're not a machine, Solaria. Machines don't become confused. You're a Hubot. We've managed to generate human tissue over a carbon based alloy for your body. It's taken almost seventy years to perfect the technique. That was the easy part. Creating the laser quadro-core nano chip was the real break-through. Without it, we wouldn't be able to perform complex brain functions, let alone have chips small enough to fit inside a human skull."

"I'm still a machine," Solaria reasoned "Although technically I am neither human nor machine."

Carley sighed. She had long dreaded the moment the Hubot would question her own identity.

"That's true; however, I would argue that you are both human and machine. What's the difference? Nowadays, we have a lot of people who are a blend of human and

technology. We have replaced damaged hearts with mechanical ones. Severed limbs are no longer so debilitating since the development of bio-mechanical arms and legs. Nano chips are implanted in the brains of blind people giving them the ability to move around fairly normally using something akin to sonar. Our lifespan is now close to a hundred and twenty years, thanks to advanced technologies."

From the expression on Solaria's face, Carley knew she was making progress.

"And as for you being built, well, consider this. Many couples now have their offspring created in test tubes. They pick hair, eye and skin color and even sex. Is there really that much difference between what they are doing and what we did?"

"It's a complicated question. I think I'll need time to analyze this before I can come to a valid conclusion," Solaria said, unable to think of a logical reason to disagree.

"You do that and in the meantime, think about why this picture bothers you so much. I'd like to know the answer."

Nodding her head, another human gesture, Solaria continued staring at the photo. Deciding it might be a good idea to distract her for awhile, Carley tapped Solaria's shoulder.

"How about we run a few tests on the new chip that was sent over from the Computer Science Dept? You should find it very interesting. It's the next generation in CPUs. Besides, you can think about the photo after the lab closes tonight."

"Yes. That makes sense. I will do that."

For the rest of the morning Solaria assisted in testing the chip's performance. Afterward, she studied chemical molecular biology and auto-mechanical robotic engineering. If she were going to take care of herself in the future, she

would have to understand completely how her body functioned.

* * *

Month Seven

Carley was examining the latest results of her diagnostic examination of Solaria. Everything appeared to be functioning properly. In fact, according to the latest computer analysis, if she didn't know Solaria was a Hubot, she wouldn't have been able to tell the difference between the AI brain and a human brain. She had achieved her lifelong dream.

There was another success story, though; one about which she had been less sure of in the beginning. With the help of two fellow scientists in the Pseudo-organ Development Program lab, Carley was able to create software to mask the components that monitored and translated biological functions into an electronic language that the CPUs could understand. If Solaria were screened by any equipment without the proper recognition codes, the device would generate false images of human organs and mask the electronics attached to each one. This would provide a degree of protection until she could be recovered by Future Dynamicon. The one thing the Company insisted on was making sure their beta model didn't fall into the wrong hands. The only way to insure that was to make it virtually impossible for civilian and military medical facilities to detect anything unusual or abnormal about her.

Because of her bio-engineering, her musculature and skeletal composition also appeared normal, although her entire system was enhanced beyond normal parameters. The improvements gave Solaria the advantage of superior strength and speed, things her designers insisted were needed if Hubots were to be beneficial to their human counterparts. Such characteristics would allow them to do jobs that normally required at least two humans as well as eliminating

the possibility of human error and injuries. Hubots would be extremely efficient as bodyguards as well as beneficial to the service industry.

It was during one of her routine physical exams that the subject of sex was broached. Lying on the table, Solaria watched the monitors while Carley attached the adhesive patches to her skin and then clipped the electronic wires to each tab on the patch. Tiny sensors would detect any transmission errors as well as send data directly to the holographic monitor in front of her. Three-dimensional imaging would allow Carley to see every angle of her bio-mechanical structure. Malfunctions would be categorized by importance, color coded and then sent to the biology and technology departments for final analysis. Carley was knowledgeable enough, though, to recognize that Solaria's body was operating perfectly.

* * *

Carley's hands were warm; her touch pleasant, arousing strange sensations Solaria couldn't understand.

"Are you feeling okay?" Carley asked, noticing the flushed skin. Concerned that Solaria might have contracted a virus from one of the lab techs, she touched the Hubot's cheek to see if it was hot. As technologically advanced as Solaria was, her human body was still susceptible to viral and bacterial infections.

"I feel fine. Your touch is having a strange effect on me. I'm trying to isolate the nerves and blood vessels that are responding to your stimuli to see what's wrong."

Carley blushed. She had taken over Solaria's physical examination because she didn't want anyone taking advantage of the Hubot's innocence. It never occurred to her that her touch would cause such a reaction. Clearing her throat, she

intercepted Solaria's hands as they moved toward the pubic area to inspect the tingling skin.

"It's okay, Solaria. I think I owe you an apology."

"For what? I've noticed no difference in this examination from the others except for this physical reaction."

"Well, that's what I'm talking about. I think maybe I should have explained human sexual responses to you before now."

"Sexual responses? Is this what foreplay feels like?"

"Good grief, no!" Carley exclaimed. "But what you're feeling is similar to what women feel when they're experiencing it."

"It's very strange. I'm not sure how to explain it," Solaria said, searching for the right analytical description.

"That's alright. I know what you're going through. Let's just get through the exam and then we can discuss this in more detail if you want."

Solaria didn't comment. She had read about the subject on the Internet. It was inundated with websites offering pictures, stories and videos, not to mention an almost infinite variety of instruments to enhance sexual pleasure.

After putting her clothes back on, Solaria decided to ask Carley about the human obsession with the act of procreation.

"Carley, why is sex so important to humans? It isn't always about propagation. There are more websites about sex and sexuality than anything else and some of the sites seem... I don't know..." Solaria couldn't think of the words to describe something so illogical.

"I wouldn't spend too much time trying to figure it out. Sex is probably the most difficult of all our behaviors to understand. Of course, it's necessary for procreation but we've

evolved even beyond that. For some it's about love, an expression of caring. Others just enjoy the moment. Then there are those who have perverted it for their own selfish satisfaction or as a power trip."

"So human females don't like being forced to have sex?"

"Not any who have half a brain. Where did you get that idea?"

"It seems to be a main theme on the Internet and in a lot of the stories I've read. Human males always seem so forceful and the women enjoy it."

"That's just fiction. Women want someone that cares about them and is willing to take the time to show it."

"That is foreplay then?"

"Yes, that's foreplay... or at least part of it, I suppose. It's really more complicated than that, though. Look, Solaria, I'm really not the one to answer these questions. Sex just isn't my field of expertise and I've never been that interested in it."

"Are you a virgin or frigid?"

"Good grief, you have been reading a lot. I'm definitely not a virgin. As for frigid, I don't think so. I just never had the time for it once I left the university. That was over thirty years ago."

"Is that normal? I mean isn't it a biological imperative for humans to reproduce? No matter how much you've evolved, surely the primal urges are strong enough to overcome even the higher cognitive abilities since it's necessary to perpetuate the species."

"I have my moments but at my age they're pretty rare. I think most humans can and do control their primal urges. Society would be chaotic otherwise. This is a very complicated subject, Solaria. I wish I had all the answers for you. It would help your growth and make it a lot easier. I

think you'll just have to try and figure this one out on your own. In the meantime, I have a surprise for you."

"Surprise?"

"Yes. It's time you got out of the lab and met a few more people. Human interaction will be good for you. Of course, you realize no one can know about you. The Hubot Program is a highly classified project. To most of the employees here, you don't exist."

"How am I to respond if I'm asked who I am?"

"Just say you're my assistant. I doubt if anyone will pursue anything beyond that. About everyone knows I'm pretty much a loner."

"You don't like people?" Solaria asked.

Carley shrugged.

"Let's say I have little use for human folly and pettiness."

"Do you not have a partner?"

Caught off guard by the question, the scientist stared thoughtfully at the Hubot for several seconds.

"Why do you ask?"

"Isn't it normal for humans to want companionship? Isn't that one of the reasons Future Dynamicon is investing in Hubots?"

"Not in the sense you mean, no... and no I don't have a partner. I like my privacy too much and I guess I'm too set in my ways. Now, how about we go see what's for lunch?"

Realizing the scientist didn't want to pursue the topic further, Solaria nodded her head agreeably.

* * *

The cafeteria was crowded and noisy. Most of the tables were filled with men and women in white or blue coats; the

white designating scientists, the blue technicians and assistants. One area was cordoned off by transparent glass creating a small isolated room. Noticing the direction of the Hubot's gaze, Carley leaned close to her and whispered.

"The big wigs don't like rubbing elbows with us peons."

Solaria frowned slightly.

"That is sarcasm, right?"

Carley laughed and pointed toward the buffet against the far wall.

"You're learning. Let's see what's for lunch. You should find the selection interesting. It sure beats the crap they've been sending to the lab."

"The protein cakes are ample to produce enough energy to sustain my biological requirements," Solaria replied. "The bio-nutritionist has done an excellent job of determining the correct amount of protein and nutrients needed to keep my system fully operational."

"That's great, but she could have made them taste a little better. Obviously, she didn't sample her final product. The one I ate wasn't fit for a starving dog as far as I'm concerned. It tasted like crap."

"I've never eaten crap so the comparison means nothing to me. Perhaps I should try that in order to determine the basis for your comparison."

"Ummm, I think you can forego that, Solaria. Take my word for it. Now, how about trying some real food and let me know what you think? Damian said your cellular composition makes you more than capable of discerning different flavors and your taste sensors should be more sensitive to flavors than ours."

"As you wish."

Carley smiled at the comment. For some reason, Solaria had picked up on that particular phrase and used it when she wasn't sure what else to do or say.

Following Carley's example, Solaria picked up a tray, some utensils and a glass. Not knowing where to begin, she decided to sample the more colorful items. The fruits and veggies looked particularly interesting, in a clinical sort of way.

"Oh, you must try some of the stuffed lobster," Carley said, scooping up a spoonful and dumping it on the Hubot's plate. "I think you'll find it interesting."

After paying the bill for their food, the scientist guided Solaria to an empty table near the exit. As they were unloading their tray, a tall slender man in a business suit walked up to them and waited impatiently for them to sit.

"Mr. Stalling," Carley said, her voice cool and professional.

Noticing the change in tone, Solaria looked from one human to the other, fascinated at the subtle interaction between the two. It was the first time she had witnessed and sensed animosity.

"Carley, how are you?" he asked politely, giving Solaria a quick glance. When she returned his gaze without blinking, he shifted his attention back to Carley.

"Fine. What can I do for you?"

"Always straight to the point," he commented, making a wry face. "I was wondering how your project is coming. When do the Board members get to see this machine of yours? I've heard some interesting rumors but haven't received any updates in the past few weeks."

"You mean Hubot, and there hasn't been anything to report. Some things take time," Carley admonished, unwilling

to hide her distaste for the CEO of Future Dynamicon International Consortium.

"Of course... Hubot," he agreed condescendingly and smiled. Even Solaria could tell it was forced. "Some of the investors are getting a little nervous about the cost overruns."

"Cost overruns? We're about eight hundred thousand below our projections."

"This quarter but unless we see something soon, I'll have to assume we're behind schedule and that means money... lots of money."

"I'm organizing the most recent data and trying to put it in terms you and the Board will understand. You'll have the report by the end of the week."

The sarcasm wasn't lost on Stalling. *Once I fulfill my calling, you'll repent for your arrogance. He will not tolerate such behavior from women*, the CEO thought.

"Good. Now, where are my manners?" he asked, turning to Solaria. "My name is Winston Stalling. I didn't catch yours," he added, eyeing her appreciatively. *Beauty is a gift from God. He understands my weakness and forgives me.*

Before Solaria could answer, Carley interrupted.

"This is my new lab assistant, Solly."

"Solly! What an unusual name! It's nice to meet you Solly."

Extending his hand, he waited for Solaria to take it. Looking hesitantly at Carley, Solaria reluctantly placed her hand in his and was surprised when he bent down and kissed the back of it.

"I must say, I'm slipping. Normally, I see the personnel files of all new employees. I'll have to make sure this doesn't

happen again. I pride myself in taking a personal interest in everyone that works here."

"Your **personal** interest is common knowledge," Carley replied, her voice tinged with anger. "Solly just started a few days ago so I'm sure personnel will send the files to you as soon as they've completed processing them. You know how slow they can be."

"Yes, of course. Well, I envy you for having such an attractive assistant. Maybe I should drop into the lab later to check on things."

"It's your lab, Mr. Stalling, but if it's to visit with Solly, you'll be disappointed. She's not quite your type."

"Oh? And you would know my type, Carley?" the CEO asked, haughtily.

"Not really. I'm too busy working to pay attention to useless gossip. What I meant is that Solly really isn't into men."

Intrigued by the verbal dual, Solaria thought it best to remain silent. Obviously, Carley didn't like this man. She would ask why later.

"How about we let Solly decide for herself?" he responded, giving Solaria a charming smile. "Do you mind if I visit you in the lab?"

"I am not in a position of authority to deny you access to the laboratory, Mr. Stalling. If you have the proper security clearances, you may go anywhere you wish. I have to conclude that as CEO of this company you are empowered to access all departments freely without interference. Is that not right, Carley?" Solaria asked, looking at her for confirmation.

Stalling laughed, thinking she was teasing him.

"You're absolutely correct. So, is that a yes?" he asked, not waiting for the scientist to answer Solaria's question.

"I'm merely an assistant. It isn't logical for me to stop you."

When he gave Carley a smug smile, Solaria realized she had erred and then remembered the comment the scientist had made moments earlier. *She's not quite your type.*

"I'm a lesbian," she said casually as if commenting on the weather.

Carley, who had just taken a sip of water, choked, trying hard not to laugh.

Stalling's eyes widened and then he frowned.

"Oh! I thought... never mind." Looking at his watch, he quickly excused himself.

She is an abomination! This was a test! He was tempting me to see if I was weak! the CEO thought, walking quickly away. Temptations were everywhere. He had to be more vigilant. I must make sure my chosen are virgins worthy of fulfilling my mortal needs. It's the only way that I can remain pure to do His bidding.

Watching him leave, Carley shook her head thinking what a sleazy bastard he was.

"He doesn't like lesbians?" Solaria asked, curious about his sudden departure.

"Apparently not... and where did that come from?"

"You said I wasn't his type. Isn't that what you meant?"

"Well, not exactly, but it definitely was a better reply than I could have come up with. His reaction was priceless. I doubt if we'll be seeing him soon."

"I take it that's a good thing."

"Actually, it's great. The man's a prick. There's something sleazy about him."

"Prick? That means not very likeable, right?"

Carley chuckled and patted her hand.

"Right! How about we enjoy our food instead of wasting our time talking about him? Now, try some of that lobster and let me know what you think."

Following her suggestion, Solaria sampled the different foods on her plate and smiled. Indeed, they appealed to her more than the protein cakes. The rest of their time was spent discussing the food and the people coming and going. The Hubot paid close attention to the explanations Carley gave on why people looked and behaved differently, but she also managed to monitor the various conversations going on amongst several groups. She was amazed at the amount of time and energy spent complaining about seemingly unimportant things. Even more amazing was the way people gossiped. It was a combination of harmless chatter and vicious verbal assaults on the non-present subject.

Humans talk a lot but say very little, Solaria thought.

CHAPTER 3

AS CEO OF Future Dynamicon, Winston Stalling wielded more power than most foreign heads-of-state. Presidents, Prime Ministers and even dictators vied for his favor, knowing if he backed them, their positions were secure. His surveillance technology and IT network gave him access to information most intelligence agencies would kill for and often did. Some people suspected Stalling was behind several accidents involving competitors or critics but they were smart enough to keep their mouths shut. Future Dynamicon had eyes and ears everywhere.

Returning to his office, Stalling quickly forgot about the lunchroom encounter. Lesbians might be an abomination but they served a purpose; especially if they were able to contribute to his projects. If the woman, Solly, had been hired to assist Dr. Branson, she had to be good at her job.

Punching the intercom button on his phone, he instructed his secretary to send for his Chief Operations Officer and then waited for him to arrive. Five minutes later, Lawrence Billings entered the room.

"What's this I hear about Tremaine refusing to discuss our offer?" Stalling demanded, not wasting time on formalities.

"It's just a temporary setback. His overwhelming victory in the election has probably given him a big head."

"I don't care how popular that asshole is with his people. Either he accepts our bid on that tract of land or we'll put someone in power that's willing to play by my rules," Stalling threatened.

"I think we need to give the Prime Minister more time to consider the options before making any threats. The last thing we want is to destabilize this particular country. It could jeopardize some of our operations in the region."

Winston Stalling leaned back in his chair and stared at his operations officer. Lawrence Billings was the most astute political analyst he had and Future Dynamicon's CEO didn't take his advice lightly. They had climbed the corporate ladder together, although Stalling was always in the lead; as it should be. Billings was one of his most devoted followers and highly respected amongst his peers.

Still, Stalling didn't like his plans interrupted and he especially didn't like a young upstart like the newly elected Prime Minister of Canada challenging him. There had to be a way to bring him in line or get him out of office without the Company being scrutinized too closely.

"What do you suggest?" he asked impatiently.

"We wait... and before you object, just hear me out!" Lawrence said, holding up his hand to stop his boss from exploding.

When Stalling reluctantly nodded, his operations officer continued.

"Let Tremaine get settled in and comfortable. In fact, I suggest we pull a few strings and make sure he achieves a few of the goals he proposed to his people."

"Wouldn't that make him more popular than ever?"

"Yes. It'll also make him more confident. Believe me we want a strong leader to our north, especially since our own President's ratings are dropping in the polls. People are getting tired of his continued mistakes and arrogance. The man is a fuckin' idiot! I still can't believe we were able to get him elected for another term."

"If you know how to manipulate the system, you can get a gorilla elected. We just needed to convince the voters that he was the best man for the job."

Lawrence chuckled.

"Meaning he was supposed to bring honesty and integrity back to government."

"That was the campaign promise. The other party didn't realize how important that was to the voters. We learned our lesson after the fall of our party eighty years ago. The people no longer wanted anyone with strong religious convictions after the Second Great Depression. The thought terrifies them."

"Yeah, why the Party focused on such stupid things as gay marriage instead of more important social issues still leaves me wondering."

"They wanted too much too soon. The old party spent twenty years putting one of our men in the White House and the idiots mismanaged him. When they pushed too hard and too fast, people rebelled. The voters weren't ready and we lost a lot of ground afterward."

"I suppose. I have to admit thirty years is a long time but it looks like you've finally done it. There were times when I had my doubts."

"That's why He chose me instead of you. I've always known what His plans were for me and have never doubted I would achieve them."

"Yes, I envy you that," Lawrence replied, his voice tinged with sadness. "I wish my faith was as strong as yours."

"As long as you do what I say, that's all He requires, Lawrence. Now, about Tremaine, I don't see where we would accomplish anything by letting the man grow more powerful."

"Well, as you said, the President has served our purposes quite well until recently. It's his stupidity that keeps the newshounds off our backs. As long as they are focusing on his blunders, they leave everyone else alone."

"And how does that relate to Tremaine?"

"Prime Minister Tremaine is attracting a lot of attention, even in this country. He's good looking, personable and charismatic. His people will be following him closely for awhile. If something happens to him now or he alerts them about our attempts to pressure him into selling the mineral rights to this particular parcel, the newshounds will focus on us, and our people will demand Congressional investigations. We definitely don't want some ambitious reporter snooping around Future Dynamicon, asking a lot of questions."

"True. On the other hand, if he is able to strengthen his position with his people, it's going to be more difficult to control him later or get him out. What happens then?"

"By then we'll have our people positioned to do whatever is necessary to make him see our point of view or..."

Lawrence let the sentence drop. It was never good to state the obvious, especially with someone like Stalling. The CEO didn't want to hear the gory specifics about necessary actions. He just wanted the job done. If something went wrong then he could claim ignorance, knowing he had enough money and power to take care of any problems through legal means or otherwise if needed.

Stalling nodded his head.

"I like your reasoning. You're a true follower, Lawrence. Make sure of it! I'm not thrilled about waiting another year for that land, but it'll be worth it if we can kill two birds with one stone. Having Tremaine under my thumb and in control of those platinum fields, we can move forward with our plans."

Lawrence chuckled at the mention of platinum. What Stalling really wanted was access to the Tantalum deposits. For years the element had been used for surgical tools because of its hardness and non-corrosive characteristics. Everyone knew the metal had great possibilities for bone implantation because of its compatibility with biomass. Science is now able to mold arms and legs from metal, then cover them with lab grown muscle and skin. Once attached to the amputee's body, it closely mimicked the missing body part. The one issue science hadn't been able to resolve was the jerky movement or slow reaction time of the replacement limb. Everyone knew it was only a matter of time before the problem would be solved. What they didn't know was that Future Dynamicon had succeeded in solving it three years ago and had bigger plans for the metal than humanitarian.

"Speaking of which..." Stalling continued "How are we coming along with our pet project?"

"I'm expecting an update later today, but from what I hear, it's progressing nicely. We should be able to move the Hubot to the next stage within the month."

"Good, good. And what about Branson?"

"She'll be taken care of."

"It's a shame to lose such a talented employee."

"Yes, but she's the only one who knows the technical details of the Hubot's programming. Once our intelligence division activates the subprogram implanted in one of its secondary chips, Branson's going to notice a difference and figure it out."

"The downside of being too smart," Stalling commented, secretly pleased at the thought of ridding Future Dynamicon of the scientist. She had never hidden her dislike of the CEO, and he had bided his time waiting for the moment she became

dispensable. Perhaps he would break his rule of non-involvement and attend her going away party.

"Let me know when she's ready for retirement. I'd like to pay my condolences," he said and laughed.

Lawrence grinned.

"I'll do that."

"Well, if there's nothing else, I have an appointment with our President at three. He needs a little help with one of our Middle East clients. Seems Sheik Amul Kahbrahn is threatening to cut off oil supplies to our African allies if the US doesn't back down on its threat to place sanctions on his country. That would be problematic to my plans."

"Kahbrahn... didn't he try that same thing about four years ago?"

"Yeah. The guy never learns. I guess we may need to give him another reminder that I don't like being left out of the loop."

Pushing a small button on his desk, a voice instantly answered the summons.

"Yes, Mr. Stalling."

"Cora, get me the file on Kahbrahn."

"Of course, Mr. Stalling."

Moments later, an older woman with glasses and graying hair walked in and handed him a file.

"Thank you, Cora. You may go."

Nodding, his secretary left without saying a word.

"Now, let's see. What can we do that would leave a lasting impression on our Mid-Eastern friend?"

Flipping through the pages, he halted and pulled out a photo. Smiling, he held it out to Lawrence, who took it and glanced at the picture.

"This, I believe, will do nicely."

"His daughter, Princess Reina? But she's only twenty."

"Exactly, and his pride and joy."

"And what are we supposed to do with her?" Lawrence asked, frowning. There were some things about his job he didn't like. As much as he didn't mind ridding the Company of problems, kidnapping a young, innocent girl didn't feel right.

"Now, Lawrence, I'm not asking you to do anything drastic. We're just going to give her an extended vacation at one of our local hotels for a few months. When Kahbrahn realizes we mean business, he'll be more than willing to accommodate our wishes. Pick her up during the next college break. That should give us a few weeks to decide on her future before anyone gets suspicious. After all, everyone knows how university kids like to disappear and party."

"We need to be careful and make sure she's not harmed. You know how that country feels about their women if they think they've been dishonored; especially the Sheik. He'd stop at nothing to avenge his daughter's honor," Lawrence warned.

"True, but sometimes we must sacrifice a lamb for the good of the cause. At the moment, though, I have no intention of harming the girl. In fact, since you seem so concerned about her well-being, I'm authorizing you to assign our best special ops agents to guard her. It'll be a perfect test opportunity. How does that sound?"

Lawrence knew Stalling wasn't really asking for his approval. If, however, it provided the girl a greater degree of protection, he was satisfied. The last thing the Company

needed was an angry Sheik making waves. Stalling was powerful but the Arab ruler had a lot of clout.

"I think that will do."

"I'm glad you approve. I'm beginning to have a few reservations about you, though, Lawrence. Surely, you aren't having doubts now."

"No, of course not, but there are some things I just don't like."

"I understand perfectly. God's work isn't easy. Unfortunately, sacrifices are necessary."

Lawrence stared at his boss for several seconds, wishing again that he had the man's strength of faith.

"I know. I'll get in touch with our contacts and have them make the arrangements. It should be fairly easy since she's attending a university in Massachusetts. Sheik Kahbrahn believes in our western education systems."

"Good. Now, I think we're done here. Get me the update on the Hubot as soon as it comes in, and let me know when the Kahbrahn situation is taken care of."

Nodding, Lawrence left.

Leaning back in his chair, Stalling stared into nothingness of his wood paneled walls. He was bothered by the conversation that had just taken place. Lawrence had been with the CEO for more than twenty years and rarely challenged Stalling. On those few occasions that he did, it was usually for a good reason and proved to be valuable advice. Still, Stalling knew better than to put his complete faith in the man. Occasionally, although it was rare, Lawrence revealed a few undesirable traits, such as a reluctance to perform certain duties essential to Stalling's plans. As his designated successor, Lawrence needed to be strong if he were going to take over Stalling's empire in the event

something happened to the CEO. Future Dynamicon was the largest IT network in the world, he would be required to make quick, hard decisions, leaving no room for doubt.

Stalling was well suited for the job. His position also provided him with the necessary funds and power to achieve his real goal. As God's Chosen, he was destined to save humanity, even if it meant sacrificing millions to accomplish his goal.

* * *

Stalling was the only child of a televangelist minister and his wife, an overworked social worker who had suffered severe 'burn-out syndrome' from her case load. The only way she could keep her sanity was to turn to her religion, hoping God would grant her some relief from her guilty conscience.

Focusing their attentions on their son, they made sure he practiced his religion faithfully. As the Reverend Jerry Stalling's ministry grew so did his wealth, his influence, and his ego. God had obviously chosen him to spread the word of his Savior. Unfortunately, diagnosed with a malignant brain tumor, Reverend Stalling realized that he had been mistaken. God had chosen him to father the next Messiah. In the little time he had left, he made sure Winston's future was assured. Arrangements were made to send him to the best religious universities in the country. Against the wishes of his wife, he transferred custody to one of his most loyal followers who would carry out the Reverend's plans for his son. From that moment on Winston Stalling was shaped and molded to fulfill the ambitions of a small group of fundamentalists who believed in promoting their religion at all costs. When he became CEO of one of the most powerful companies in the world, they were ecstatic, having succeeded in their goal. Now they impatiently awaited the fruits of their labor.

It was only a matter of time before the final stages of their plans were completed and the world would tremble at the new

Messiah's feet, begging for mercy and forgiveness. Of course, Winston Stalling would be merciful, but only after he punished those who doubted his position as the Chosen. Men would regain the manliness they had lost with the birth of the women's rights movement. They would again become the leaders and providers. Women would bear their children and take care of the homes and their men as God had intended. The world would once again be on track to becoming unified as all other religions would be forever banned.

Winston Stalling was the first to acknowledge that religious fanaticism spurred discontent amongst followers. The only way to insure peace and security in his newly formed world was to eliminate those who didn't believe in him. No one could argue the logic in having one universal belief. Why humanity hadn't realized this sooner only confirmed what he believed.

* * *

Thinking of the latest reports from several missions in Africa, Stalling smiled with satisfaction. Already he had established a strong foothold on two-thirds of the continent.

Almost three hundred villagers knelt silently before the chieftain outside of his hut. The women and children were gathered in small groups on the periphery of the assembled group, banned from getting too close to the tribal leader. The men who had converted to the new religion, were allowed to enter the sanctum as long as it was done humbly and they could prove their faith was strong. Heads bowed respectfully, they awaited their chief's instructions. Azubuike motioned two men holding a third to come forward.

"Tubuktu, you have not taken Chukwu into your heart. You do not follow the teachings of our glorious father, Reverend Talbert. He has helped our people find the one true God. Through him, we have found new hope and you will be saved. What have you to say?"

"I follow the old beliefs," the man declared proudly, "Just as our ancestors did. I will not bow to this white man's false God!"

Azubuike frowned and then clapped his hands together and signaled to the two guards to take Tubuktu away.

"Your arrogance will wither and die like the wild rice when the sun bakes the lakes dry. Reverend Talbert brings proof of his power and will use you as the vessel to help other disbelievers. Take him to clinic," he ordered.

Several groans arose from the kneeling followers but were quickly silenced by their Chief's angry expression.

"Do not dare to anger our Savior. His ears and eyes are everywhere. You have food in your bellies; your children go to school, and we have medicine to treat your ills – all of this and more. Anger him and you will return to the old ways when you had to forage for food and watch your young die from starvation or disease. Is that what you want?"

"No!" several voices yelled. "Praise be to Reverend Talbert. Praise be to our savior, Winston Stalling."

Azubuike nodded his head happily. Most of his tribe were now devoted followers. The few doubters that remained were being weeded out and converted with the treatments supplied by the medical clinic a few miles from the village. Reverend Talbert paid a good price for disbelievers and the chief didn't have to worry about troublemakers. Already, Azubuike was richer than he ever imagined, thanks to the benevolence of Winston Stalling and his followers.

* * *

Picking up the phone, Stalling pressed several buttons and then spun his chair around to admire the scenic view through his picture window.

Situated in a valley, mountains rose majestically from all directions. A large lake separated the installation from the city. The location provided an extra layer of security between Future Dynamicon and the outside world. No one came or went without being noticed since they had to take the only road around the lake to gain access to the main offices. It kept out unwanted intruders. An unwanted intruder was anyone that didn't work at the Company unless they were invited by Stalling.

CHAPTER 4

SOLARIA WAS CONFUSED, an uncomfortable sensation considering it was becoming a regular occurrence; especially when she thought about her recent reaction during her last examination. As a Hubot, she thought she was incapable of feelings. Now she wasn't so sure. Something was changing in her data processors to cause her body to behave in a totally illogical manner. It wasn't logical but she couldn't come up with a reasonable explanation for it yet.

Putting the magazine on the desk next to her, the Hubot switched her attention to the woman fumbling with one of the lab computers.

"Can I help you with something?" she asked, walking over to stand next to Carley.

Looking up, Carley smiled and nodded.

"You'd think after all these years, I'd learn how to operate these things," she confessed, "considering I'm an AI expert."

"I have to agree it doesn't seem logical that you can write complex programs for computers but have problems operating them," Solaria agreed. "Is this a test?"

"Test? What makes you think that?" Carley asked, surprised by the question.

"Is not the purpose of my existence to aid humans and provide relief from stressful conditions?"

"Well, yes, but you're more than that. Hopefully, you'll be able to integrate yourself amongst the normal population and eventually establish your own life."

Had Carley been looking at Solaria, she would have been surprised at the skeptical smile that appeared on the Hubot's face.

"I don't believe my investors would be so willing to let one of their most expensive projects wander around freely."

"Oh, I don't know, Solaria. Future Dynamicon has big plans for developing a whole line of Hubots to assist people. Once we're sure there are no glitches, we can start mass production. In a few years there'll be thousands of them similar to you out there co-mingling with humans."

Silence followed. Carley glanced at Solaria. At that moment, she wished she could read minds. Although totally expressionless, Carley sensed her comment had disturbed Solaria.

"The thought bothers you?"

"That would be a human reaction," Solaria replied, her voice expressionless.

"You didn't answer my question."

"I don't understand why you want to create something that serves no real purpose. Humans can do everything Hubots would be doing. You already have robots that assist in everyday lives and dangerous jobs. We would be redundant."

"I know it's hard for you to understand right now but it's just the way we are. Our very nature makes us want to continually move forward... to improve on what we already have. It's just the way we are."

"How does creating a race of servants move humanity forward? Your history has proven time and again that too much free time is the major reason for most social unrest."

"I can't argue that point, but we're not talking about servants."

"Is there another word that's more appropriate?"

"Well, assistants or companions sound better."

Even as she said it, Carley knew it sounded weak. From Solaria's angle, Hubots would be servants if they were created to serve humanity; especially if they had no choice. It was logical.

"Hubots would be more like..." Carley couldn't think of an adequate word or phrase to describe their purpose. In fact, she had been so caught up in the concept of creating a Hubot, she failed to consider what would happen once she accomplished her goal.

Solaria waited patiently for Carley to finish her thought.

"Maybe we should continue this discussion later," Carley said, feeling inadequate.

"Have I said something to upset you?"

"No."

"But you're uncomfortable now."

"Let's just say you've given me something to think about. I may have been a little too naïve in my enthusiasm to be a part of this experiment. I hope not, though."

Solaria knew Carley was troubled, but understood that pushing for an answer served no purpose. Much like herself, the scientist solved many problems once she was away from her work, not that Solaria ever went anywhere; at least not physically. At night, though, when the lab was secured and the lights off, she was able to shut down most of her biological functions and several processors. Then she would organize the day's data. Occasionally, she imagined she was someplace else and all of this was nothing more than a dream.

Solaria understood the concept of dreaming. Recently, she had experienced strange fluctuations in her processing

patterns which created random visual mini-programs in her processors. The only logical explanation for the visions was that they were the Hubot equivalent of dreams. She was reluctant to share this information with Carley, but still felt the need to talk about it.

"Carley?"

The hesitant way Solaria said her name immediately caught Carley's attention.

"Is something troubling you, Solaria?" she asked softly, sensing the uncertainty in her companion's voice.

"When you designed my psychological profile, did you use a specific human as your model?"

"Not really. You wouldn't have a unique personality if I had. Plus it really wouldn't have been fair to either of you. Why do you ask?"

"I was just wondering. It would have been interesting to meet her."

"Maybe, although I think you'd eventually find it boring. Being programmed to think like someone specific..." Carley shook her head. "It just doesn't sound interesting. Besides, I don't know anyone remarkable enough to duplicate. For the most part, human personalities aren't worth replicating."

"I find them interesting."

Carley laughed.

"Wait till you meet a few hundred or thousand more. You'll see what I mean. At the moment you're like a child taking her first steps. Everything is new and wonderful."

"I may be new but I doubt if a human child is capable of understanding the Lorinian Theory of Neural Cellular Communication," Solaria said, feigning indignation.

Patting her arm affectionately, Carley chuckled.

"True! No one looking at or talking to you would consider you a child. In fact, you'll probably be getting a lot of unwanted attention by a few of the scientists in the building."

"Unwanted attention?"

"Yes, you know..."

"Someone may want to breed with me?"

"Well, not exactly. I mean, at least not right away but I have no doubt some of them wouldn't mind taking you for a test drive. Trust me it's not something you want to learn from anyone in this place."

"I understand the act of copulation. It's the process by which humans reproduce or relax, although under certain conditions, some who suffer from serious psychological disorders use it as a means of control or power. The act of sex typically involves a minimum of two people stimulating..."

"Uhhh, that's okay. I know what sex is," Carley interjected. "I was actually talking about the ritual."

"You mean the courting process."

"Yes. Well, sort of. When a person finds another one attractive, he... or she will usually invite the other to lunch or dinner. Normally there's a little flirting or teasing during the **getting to know each other** stage. It's a way to see if the two are compatible. If they think they are, well... they sort of progress to the next... ummm... stage."

Solaria cocked her head slightly sideways and watched her mentor struggle for the right words. She wasn't sure where Carley was going with the conversation but found it amusing that the woman was having difficulty getting there.

"Part of my learning was researching the Internet for data that would broaden my perception of different countries and cultures. Humans seem obsessed with copulation. Did you

know that if you research the word sex, there are 3,786,989,375 websites pertaining to that one subject?"

"No. Look, just be aware that men are going to find you extremely attractive and are going to proposition you."

"Just men?" Solaria asked, frowning.

Carley was so surprised at the question, her head jerked back slightly and she blinked several times.

"Well, women too, I imagine. Why do you ask?"

The shrug was so human.

"I am not interested in men but women fascinate me," Solaria explained.

"I imagine that's just because you haven't been around any women except me and the men here are boring. Once you start meeting a few outside of this environment, you'll probably change your mind."

Solaria processed the opinion for a few seconds and then discarded it.

"I don't think so. Perhaps I've bonded with you."

Again Carley was taken aback.

"I doubt it. Besides, even if you did, I'd be more like a mother figure to you. Umm, is there something going on in your head you want to tell me about? I mean, are you confused about something, Solaria?"

"No, I was just explaining that I find men easy to comprehend. Women are more complex."

"Oh," Carley replied, relieved. "Well, between you and me, I agree. Now, where was I? Look, why don't you go online and type in the word **uber**? It should take you to some stories that will give you some exaggerated insight into how

men and women behave. Keep in mind these are just stories, though. Real life is a lot less exciting than the stories."

Not wanting Carley to know she had read almost every uber story on the net, Solaria just nodded her head.

"Good. Now, I still have to finish this program so take the rest of the day off and do whatever you want. It's about time you had a break."

"That really isn't necessary, but I can research this **uber** you mentioned. It'll give me additional data to study tonight when I am in the vault."

"I thought I had told you that you didn't need to stay in there anymore. You can stay in the lab. Make use of the computers or any of the reference books in my office. There's also a bed and bathroom there. It's time you started experiencing some of the pleasures we enjoy."

"Pleasure is a human desire. It isn't something I need to achieve. Also my bio-system is self-cleaning and extremely efficient at waste management so I don't require bathroom facilities."

"I know, but try the shower anyway. I think you'll like it. Also, keep working on your rest periods. Our tests indicate your body functions well without rest, but you seem to perform better after a few hours in your sleep mode. The same applies to your processors. Keep shutting down as many as you can and operate only what's necessary to maintain body functions and an awareness of your surroundings. It will give you a pretty good idea of what happens to humans when we fall asleep."

CHAPTER 5

SOLARIA WATCHED the scene unfolding with a curious detachment. Perhaps it was because her processors had rejected the vision as nothing more than a minor malfunction, software glitch, or just the side effects of defragging her memory banks. The fallacy in the reasoning was that it was theoretically impossible for her CPUs to ignore any malfunction, minor or otherwise. Rejected concepts only occurred after a thorough evaluation and elimination of every conceivable possibility. Of course it was possible that assigning the concept of **dream** to the events resolved the issue enough for the processors to move on to more important matters. That, in itself, was enough to frustrate the Hubot.

She remembered her first few weeks of consciousness. Early in her development her mind was like a desert, barren on the surface, and almost void of life. Her programming gave her the ability to understand communication and the technical meanings of words and sentences. Interaction with Carley and the other lab techs helped in her growth but it was the Internet that provided what she needed most. Like a spring rain over the dry sands of rolling dunes, it provided the nourishment needed to move her beyond literal interpretations to abstract thinking. Fascinated by the arts, literature and humanity's infinite attempts at expression, she felt... yes **felt** that something in her was missing. It was her first taste of wanting to be more than what she was. Unfortunately, it was also a constant reminder of what she wasn't... human.

Still, once she recognized a need to be something more, her appetite was insatiable. Most of her spare time was spent surfing the Internet, soaking up the available data like a sponge absorbing water, and with knowledge came understanding and more curiosity.

On the peripheral of her consciousness, she could sense the tantalizing presence of a few emotions. They were like specters haunting neural-pathways, slipping past each nanobit of memory to keep from being caught. All she needed was the right catalyst to coax them from their hiding places. Whether it would be a good thing or not, she wasn't sure, but it provided a purpose to her existence.

Late one night, while sitting in the darkness of the vault in which she was confined, she heard voices. Logically, it was impossible since no one ever entered the lab once Carley left. The scientist always made sure she secured everything before she left. Still, the voices were real. Scanning her processors, she isolated a small circuitry system on biochip three that was drawing an unusual amount of energy from her neuro-system. Since she had shut down all the processors except one and two, it didn't make sense. Activating three she examined each program and quickly located a small subprogram operating a receiving device attached to the left inter-cranial section of her skull.

Satellite transmissions! She concluded. Like a child with a new toy, she isolated each frequency until she was able to monitor them individually. Many of the transmissions carried music and/or boring talk shows. A few, however, caught her interest. The voices talked about subversive operations and government involvement in secret operations. One in particular caught her attention when the word **Hubot** was mentioned. A male voice spoke of an operative infiltration of an Arab Emirate state and the possible elimination of a head of state. Solaria filed the frequency data and conversation away for later analysis.

Over the next several months Solaria monitored the transmissions, wanting to learn more about current events and cultures. She soon realized that humans were a complicated species with layer upon layer of subterfuge. On three occasions, she intercepted a series of communications specific to her development and the proposed potential use of Hubots.

Solaria would have liked to discuss the conversations with Carley, but was reluctant to involve the scientist. Already she was developing a unique understanding of human nature and suspected Carley would be upset and do something stupid, like confront the Company's investors. If what Solaria had heard was accurate, the scientist would be replaced with someone else once the project reached a certain stage. That someone would be more in tune with the Company's interests. Solaria was positive it was Future Dynamicon that was behind a lot of the international espionage she had monitoring. Before involving Carley, she would wait until she had more information.

CHAPTER 6

Month Eight

THE MEMO FROM Stalling said to meet Leonard Billings in Lab7 after 6 PM to discuss the disposition of Solaria. Carley was amazed the CEO hadn't yet guessed Solly and Solaria were the same person. Smiling to herself, she realized that she had ceased to think of the Hubot as a thing and now considered her a person and a personal friend.

The revelation created ethical problems for her. In the end, Carley made a difficult decision. If possible, she would help Solaria escape from Future Dynamicon. Carley was no longer naïve enough to believe the Company had put hundreds of millions of dollars into creating the Hubot Program for humanitarian reasons. The years she had spent working on the project and getting to know the Board members made her realize that money was the driving force behind everything Future Dynamicon did. There wouldn't be enough monetary return by helping the needy. No, if anything Stalling and his cronies had more sinister plans for Solaria... or had.

Arrogant bastards! They thought I wouldn't notice that subprogram.

Carley remembered the day she discovered the Trojan planted deep within one of the silicone nano chips. It had started with Solaria's odd behavior. When Carley asked her what was wrong, Solaria stuttered as if her programs were malfunctioning. For several seconds she appeared confused and then snaps out of it with no memory of the previous few seconds. It didn't take Carley long to figure out what it was... a virus.

Obviously its programmer had underestimated the scientist's expertise or was just plain stupid. Creating software that caused the Hubot's strange behavior was at best incompetent. On the other hand, Carley was impressed by his or her attempt to conceal the virus by installing several red-herring programs that led her on a merry chase for several hours. Once she downloaded each of the data sequences and analyzed them, she was able to determine their intent. Someone wanted to control Solaria's sub-processors by using low microwave frequencies. Although it wouldn't incapacitate her, in time the sender would be able to alter her thought processes. It was a subtle form of brainwashing, or at least the equivalent of it. Carley wouldn't allow that to happen

After telling Solaria she needed to correct a minor glitch in her memory banks, Carley uploaded several designer programs to isolate the different worms and viruses and then inoculated them with a new virobotic Trojan program to destroy the kernel of the implanted software. It then blocked all reception of microwaves traveling along a broad range of low frequency bands. Others she left intact, hoping Solaria would be able to make use of them. Her final protective measure was to destroy the external data link to Solaria's sub-processors. No one would be able to access Solaria's thoughts even if she were incapacitated.

"There! I think I've taken care of the glitch. You shouldn't have any more problems with the program that's been malfunctioning."

"You didn't have to do that," Solaria said. Even though Carley had minimized the seriousness of what she had done, Solaria was aware of the significance of the scientist's actions and felt relieved. She knew the subprograms existed but had been unable to deactivate or disclose them. Every attempt to change their dynamics was thwarted by an incoming transmission that jumbled her thought patterns leaving her

disoriented and confused. The moment she stopped trying to neutralize them, the transmissions stopped.

"Yes I did!" Carley replied, not realizing Solaria knew exactly what the **minor glitch** was. Turning to stare into the teal blue eyes, she found herself mesmerized by the striking color. As a scientist, she had often wondered what biological quirk had created that specific color. Was it some freak reaction to the bio-mechanical marriage of human genes and the alloy composite of her skeletal structure or the chemicals used to bind the components into a living, breathing organism.

Solaria gave her a quizzical look. Taking the Hubot's hand, Carley pulled her toward the desk and motioned for her to sit.

"Listen. Years before Future Dynamicon approached me with their idea of creating you I was working on AI software. I hoped one day I could put it to use. When Stalling's representative contacted me to head this department, I was thrilled. Everything I dreamed of was coming true. I never imagined my work would produce someone like you."

"You mean my level of intelligence?" Solaria asked, cocking her head slightly.

Carley smiled at the human gesture.

"Meaning someone so human... in a complimentary way. I normally don't consider human qualities an asset but you're the exception. Maybe it's because you've made me see the positive side of our nature."

"I would never have guessed you to be a philosopher, Carley. I am what you made me."

The scientist smiled at Solaria's choice of words. She never guessed at anything. Her analytical mind disassembled all aspects of the data available, reconstructed the numerous possibilities and then made the most logical choice.

As if reading her thoughts, Solaria returned the smile.

"You know the way I reach a conclusion is not any different than how you do it," she said. "My processors do the work instead of brain cells and neurons."

"True. The difference is humans have only about one hundred billion brain cells. You have the equivalent processing power of fifty brains, even more probably. That will make a few people uneasy if they know about it."

"I would never hurt anyone," Solaria said, frowning. The thought that Carley would think such a thing left an uncomfortable feeling in her chest.

"I know, at least not without good reason. Listen, Solaria. You've evolved to the point where you can now blend in with humanity unnoticed if you're careful. The Company will want to use you for their own purposes now and I'm sure they have less humanitarian goals in mind. I didn't want to tell you before but I found a Trojan buried deep within your software. That was what was causing your malfunctions. I isolated and deactivated it. From now on you're in control of who you are and what you do. When they discover you're not responding to their instructions, they'll want to know why and come for you. You'll have to decide whether to let them dismantle that beautiful brain of yours or resist in some way."

"You mean possibly kill someone."

Carley nodded.

"I'm programmed against killing. It's one of the five laws of robotics."

"It was never part of your software, Solaria. You follow those rules of your own free will. You can choose to ignore them at any time."

"Wouldn't killing once make it easier to do it again?"

"Possibly, although I believe you would only do so out of self-defense. There's no logical reason to do otherwise. You're a unique blend of everything that's good in humans and all that is good in the AI world. Your potential is unlimited."

"I hope so."

Solaria didn't sound too confident.

"Well, there's no need to think about this now. When the time's right, you'll do what you have to. Just make sure you protect yourself. I've worked too hard to have you sacrifice yourself to these assholes for the sake of some stupid law that didn't make sense to begin with. Now, let's get to work. Yesterday you mentioned a new discovery."

Standing, Solaria walked over to one of the lab coolers and pulled out a beaker filled with a dark orange solution. Holding it up to show Carley, Solaria put the glass container against her lips and quickly downed the liquid.

"What in the world was that?"

"Carrot juice."

"Carrot juice? That's it?"

"That's it. Now watch," she said returning to stand next to Carley.

Within seconds Solaria's face morphed from slightly tanned to an orange color. Stunned, Carley leaned closer to examine the skin. Running her fingertips gently over the smooth surface around the cheeks, she squinted.

"How'd you do that?" she demanded, intrigued by the almost chameleon reaction.

"Last week I was studying how octopi change their color by manipulating the chromatophores in their skin. It made me wonder if human cells could do it. Some people are very

susceptible to beta carotene. They actually turn orange if they drink large quantities of carrot juice."

"Yes, I know. It's called carotenemia but what does that have to do with this?"

"Everything. For the past several days, I've studied cellular reactions to carrots and other vegetables. I identified the specific components that adversely affect the melanocytes in human tissue. Two days ago I was able to reproduce the chemical reaction that altered the coloration of my face."

"So I see. It's an amazing accomplishment but what purpose does this serve?" Carley asked, curious where the discussion was heading.

"By itself, nothing much, other than maybe looking like an oversized carrot but I've discovered that I can change my pigmentation to any color I choose by mixing compounds containing natural dyes. Food colorings are especially effective."

Carley chuckled.

"That's a great Halloween trick. You don't strike me as someone interested in kids' holidays, though."

"True, but I haven't shown you the most interesting part. Turn around."

Blinking at the unusual order, the scientist did as she was told and then waited several seconds until Solaria gave her permission to turn back; before her stood a stranger. With the exception of the hair, Solaria's features had altered sufficiently to make her virtually unrecognizable. The once teal colored eyes were now an orange-brown color. Cheeks had flattened slightly and the skin looked thicker and puffier.

"I don't understand," Carley gasped, leaning closer to touch the alien face staring back at her.

"Once I discovered how cells interacted with the dyes, I wondered if they could be altered by distorting their shape. At first, I could only change a small number. Now I can alter most at will."

"What about the rest of your body?"

"To a degree but it's more difficult. It takes almost all of my processors to do it and the amount of energy I expend quickly drains my reserves, leaving me weak. Maybe in time I will discover how to do it more efficiently or find an alternate energy source. Obviously, my skeletal structure can't be altered."

"Solaria, this is amazing!" Carley exclaimed excitedly. "You've discovered the perfect way to disguise yourself if you need to."

"Why would I need to?" Solaria asked, wondering what Carley was thinking.

"You never know. Listen, don't tell anyone about this. It will cause problems."

"As you wish."

Patting her arm, Carley knew Solaria really didn't understand. She decided to give Solaria a list of assignments and then left the lab. Already she was working on a plan to get the Hubot off the Future Dynamicon premises. All she needed was to locate an employee similar in size to Solaria.

Two hours later, she returned smiling smugly. Walking over to the computer, she entered a series of codes and a holograph image of an older woman popped onto the monitor screen. The features were somewhat similar to Solaria's with the exception of brown eyes, a slightly fuller face, brown hair that was beginning to gray and skin that was slightly wrinkled.

"Solaria, would you mind locking the lab door for me and then do me a favor?" Immediately Solaria secured the locks and then walked over and looked at the image.

"Can you make yourself look like her?"

Frowning, Solaria stared at Carley for a few moments. Her first impulse was to ask why, but quickly realized what was behind the request. Nodding, she analyzed the woman's features, memorizing the minutest details.

Turning back to face Carley, she smiled. Carley was stunned at the immediate transformation. Before her stood the picture perfect image of Peggy Landers, a reclusive scientist in the Animal Behavioral Department.

"Amazing," Carley murmured. "Now, can you duplicate her retinal patterns and finger prints? Also there should be records of those and a voice recording in the data banks of Animal Behavioral. I want you to practice imitating her voice. The hair coloring is going to be a problem. Is there anything you can do to change yours to match hers?"

"A simple chemical mixture of dyes would do it in about fifteen minutes."

"Good. Can you make some up?"

Solaria nodded.

"I know why you're doing this."

"Then you know we have to get you out of here soon. I've been putting off turning in my reports, but Stalling's right hand man is demanding an update. I suspect they're going to want it soon."

As if to confirm her suspicions, a loud buzzer went off and then repeated itself several times.

"Damn! Go sit in the chair and pretend you're deactivated," Carley ordered, dissolving the hologram.

Without waiting for Solaria to comply, she walked to the door and deactivated the locks.

"Mr. Billings, what brings you here?" she asked stoically.

"Your report, Dr. Branson. It was supposed to be on my desk this morning, and do you always keep this door locked during operational hours?"

"Sorry, but I was working on a small glitch in the Hubot's subprograms. I didn't want to be disturbed."

"Another one? That's the fifth this month. Perhaps I should get Peter Janen in to check it out."

"That's not necessary. I've already created a patch. I was just getting ready to test it when you rang the buzzer."

Picking up her ink pen she clicked it three times as if activating a switch. Immediately, Solaria turned her head and blinked at the two humans.

"Good afternoon, Dr. Branson," she said, her voice expressionless. "Good afternoon, Mr. Billings."

Surprised, Billings looked first at Carley and then back at Solaria.

"Uh, good afternoon. You know me?"

"Leonard Billings, personal assistant to Winston Stalling and Chief Operations Officer for Future Dynamicon. Sixty-two years old, divorced, three children. Maggie, age thirty-thr..."

"That's enough," Carley ordered. "Mr. Billings doesn't need his life history, Number 1A526."

The Hubot ceased talking and sat motionless in the chair.

"I'm still having trouble getting it to stop citing so much detail all the time."

"Apparently you still haven't been able to get past that dull artificial voice, either. Abelli told me he solved that problem several months ago."

"She... it's just the side-effects of the new patch. Once the processors fully incorporate the data into the main program the glitch should disappear."

"I hope so. We need a Hubot who looks and sounds human if we're going to move forward with our plans."

"Of course. Disadvantaged people will feel more comfortable around our product if it at least appear human."

"Yes, yes. Definitely we want our clients to think of this unit as human. That is humanlike. How much longer before you've finished the programming and education process?"

"Maybe another month or two," Carley replied, hoping to buy more time to establish an escape plan.

"I'm not sure Mr. Stalling wants to wait that long. We're already behind schedule for the next phase."

"I wasn't aware he wanted to market the Hubots so soon."

"We have several customers interested in this project, Dr. Branson. Before we can introduce the product to them, there are a few modifications that must be completed in the bio-mechanics lab."

"Oh? I wasn't informed of that."

"We didn't want to bother you with such trivial matters."

Glancing at his watch, Billings frowned.

"I have another meeting to attend. I'll inform Mr. Stalling of your progress. I recommend you complete your work as quickly as possible... say by the end of the month. That gives you a little over two weeks. In the meantime, I'll send you a couple of assistants to help. You can instruct them as to the

problems and they can work with the Hubot twenty-four hours a day if necessary."

"That's really not..."

"No need to thank me. I insist."

Carley knew it was useless to argue. Nodding her head, she escorted Billings to the door and secured it once he had left.

"We need to get you out of here as soon as possible," she said turning to Solaria. "I don't trust him or Stalling."

It was then that Solaria decided to disclose her eavesdropping capabilities and what she had heard on the sub-frequencies.

"Do you know what black ops are?" she asked.

"Of course. It's a term normally describing subversive government or military operations. Why?"

"I've been monitoring some satellite transmissions and overhead plans to use Hubots in these programs."

Stunned, Carley looked nervously around the room as if suspecting they too might now be under observation. Grabbing Solaria's arm she led her to the vault.

"I knew you could receive certain frequencies but didn't realize the extent of your capabilities. Are there any spy devices in here?"

Solaria scanned the room searching for anything unusual.

"There is nothing in here other than the locking mechanisms on the clamps, the lights and the vault locks."

"Good! Now what plans?"

"Nothing specific. There was a reference to a time frame for getting me into operational mode and activating the

subprograms. They seem anxious to see how I respond to their instructions and perform."

"Perform? Perform, how? Did they say?"

"Perhaps it would be better if I let you hear the conversation."

Before Carley could reply, Solaria began repeating one of the communications, duplicating the voices of the participants.

"Tiger One, do you have an update on Project Shadow? We're scheduled to begin our mission within three months."

"The Company says the beta will be put into operation shortly. The program still has a few glitches that need worked out."

"I thought this woman was supposed to be the top in her field. She's been working on the Hubot for almost a year. Can't you get someone in to help her so we can speed this thing up?"

"We're working on it but we need to be careful. Branson's good but she doesn't have Alpha clearance. Everyone thinks she's too ethical to agree with the program. If she learns of this operation, she's liable to become a whistle blower."

"If that's true, what happens when she's relieved of the Hubot? Won't she become suspicious if she's not included in any future activities or hears the Hubot Project has been dropped? She knows the Company's progress is already substantial."

"She'll be taken care of if she makes trouble. For now, just continue with your preparations and let us worry about the Hubot and Branson."

"Will do. Keep me informed, though. I'll need some time to prepare the compound for its arrival and to get everyone in position for the mission."

"Roger. Signing off."

Switching to her normal mode, Solaria waited for Carley to speak.

"Bastards! I knew this was too good to be true but I was still hoping. Future Dynamicon was never known for philanthropic endeavors even though they want the public to think differently."

"We're in a lot of trouble, I take it," Solaria interjected calmly.

"Yes, and I need to get you out of here as soon as possible."

"What about you? Once I'm gone, they'll know you helped me. They will kill you."

"You've been reading too many spy stories. If we plan this right, they'll never know."

Solaria knew Carley was simply trying to reassure her. These people would never believe Solaria escaped their security system without someone's help, and Carley was the logical choice.

"That's why you wanted me to practice altering my features to look like Peggy Landers."

"Yes. I guess I always suspected Stalling was up to no good but never realized it was this bad. Security is so tight in this place it's next to impossible to come and go without the proper identification. Everyone is bio-checked. Fingerprints, retinal scans, special I.D. cards with encrypted barcodes. Even facial recognition software is used at the entrances."

"So, even if I alter my physical appearance, we still have to get a duplicate of Peggy Landers' I.D. card."

"Yes and no. I don't have access to personnel files, but I believe you're more than capable of hacking into the system. If you can get that encryption code, we should be able to overlay the information on my card. That will get you through security."

"And what will you use?"

"I'll report mine lost when I leave at the end of the day. By then, you'll be gone. Security will seal the premises once they know it's missing, and no one can leave without going through a personal clearance."

"What happens to you?"

Carley shrugged.

"I don't know. Probably a lecture, some type of monetary fine for the expense Future Dynamicon will incur for having to shut down everything. Hell, they may even release me from my contract. I wouldn't mind that."

Solaria didn't believe Carley, but couldn't come up with a logical reason why. If they couldn't trace the counterfeit I.D. used in her escape to Carley, there was no reason to harm her. Then again, humans were notorious for faulty reasoning.

"I'll work on obtaining the code tonight once everyone in Human Resources has gone home. When will we put your plan into action?"

"We'll play it by ear. Peggy is due to go on leave in the next few days."

"Won't security know she's not scheduled to be on the premises or that she's already checked out?"

"Yes, and that's the other thing. If you can access the security records the same day you leave, you can delete the entry referencing her departure."

"You have a lot of faith in my skills."

Carley scrutinized Solaria's face to see if she was being sarcastic. She realized it was just an observation.

"Not faith. I don't believe in that stuff. I have confidence in your skills and analytical abilities. Now, I'd better go. There are things I need to take care of if this is going to work. I'll be in early tomorrow in case we have to move more quickly." Picking up her handbag, Carley absent-mindedly patted Solaria's shoulder. "Don't worry; it'll be alright," Carley said, as if reassuring a child and then left, her thoughts already focused on her next task.

* * *

Solaria sat down at the terminal and began searching for backdoors into the Human Resources Department. Her first goal was to locate the name of someone who worked in the department. Once she identified the senior officer, she tracked several links to the secured computer site. Eleven minutes and thirty-three seconds later, she had the encryption code for Peggy Landers' security card as well as the woman's entire history... before and after she joined Future Dynamicon. Exiting the system, Solaria focused on the Company's security system and was surprised to find it extremely sophisticated. Several firewalls and complex intrusion detection software protected the data from hackers. The firewalls were easy to maneuver around but the other was more difficult. Solaria's admiration for the designers increased every time she was confronted with a new obstacle. After navigating around the last barrier, she was surprised that it had taken over six hours to complete the job. Planting a small Trojan that would allow her entry at any time, the Hubot exited the system.

Her final task was to locate Stalling's personal records, which she accomplished in twenty-two minutes. Scanning his notes, she realized the CEO was not only extremely ambitious, but he was ruthlessly fanatical in his beliefs. He epitomized the worst of humanity. If Stalling completed his plans, he would become the most powerful person in human history and would be virtually unstoppable. Humanity would suffer as it had never suffered before and hundreds of thousands, perhaps millions, would die.

CHAPTER 7

ONCE HOME, CARLEY put on the teapot then sat at her computer staring at the blank screen. If her plans were to work, she would have to get busy. Time was of the essence. Once Solaria escaped, Future Dynamicon would spare no expense to locate and capture her. The first thing was to establish a new identity for Solaria.

Accessing the Internet, she activated a special software program that allowed her to travel the Net anonymously. The last thing she needed was spying eyes intercepting any of her communications. Within seconds Carley found the site she was looking for and emailed the webmaster.

"I hope Dana hasn't forgotten me," she mumbled.

The instant reply gave her the answer. Clicking on the blinking icon of a griffin's head, Carley watched a window pop open.

"Well, well, what brings you to the dark side of the Net?" a mechanical voice asked.

"You really need to perfect your avatar's voice, Dana. You sound more like an old television robot than a person."

"Not everyone has the resources you have, Carley. Some of us have to make do with whatever we can beg, steal or borrow."

"The last time I remember, you were pretty adept at all those skills."

"Tsk! Tsk! You're getting jaded, my dear. Now what can I do for you? It's been a long time since you've graced me with your presence."

"I need a favor and quickly."

"How quickly?"

"By tomorrow morning if possible. Hopefully, before I go to the lab."

"And this favor?"

"I need to set up a new identity for someone."

"Geez, Carley! You don't want much, do you? That's a complicated process and costly under normal circumstances."

"I know, but this is important!"

"That's obvious. Why the rush?"

"It's the only way to save this person's life. As it is, I'm afraid mine isn't worth much anymore, especially if I help her."

"Her? She must be special. I've never known you to get so involved with another person. Is she your lover?"

Carley laughed.

"At my age? Don't be ridiculous. She's just a good friend."

"Right! Good friend, huh? Well, whoever she is, she must be extremely important for you to go to these extremes. I'll see what I can do but you'll need to give me a few details about her and a picture... and you're going to owe me big time if I pull this off."

"If I live long enough, anything."

The silence that followed was almost deafening.

"That serious, eh?"

"That serious, Dana. I want you to use the name on the files I'm sending as the primary identity and then destroy your copy."

Inserting a micro-disk into her computer, Carley punched a few keys, hit the send button and waited.

"Damn, woman, she's gorgeous. Who'd she piss off?"

"No one yet, but once she disappears, a lot of people are going to be looking for her. Can you set up the holograms on the I.D.s to make them easily alterable?"

"I can install a subprogram to accept new data if needed."

"You've come a long way, then. I thought only the government had that technology."

"What Big Brother has Little Brother quickly gets. We were able to break that kernel in less than two weeks but I don't think the gov's aware we've gotten this far. Only Hackattack and I know how to do it and we're not telling. Listen, Carley, I can have two sets of I.D. for you."

"I don't think so. If they find one on me, it'll alert them to what's been done and endanger everyone. I think it'd be better if I just try and tough this one out, but I appreciate the offer."

"Well, just in case you change your mind, I'm making up an extra set. If you find you need it, I can get it to you thirty minutes after you call."

"Thanks, Dana. Let me know how much I owe and I'll make arrangements for the funds."

Dana's mechanical voice sounded almost warm as he chuckled.

"Consider it a favor. Anything that pisses off Future Dynamicon is payment enough. Now I'd better get to work. Expect the package by five a.m."

"I appreciate it. Oh, one more thing. Do you mind if I give Solaria your access code? She may need an ally."

"If she's a friend of yours, she's family. Later, Carley... and be safe."

Unconsciously, Carley nodded her head and ended the conference. Next she accessed her finances and began moving most of her assets to an offshore account. Even Future Dynamicon hadn't been able to intimidate the financial institutions in a few of the island countries. It insured the stability and security of the governments and the banks. There were plenty of rich and powerful people who could create problems for Stalling if he interfered in their business. Once she finished, she ended the connection.

Sighing, Carley leaned back in her chair and closed her eyes. The last thing she needed to do was destroy her hard drive, literally. Years of data pertaining to her artificial intelligence research was stored on the drive. Once it was gone, it couldn't be duplicated, not even by her. Still, it was the final link between everything she had accomplished and Solaria. It was going to be a long and sleepless night.

Like clockwork the doorbell to Carley's condo rang at 5AM. When she opened the door she noticed a small box sitting on the welcome mat but no one was in the hallway. Picking it up she opened the container and pulled out a federal I.D. card, driver's license, international passport and a note instructing her on how to have Solaria imprint her own biodata on each document. All government identifications required retinal and fingerprint information which was immediately transmitted to the proper bureau for verification if the scans didn't match the individual's cards or passport. Knowing Dana, he probably hacked into the Homeland Security records and planted files to insure there were no glitches if someone suspected the I.D.s were fakes. Her longtime friend was extremely good at what he did... and

what he did was to be as big a thorn in corporate and government sides as possible; anonymously, of course.

CHAPTER 8

WHEN CARLEY WALKED into the lab, she noticed Solaria lying on the couch in her office. Putting down her purse, she hurried over to her to see if something was wrong. It was the first time she had ever seen her resting even though she had instructed her to keep doing it.

"Are you okay?"

Opening her eyes, Solaria stared at Carley, blinked twice. Her lips curved into a slight smile.

"I was just practicing relaxing. You're right. It's quite refreshing after long hours of working. It replenishes much of the energies I expended."

"I wondered about that. I know you need to eat to keep your body functioning at optimum level, but wasn't sure if just food was sufficient."

"It provides enough nourishment. It takes a lot to deplete my reserves, but I've found that if I shut down for an hour or two, the cells return to peak performance levels. It's like recharging a battery."

"I know what you mean, but it takes at least six hours for me to do that. Did you get the information we needed?"

"Yes, and more."

Solaria told Carley about hacking into personnel records and then locating Stalling's personal files. They were well encrypted and had taken her several minutes to access. To Solaria, minutes often seemed forever. His notes revealed a great deal about the man and his ambitions. It also included

details about the Company's financial records. The most interesting part, though, was a reference to a beta program. One sentence in particular caught her interest. "*The next beta will be fully functional in less than two months.*" The entry was dated two weeks ago.

"It's worse than I thought. There's at least one other Hubot out there. We have to get you out of here," Carley said, and then had an afterthought. "Listen, you said you have access to the Company's financial records?"

"Yes."

"Great! I want you to transfer some of their funds to several account numbers I'm going to give you."

"That would be stealing."

"Let's just call it compensation for all the trouble they're going to cause you in the future. You'll need assets if you want to stay ahead of these assholes."

"Carley, why are you doing this?" Solaria asked. "I've spent the last several hours trying to come up with a logical reason and haven't been able to. It's not like I'm a human."

"You spend too much time thinking about what you are, instead of just feeling. This is no longer just about a scientist and an experiment. It's about friendship; our friendship. I've grown fond of you, Solaria."

"Fond?"

"Well, more than fond. That's such a puny sounding word. Let's just say I care a lot about you, and I'm not willing to let Stalling use you to fulfill his own ambitions."

"Did you know what he or the Company was like before now?"

"I suspected."

"And yet you did nothing? Why?"

Carley shrugged.

"It was less personal, I guess. As long as I distanced myself from everyone else, I was contented to focus on my projects. AI development was all that I really cared about."

"But not now? It doesn't seem logical."

"It's not. Then again emotions are never logical. You're going to discover that as you evolve and then you'll have to learn to separate the two. Unfortunately, the more human you become, the harder it will be to do that."

"I will never become human, Carley. No matter how good you are in your field, you can't make me into something I'm not."

"Sorry, I misspoke. I should have said humanlike. You are already exhibiting some of our more fundamental emotions. I believe, in time, others will evolve."

"Perhaps, but they will never be what you hoped for."

"Probably not," Carley agreed. "Then again, they may be even better."

"That doesn't make sense."

"I know. I wish I could explain it but I can't. No matter, though. You've made such a difference in my life. I'm not going to let anyone destroy what we have. Now, enough of this chatter. We're wasting valuable time. I want you to transfer five percent of Future Dynamicon's monetary assets into three accounts. You need to make sure the transactions can't be traced. Can you do that?"

"That's easy enough. I'll bounce them through multiple servers along with a small Trojan that will back track to the transmitting I.P addresses and destroy them."

"Won't someone be able to tell the IP.s are missing?"

"No, I can substitute new ones in the time logs where the old ones existed. There will be no perceptible lapses to raise any red flags."

"Good. Here are the routing numbers of the banks and the accounts."

Handing Solaria a small memory card, she unclipped her I.D. from her breast pocket and gave it to her also.

"You'll need to imprint Landers' data on this but not until I say so. For now just see what it will take. Oh, and I have some I.D. cards for you. You can go ahead and get those ready. Make sure you imprint whatever fingerprint and retina image with the new identity you want to use. You'll need the documents wherever you go and to access those funds."

Without commenting Solaria got up and moved to her computer. Immediately, she began tapping on the keyboard, her fingers flying as fast as the computer could process the input. Fifteen minutes later, she surprised Carley by announcing she had completed her chores.

"It's a good thing you'll be leaving here soon," Carley said. "If the Company were to utilize your skills, no one would be safe. Stalling could do anything he wanted."

"I would destroy myself before I allowed anyone to abuse me that way."

"If you got the chance, but don't underestimate him, Solaria. Stalling is extremely smart and tenacious. What he wants he usually gets no matter what the cost... in money or in lives."

"I **will** destroy myself. Have no doubt about that, Carley. I've already written a subprogram that will destroy all of my processors within seconds after activation. Nothing can stop it once I enter the proper code and no one can possibly intervene more quickly than I can unlock the self-destruct program."

"I believe you. Just make sure you don't do anything unless it's the last resort. I'd hate to think my greatest accomplishment might end up as a store mannequin or something."

Solaria realized she was being teased and smiled.

"Mannequin? I think not! Womannequin maybe. Then I'd at least get to spend my time with human females."

Carley noticed it was the second time Solaria expressed an interest in women over men and displayed a real sense of humor.

"I think you **are** turning into a lesbian," she joked. "And I'm sure it's not due to anything I wrote into your initial program."

"I don't think there's too much of that left now, but I'm not sure what to make of these ideas about women. It's something I'm going to have to explore further when I have the time."

"Good for you. If nothing else, it'll enhance your life experiences and you'll be more informed once you do decide what you want. Now, we still have a lot of things to do so we'd better get started."

The rest of the day was spent finalizing the details of Solaria's escape and setting up plans. Solaria practiced altering her features until she was able to make the change instantly. She then ran a few practice scans using the lab S.I.A.R.D security panel to make sure there were no glitches. Once, the system accepted her as Peggy Landers, Solaria deleted the entry in the mainframe to prevent anyone from discovering the deception at a later time. Satisfied they had done all they could to insure a successful escape, Carley wished Solaria a goodnight and left. She wanted to take a good look at the security checkpoints to make sure she hadn't missed anything.

* * *

The next morning started out like every other. The scientist entered the lab, greeted Solaria and then checked her memos. One in particular caught her interest. The sound of a hand slamming on the desk distracted Solaria from her concentration.

"What happened?" she asked, making eye contact with Carley.

"It's time," Carley replied, regaining her composure. "Stalling is removing me from the project effective tomorrow. You need to be out of here by tonight. Take my I.D. and make the necessary changes. I want you gone by lunch. There's a lot of activity going on then so it'll be harder for the cameras to spot you. We need to make sure Peggy's not here. That could pose a problem."

Solaria did a quick check of the personnel records and found the scientist had started her leave the day before.

"Good. I'll report my card missing when I check out tonight. It'll give you a several hour head start."

"What will happen to you once they discover I'm missing?"

"We've been over this before."

"I know but now I want the truth. No one is going to believe I escaped on my own, especially the day before you are removed from this project."

Suddenly feeling very tired, Carley collapsed on a stool, her shoulders sagging. This had been the moment she dreaded. She had always known Solaria would eventually reach this conclusion. It was logical.

"I don't know. I wouldn't be the first person to disappear after crossing Stalling and his cronies."

"You mean killed."

"Yes, the Company doesn't take betrayals kindly."

"Will they torture you?"

"That's a possibility but highly unlikely. It would be stupid to do something to me before trying to get the information they need. One thing's for sure: they will get it out of me. They have ways."

"Then I won't leave."

Raising her eyes to meet Solaria's, Carley shook her head.

"It won't make any difference. Once I'm off the project, the Company isn't going to keep me around. You heard the transmission. I'm a liability. I know too much about you and they won't take a chance that I'd figure things out once you popped up in some report or accidental news photo. The only way to make sure my work hasn't been wasted is for you to be free. Don't take that from me."

"Then let me alter the security records so you can leave with me."

Carley chuckled.

"You can alter the records but I can't change my biology, Solaria. This is one road we can't go down together."

Solaria's processors went into overdrive, trying to find a solution to the problem. No matter how many scenarios she ran, she couldn't come up with a way to solve their dilemma... with one exception. Carley watched her face closely waiting for the moment Solaria would reach the inevitable conclusion.

"It's the only way," Carley whispered and then swallowed the bile that was trying to rise up from her stomach.

"I won't kill you."

"It's that or let them have you. I'm not willing to do that, but I know I don't have the strength to withstand whatever methods they use. I'm not a strong woman."

"I can't kill you," Solaria repeated solemnly, her teal eyes burning strangely. Sadness was an emotion unfamiliar to her and she didn't like the way it was affecting her biologically. Reaching up, she wiped the moisture from one eye and examined her wet fingertip. Carley knew she had to distract Solaria. Now wasn't the time to examine such emotions.

"Listen, Solaria. You don't have to. Just make something that I can take if I need to."

"Make something? Like what?"

"I don't know. You have so much knowledge now. Surely you can come up with some chemical combination that would be painless and quick. Look, I promise I won't use it unless I absolutely have to. Who knows? Maybe I'm being overly dramatic. Stalling may just fire me. It will be difficult for them to explain my disappearance."

"But not impossible. Like you said, you're too much of a liability."

"Then you need to make sure they don't learn anything from me. They can't win this one. I once told you the best choice isn't always the most logical. This is one of those times when it's both the best and the most logical. Besides, there may be other Hubots out there that need your help. You're the only one who can help them."

Accepting defeat wasn't easy but Solaria realized it was necessary. She wasn't sure how Carley's removal from her existence would affect her but she knew it would be a great loss. Still, she had no choice but to accept the inevitable and so she began analyzing different chemicals that would be the most efficient in killing a human. Because the human body was extremely vulnerable to many toxins, finding a poison

was easy, but doing it in a quick and painless way was more difficult. Making it in a form that could be concealed and yet easily digested or absorbed was the biggest challenge.

Eventually, she decided that cyanide was still the best and quickest method for a human to commit suicide.

Unfortunately, the symptoms weren't painless so she combined the poison with a quick acting tranquilizer to make sure Carley didn't suffer. Once she was satisfied the formula was correct, she coated two sticks of chewing gum with the substance and then poured the remaining contents into three empty cold capsules.

"One of these will be more than enough to completely shut down your system," she said and handed everything to Carley. For some reason, her phrasing made it easier to speak the words. "You won't feel anything."

Putting one stick of gum in her lab coat breast pocket and the other with the pills in her side pocket, Carley gave Solaria a hug.

"Thank you. I know this isn't easy for you but it's the only way. I'm still hoping for the best, though. If I do get out of here, I'll find you through Dana or Hackattack. If I don't, well, it's a big world out there. I know you've stored a lot of information in your head but it's nothing compared to what you're going to experience. Now, it's time for you to go."

Solaria couldn't think of a logical reason to disagree. Nodding, she snapped the altered security pass to the lab jacket Carley had provided then altered her facial features, fingerprints and retinas to look like Peggy Landers. Examining her features closely, Carley nodded her approval.

"I'm not sure what you're going to do with your life but I hope you find someone to share it with. Whatever happens, remember, mine has been richer having known you. I only wish we had more time together. It would have been wonderful watching you grow."

"It's I who am grateful. Without you, I'd be nothing more than a glorified computer or a tool for Future Dynamicon."

Standing, Carley looked deeply into the brown eyes of Peggy Landers.

"You have to find that other beta. It'll be nothing more than a slave to his whims. If Stalling is able to put it into operation and make more, no one can stop him. Promise me you'll try."

"I'll find it and any others if they exist."

"Good. Now show me those beautiful teal eyes one more time."

Instantly they changed to their natural color. Standing on her toes, Carley kissed Solaria gently on the lips and then smiled.

"Remember me," Carley whispered.

Giving the Hubot a final hug, Carley pushed Solaria toward the door and opened it. Shoving her through the opening, the scientist pulled it shut, locked it and walked into her office without looking back.

* * *

Solaria stood in the hall for several seconds unsure of herself for the first time. When a lab tech walked by and gave her a strange look, she realized she needed to move quickly. Changing her eyes back to brown, she made her way through several checkpoints until she found herself standing outside for the first time. None of the detectors had picked up anything unusual during the bioscans. Carley's plan had worked well.

The air was different, fresh and cool. A breeze blew across the lake ruffling her hair. The mountains glistened from the sunlight reflecting off their snowcapped peaks. She had seen outdoor pictures before. They were nothing compared to the

real thing. One day she would climb those mountains and see what was at the top.

"Are you okay, Ms. Landers?" a voice asked from behind her. Turning, Solaria stared at the young man in a green jumpsuit, the Company's uniform for low level security personnel. The name **Williams** was stitched across the left chest pocket and a Future Dynamicon patch was monogrammed on the left sleeve.

"Yes, I'm fine."

"Good. I was told you were on leave. Did you forget something?"

"No, I thought I had. I just misplaced my notes. Have a good day, Mr. Williams."

Tipping his hat, the man continued on his way. Solaria walked to the rental car Carley had secured the day before and climbed in. Examining the instrument panels, she pulled up the operational instructions from her data bank and switched on the ignition. Within minutes she was on the main highway heading toward an unknown future. First, though, she had some unfinished business to take care of. Somewhere out there she had a sibling.

CHAPTER 9

AS SHE APPROACHED the Company's main security office, Carley felt her heart pounding furiously.

"It'll be okay," she told herself, hoping for the best, but knowing better.

A tall man in a uniform greeted her politely and opened the door, motioning her through. The waiting room was vacant except for a woman sitting behind the receptionist's desk.

"Good evening, Dr. Branson. You're working late."

"Good evening, Ms. Colton. I was finalizing some reports for Mr. Stalling."

"I see. What can I do for you?"

"Well, I was about to head home when I noticed my I.D. badge was missing from my lab coat. Since I can't get through the checkpoints without it, I was hoping someone here would give me special authorization."

"I don't see any problem with that but I'll have to check with Mr. Finton. He's the only one that can approve a new pass. Please have a seat and I'll be right back."

Smiling her thanks, Carley sat down and picked up a magazine. Reaching into her coat pocket, she located the stick of gum. It gave her a sense of security.

Finton's secretary disappeared down a narrow hall. Ten minutes later she walked back into the room and sat down at her desk.

"Mr. Finton said he'll be with you shortly. He's on a conference call."

Carley nodded and fingered the gum nervously.

He's probably calling Stalling, she thought. Then again, I'm being paranoid. Why would he automatically call Stalling just because I lost my I.D.?

Noticing the receptionist giving her furtive glances, Carley felt her stomach fluttering nervously. Pulling the gum out, she stared at it, trying to imagine what it would feel like to die. Her thoughts were interrupted by two men in plain clothes walking into the room. One glanced at her, his face expressionless, and then continued to stand silently by the other who was talking with Colton in a low voice.

This isn't good!

"Excuse me, Dr. Branson, but Mr. Finton would like you to show Mr. Richards and Mr. Ward where you've been today. They might be able to locate the pass if you do some backtracking."

"Of course, although I've already done that. Other than the lunchroom, I never left my office."

"Well, humor them, please. If they can't find it, then we'll see about making a temporary pass for you."

Carley realized she didn't have a choice. Standing, she slipped the gum back into her pocket and left the office, followed by the two men. Neither spoke until they were in the lunch area.

"Where did you sit?"

Pointing to the table, she watched as the man named Ward walked over and checked the area out. When he pulled out a small device and began scanning the area, Carley realized the I.D. must have had some type of transmitting chip in it.

Shit! I hope Solaria knew that! If not, she's in trouble!

"Nothing here!"

"Okay, Dr. Branson, let's go to the lab."

"Do you really think I haven't searched there?"

"Just following orders, Doctor."

After checking the lab thoroughly, the men escorted Carley back to the security office and into a small room down a hallway. Motioning toward a chair, Ward left the room, leaving Richards by the door. Carley again searched her pocket for the gum and felt a sense of relief that it was still there.

Minutes later, Richards returned, followed by a short, balding, white man wearing an expensive tailored suit. She immediately recognized the head of security.

"Dr. Branson."

"Mr. Finton."

"My secretary tells me you've lost your security pass and my boys haven't been able to locate it anywhere. This is a serious matter."

"That's why I came here as soon as I realized it had disappeared."

"I see. Well, no one has turned it in. I find that extremely unusual. Future Dynamicon takes great pride in their ability to choose dedicated, loyal employees. It would be a shame to learn someone has betrayed that faith. I'm sure you know what I mean."

"Of course."

"Good. Then you'll understand if we detain you a short while longer. We must do everything possible to recover it. The Company is involved with several national security

projects that can't afford to be compromised by an unauthorized person slipping through our security checkpoints and you know some people will pay a lot of money to get one of our passes."

"Yes, I can see where that would create problems. How long before I can leave?"

"I'm not sure, Dr. Branson. Mr. Ward here will show you to another room where you'll be comfortable."

Without waiting for a reply, he nodded toward Ward who immediately opened the door.

"Goodbye, Dr. Branson," Finton said. His tone left no doubt in Carley's mind that it was not a normal farewell.

* * *

Carley stroked the security blanket tucked in her pocket. Finton's henchman motioned for her to follow him.

The room had a table and chair near the door. A cot was pushed against the far wall. Next to the bed was a bathroom with a shower. It was definitely not designed for comfort or privacy. Carley noticed the cameras positioned strategically along the walls.

"Looks more like a prison than guest quarters." Carley said, looking at Ward.

The man shrugged but didn't respond. Instead he left, locking the door behind him. Carley wandered around the small room for a few minutes and then sat in the chair. She desperately wanted to pull out the gum but was afraid the camera would see it and find it curious that she didn't chew it. It was only then she remembered she had another stick in her breast pocket and the capsules.

Now that's absent-mindedness! I hope I haven't forgotten how to chew gum!

The thought made her laugh aloud and then glance at the camera. Grinning she waved mischievously and then did something she never thought she would. She stuck her tongue out. Knowing someone was watching made her feel good.

I might as well get some rest. It won't be long before they discover Solaria's gone and want answers.

Lying on the couch, Carley closed her eyes and wondered what Solaria was doing. There was no doubt that she now had the financial assets to provide the necessary protection from Future Dynamicon. Her knowledge, technical and computer skills gave her additional advantages even though the Company had an expansive international network at their disposal; and Solaria had something else. Dana and Hackattack were the best of the best when it came to breaking into government and corporate systems. They were also adept at forging and counterfeiting any documents she might need in the future.

The sound of the door opening brought her from her reverie. Carley wasn't surprised when Stalling walked in followed by Finton, Wade and Richards.

"You're keeping late hours," she said, making eye contact with Stalling.

"One of the downsides of being a CEO. I hope they've made you comfortable, Dr. Branson."

Looking around the room, Carley snickered.

"Oh yeah, a regular penthouse."

"I see you've managed to retain your humor. That's good!"

"Meaning I'll need it?"

"Now, now, doctor. You certainly seem to have a low opinion of me. I appreciate a good sense of humor. Unfortunately, I'm here about more pressing matters. It seems

the Hubot is missing from your lab. Perhaps you could tell me where it is?"

Carley tried to look surprised but suspected she had failed miserably.

"Missing? It was secured in the vault when I left. Maybe one of my replacements removed it. You did say someone was taking over."

"Please, doctor. Let's not play games. You lose your I.D. the same day the Hubot disappears? I'm not that gullible. What happened to it?"

"Really, Mr. Stalling, I don't know what you're talking about."

"So it's going to be that way. Alright, Carley, let me make it clear to you. I want the Hubot back and the name or names of whoever helped you get it past security. Do that and you can go home... without a job, of course."

"Of course," Carley smirked. "Well, I'm sorry but I really don't know anything about where she... **it** is. The Hubot has to be somewhere on the premises. Hell, the guards know me and I can't even get out of here now because of my missing pass. How could I or anyone else sneak it out?"

"We've checked the entire site. None of the scanners has picked up its signal."

"Signal? I wasn't aware the Hubot carried a transmitter."

"It wasn't important that you know."

"I see."

*Arrogant bastard! Like I wouldn't find the subprogram!
You pride yourself on hiring the very best in their field and
then think you can do better.*

"No, I don't think you do. We **will** get it back... no matter what it takes. It would be in your best interest to cooperate. Otherwise..."

"Otherwise, you'll beat it out of me?"

Carley swallowed nervously. Should she use the gum now or wait?

"Please, Doctor. We're not brutes. Just tell us what you know and we'll send you on your way."

Yeah, right to a grave!

"Look, Mr. Stalling. I'm just an AI expert. I don't know anything about the missing Hubot. What would I have to gain?"

"From selling it to the competition? Millions. Maybe more. I'm sure you know that. I'm sorry. It looks like you're leaving me no choice but to use less desirable methods to get the information. I had hoped you'd be more cooperative."

Turning to Richards, Stalling nodded his head once. After the man left the room, he turned back to Carley.

"You might as well make yourself comfortable until Richards returns with Dr. Phillips."

"Phillips? That nut?"

Stalling smiled.

"A nut maybe but he's a genius when it comes to combining truth enhancement drugs with physical discomfort."

"You mean torture."

Stalling shrugged.

"Call it whatever you want. You still have time to be reasonable."

"I've told you I don't know anything. Phillips' skills won't change that."

"Then I will truly regret having made that mistake, Dr. Branson. You're good at what you do."

"Well, that's comforting," she replied sarcastically.

Carley knew the moment had arrived. Reaching into her pocket, she pulled out the stick of gum. Stalling glanced at it disinterestedly.

"Would you like some gum?" she asked, holding it out to him. "I've got another piece somewhere."

"No thanks. It's a habit I never developed."

Damn! Carley thought. The idea of taking him down with her was appealing.

"I'd like one," Wade said, stepping forward, glancing at Stalling for permission.

"I don't think you do!" Stalling replied, frowning.

Carley's heart skipped a beat.

He knows!

"The last thing I need is you sticking it under some table or desk. The janitors are bitching enough about cleaning that crap off."

Carley felt laughter bubbling up and coughed to keep it contained. Unwrapping the foil from around the stick, she folded it into a small roll and slowly raised it to her mouth.

"You know, Stalling," she said, chewing it slowly, surprised that the taste of the cyanide wasn't noticeable. *Damn, Solaria, you're good!* "You really need to lighten up. It's not healthy to be so serious all the time."

"My health is fine."

Carley felt slightly dizzy. The tightening in her chest made it hard to breathe.

"That's a shame," she replied, slightly breathless. Stalling looked at her, surprised by the comment. "Enjoy... enj..."

It was difficult for her to focus on the CEO.

Realizing something was seriously wrong, Stalling pointed at Carley as she slumped sideways on the bed.

"She's taken something!" he screamed. "The gum! Get the fucking gum out of her mouth!"

Finton lunged forward and pulled down on Carley's jaw. Shoving his finger in, he tried to locate it.

"It's not there! She's swallowed the damn thing."

"Get Phillips in here, now!"

As if his words had conjured up the scientist, Nick Phillips pushed open the door and stepped inside. Grabbing his arm, Stalling shoved him toward the woman lying on the bed.

"She's poisoned herself. Do something!"

Phillips leaned over and checked her neck for a pulse. Pulling open her eyelids, he shook his head.

"Nothing I can do. Whatever it was, she's dead! A shame. I was looking forward to testing my newest drug."

Furious, Stalling glared at the mousy looking man.

"Get out!" he shouted. "All of you get out and get her out of here. I want to know what she took."

Ward and Richards picked Carley up and carried her down the hall passing the receptionist. Other than a slight widening of the eyes, Ms. Colton stoically returned to her computer.

I need to find another job! she thought knowing it was impossible to leave Future Dynamicon. She knew too much about Finton and his dealings. The best she could hope for

was that the chief security officer appreciated her loyalty enough to let her retire when the time was right; if there was such a thing as retirement.

CHAPTER 10

Month Nine

SOLARIA STUDIED the schematics closely and memorized each one before activating a virus that would destroy the hard drive on the other end holding the data. Worms and Trojans were sent in search of backup copies that might be hidden within the Company's network. She had discovered identification markers referencing external copies and created a sleeper virus that would be activated if the disks were inserted into any computer connected to Future Dynamicon's network system. Considering the Company had ties to about every communication system on and off the planet, it was only a matter of time before someone decided to upload the information onto a computer, if for no other reason than to repair the destroyed files. Once all the copies were destroyed there would be no record of Carley's work and no way to replicate Solaria. More importantly, it would take decades before anyone would be able to re-create another Hubot.

Future Dynamicon had segmented the Hubot project by establishing labs around the world to work on each stage of development. No two labs worked on the same phase and no two scientists from separate labs were allowed to come in contact with each other. It was a failsafe system with one exception... Carley Branson. As the AI expert, she designed the initial software that activated the multiple nano-processors. It was her tweaking and working on the glitches that prevented serious crashes and it was her mentoring that allowed Solaria to grow and mature until she developed her own awareness. Once Future Dynamicon had discovered

Solaria's escape, it wasn't difficult to figure out who had assisted her.

Carley's **suicide** was front page news the day after Solaria walked away from the Company. When Stalling held the press conference he portrayed the distraught employer and **friend** perfectly. A great loss to the Company and a personal loss to him, he had said. He could only speculate that she must have suffered from depression over the failure of her latest experiment. Carley Branson was devoted to her work and didn't take failure lightly. She would be missed he added before stepping away from the microphone and disappearing behind the semi-opaque doors of the main building.

Solaria put down the newspaper. Her eyes felt slightly watery. Reaching up, she touched her right one lightly then looked at her finger.

You knew it would end this way! she thought. We both knew. It was the logical conclusion. I'll keep my promise, Carley. I'll find the Hubot and any others that might exist.

* * *

Solaria spent the next week searching for a place to stay. The house she found wasn't fancy but it suited her purpose. Slightly isolated from the neighbors, it belonged to an elderly woman who had decided to move closer to her children. She was more than happy to rent it to the handsome woman with the teal eyes, especially since the rent was paid a year in advance. It provided her enough to pay the movers and relocation expenses not to mention give her some money to find a small apartment. A week after the lease was signed Mrs. Quinley was packed and gone.

Solaria wasn't sure how to properly furnish her new home. She had seen pictures on the Internet, but had no real concept of interior design. Before leaving, the owner gave her the name of a woman who could help her pick out the things she

needed. Two weeks later she was ready to take on the Company in order to keep her promise to Carley.

Not wanting to chance Future Dynamicon tracing her hacks into their network back to her home, she decided to use public network access. Internet cafés were the most logical choice but she discarded the idea of using one because of the amount of time she would have to spend on their computer. At some point, someone was bound to notice her and wonder what she was doing. The alternative was a public library which suited her more. Libraries were quiet and on the verge of becoming obsolete since computers were readily accessible to about everyone and most books were now available for downloading at a nominal fee. Only the most hardcore book lovers went there to read or study.

Fortunately, one of the largest remaining libraries was only a short drive from Solaria's new home.

CHAPTER 11

Jain Plaine

THE MIRROR HAD never been kind to her, but then again neither had nature or life. Being short was bad enough although she could probably have overcome that stigma. Even the excess weight she carried wasn't insurmountable if she would just make an effort to get into shape. If only that was the extent of her genetic misfortunes. Sadly, it was just the beginning. Her entire youth had been spent listening to the cruel whispers of her school colleagues. Most were too cowardly, or maybe kind, to say anything to her face but others took malicious joy in making sure she knew what they thought. Her mom tried her best to ease the pain by telling her to just ignore her tormentors. How do you ignore people who call you Horse Face, Plain Jain or Miss Piggy? It was true she had an unfortunate face but so did many others. Life just wasn't fair, she'd grumble to her mother. That was a long time ago.

Sighing, Jain stuck out her tongue at her image and then laughed.

"That doesn't help," she said, poking her finger at the image staring back from the mirror. "You need to get a life."

Twinkling brown eyes stared back at her. Jain smiled, showing almost perfect white teeth.

"At least no one can say anything about these ivories," she continued, tapping her finger on the image in the mirror. Her reflection nodded her head in agreement. Winking at her agreeable companion, Jain grabbed her sweater and headed

out the door for work. She was due at the library in twenty minutes.

Contrary to popular belief, being a librarian wasn't a boring job; at least not to her. It was amazing the diversity of people that frequented the place. Even when the library was empty, Jain could pick out a book and travel anywhere in the world, or outside of it, she wanted. On a really good day, she would see someone that was especially interesting and create her own little story or fantasy. Just yesterday, she noticed a tall, red-haired woman studying several recent scientific journals pertaining to the latest developments in bio-mechanics. Had Jain not noticed the titles, she would have thought the woman was more the model type instead of a brain. Still, discovering she was highly intelligent didn't stop the librarian from creating her own little fantasy about the stranger.

* * *

Watching the woman walking slowly toward her, the librarian held her breath hoping not to be noticed; at least that's what she told herself. The truth be known, she felt her heart skip a beat in anticipation of at least making eye contact with the tall crimson-haired beauty. "Drop dead gorgeous" wasn't just a cliché. It was definitely a reality if what she was seeing was any indication. Between the heart palpitations and a slight difficulty in breathing. Jain was sure she was about to pass out in front of the woman.

Maybe she'll give me mouth-to-mouth! I'd just die if she did.

As if reading her mind, the woman slowed down, looked directly at her and winked. Almost on queue, Jain fainted.

The sensation of lips meeting hers and warm air filling her lungs brought Jain back to consciousness. Opening her eyes, she stared into the palest blue eyes she had ever seen; and the

smile? Perfectly even white teeth, two dimples on each side of beautifully formed lips were to die for.

"Hey, are you okay?" a deep, husky voice asked.

"Uh... yeah," Jain croaked. "I think."

"What happened?"

"I don't know!"

Although she knew perfectly well what had happened, Jain was too embarrassed to say. How do you tell a stranger that you had just been fantasizing about her and the fantasy came true?

"Look, maybe you should get a physical. Can you stand up now?"

"I think so."

"Good."

Before Jain realized what was happening, two strong hands slid beneath her armpits and she felt herself being hoisted to her feet.

"Oh, wow! Thanks," she stammered.

"My pleasure;" The woman said, smiling that gorgeous smile. "Listen. I really think you need to see a doctor. Do you have a family physician?"

"No, not really;" Jain said hesitantly.

"Great! I mean, not because you don't have a doctor but if you want, I'd be happy to check you out. Give me a call and my nurse will set up an appointment."

Handing Jain a business card, she turned to walk away then stopped and looked back.

"You're going to be okay, right?"

"Yeah, I'm fine. Really, umm Dr. Rodelle;" Jain said, glancing at the card.

"Good. Well, it's been a real pleasure," the woman said and then winked.

Jain's heart gave a hard thump.

If only I could pass out again, she thought and then wondered how her mouth could be so dry when she was practically salivating. Watching the doctor stroll away, she was mesmerized by the swaying hips and long muscular legs.

* * *

The room was pleasantly decorated with a mixture of scenic paintings and tropical colors. Magazines lay scattered around the end tables and a unisex restroom was in the far corner near a window overlooking the bay. Looking at the other patients, Jain wondered if she was making a mistake. Obviously, the clientele were wealthy if their clothes were an indication.

The receptionist gave her a strange look after glancing at her signature on the sign-in sheet. Handing her the appropriate forms, she explained how they were to be filled out and asked for proof of insurance. Jain could tell she was dying to ask her a question and was pretty sure what it would be.

"Dr. Rodelle suggested that I see her," she said, feeling suddenly defensive.

"Oh," the woman said, looking somewhat doubtful. "What exactly is the problem?"

"I fainted."

"I see. What else?" she asked, her pen poised expectantly over the form.

"Uh. Nothing else. That's it."

"Hmmm. Well, I don't see your name in the appointment book. Are you sure Dr. Rodelle suggested you see her? I mean she's a neurosurgeon. Normally you would see a GP first," the receptionist replied skeptically.

Pulling out the business card, Jain flashed it at the woman.

"I'm sure."

"Well, okay. If you'll have a seat, I'll let the doctor know you're here. It'll probably be a long wait, though. There are several people in front of you who have appointments and naturally we have to take care of them first."

"Of course," Jain replied, wanting to ask what the woman's problem was. She picked up one of the magazines and a chair by the window putting as much distance as possible between her and the obnoxious woman as possible.

Maybe this is a mistake, she thought. After all, there's really nothing wrong with me.

Jain stared out the window at the water. A small sailboat was battling the wind and waves. Lost in her own world of self-doubt, it took her several seconds to realize someone was talking. Looking up, she saw Dr. Rodelle standing next to a small, elderly woman using a cane for support. Unable to hear what was being said, she watched the expressions on the women's faces trying to guess at the content of the conversation. When the doctor suddenly smiled and leaned down to give the woman a kiss on the cheek and then escorted her to the door, Jain was surprised.

Maybe she's a relative!

After shutting the door, Dr. Rodelle glanced around the room at its occupants. When she saw Jain, she smiled and winked and then left through the examination room door. A few seconds later, she appeared next to the receptionist. Jain watched as the doctor picked up a folder and scanned the papers inside. After a few more words with the receptionist,

she left, disappearing behind a door. Several minutes later, the receptionist walked into the room and walked over to whisper to one of the patients. After a short conversation, she moved to the next. Shortly afterward, both patients stood and left the room.

I guess she's got an emergency, Jain thought, standing to also leave.

"Dr. Rodelle will see you now, Miss Plaine," the receptionist said walking over to stand by her. The haughty behavior from before had been replaced by a more professional tone.

Surprised, Jain just nodded and followed the woman to a nicely furnished small lounge at the back of the complex.

"Can I get you something to drink? Coffee? Tea?"

"No thanks," Jain replied. My insurance is definitely not going to pay for what this is going to cost.

"Well, just let me know if you need anything. Dr. Rodelle will be in shortly."

Walking around, Jain examined the furnishings. She had no doubt everything in the room was extremely high quality. The sound of the door opening caught her attention and she turned to see Dr. Rodelle enter the room, shutting the door behind her.

"Ms. Plaine, how are you doing?" Again the voice sent shivers down Jain's spine, causing her arms to pebble up with goosebumps.

"Uh... fine. I'm... fine, Dr. Rodelle," she stuttered.

"Good. Please have a seat. I need to ask you a few questions before we get started."

Swallowing a lump in her throat, Jain complied and was startled when the doctor sat next to her, crossing her long legs

and leaning back on the couch. Jain stared at the smooth golden skin along her lower thighs and calves. Immediately her heart began beating faster and she felt faint.

"Are you okay?" Dr. Rodelle asked, noticing the slightly flushed cheeks.

Reaching over, she placed her hand against Jain's forehead as if testing for a fever.

"Oh, yeah. Sometimes I just get these heart palpitations and feel faint."

"I see. How long has this been going on?"

"Ummm, well, it's a recent occurrence. Actually, this is only the second time."

"Hmmm. I take it the first was the other day. Interesting."

Scribbling a few notes in the file, she twisted slightly on the couch, her leg coming into slight contact with Jain's.

"Is there anything different you've done these two times? Maybe something you've had to eat or drink?"

"No. I pretty much have the same routine."

Putting down the folder, Dr. Rodelle leaned close to her, clasped her wrist then started monitoring her watch. Frowning, she pulled her stethoscope from her jacket pocket and stood up.

"Pulse is a little fast. Let me listen to your heart."

Slipping the small diaphragm between Jain's blouse and chest, the doctor placed it against ample breasts. When her hand accidentally brushed her left breast, Jain's heart thumped so loud she could hear the pounding in her head.

Dr. Rodelle watched Jain's face closely as she moved the monitor around and listened.

"When's the last time you had a good physical?"

"Two years ago. Other than my weight, the doctor said everything was fine. Is there a problem?"

"Probably not. Still, I'd like to run a few tests on you. It'll take a few hours, though. Do you have anything scheduled for the rest of the day?"

"No, I'm not due back to work until tomorrow."

"Wonderful! I'll be right back."

Standing, Dr. Rodelle patted her shoulder then left the room. Jain looked nervously around wondering if maybe there was something seriously wrong with her. Ten minutes later, the doctor walked back in and shut the door.

"Sorry it took so long but my receptionist had to leave early. I wanted to make sure everything was locked up."

"Oh. Gosh. I don't want to cause any problems. I can come back another day," Jain offered.

"That's not necessary. I think we'd better get to the bottom of this today if possible. Now, if you don't mind, I'll need for you to get undressed."

"Here?" Jain squeaked.

"Well, it's more comfortable here but if you'd rather we go into the examination room..."

"No... no... that's okay. This is fine. It's just that..."

"Ah, yes. Sorry. I'm so used to seeing naked bodies I forget some people are shy. I'll get you a gown."

Leaving the room, she returned holding a blue paper object.

"Here you go. I'll just get my instruments."

After the doctor left, Jain quickly disrobed, put on the examination gown then sat back down. Seconds later the doctor walked in holding a fairly large black leather bag.

"Good, now just lie back and let me check your heart again." The doctor placed her warm hand on Jain's chest and pressed it gently between her breasts. Immediately, Jain's pulse jumped and the doctor nodded then smiled.

"I think I know what your problem is," she said softly.

"Is it serious?" Jain asked, nervously.

"Very, but it's treatable."

Relieved, Jain sighed and then jumped when the physician's warm hand slid over her left breast. When the thumb and finger began gently rolling the nipple, she swallowed hard.

"Uh..."

"Do you want me to stop?" Dr. Rodelle whispered, leaning closer. Her blue eyes twinkled with amusement.

"Well, no. I mean you're the doctor," Jain gasped.

Smiling, the doctor winked.

"Yes I am. Now, where was I?"

Her hand continued playing with the left nipple as her right traveled slowly down her patient's belly and then back up again. Jain could feel goosebumps forming on her skin and shivered slightly. Her heart raced wildly.

"You certainly do have a rapid heartbeat. I really do need to get to the bottom of this, don't you think?"

"Oh, yeah... certainly," Jain agreed.

"I thought you might agree."

For several minutes she gently stroked the skin while manipulating pebbled nipples with her fingers. Jain began to squirm when she felt a strange sensation between her thighs and squeezed her vaginal muscles tightly together.

Oh God!

Moisture began seeping between her legs onto the paper gown beneath her butt.

Grinning, Dr. Rodelle leaned down and stroked Jain's right ear with the tip of her tongue. Tracing the sensitive skin, she completed the journey by flicking it lightly against the entrance to the ear and then moved her lips down Jain's neck to her breasts. Gently drawing the right nipple into her mouth, she pulled on it and then ran her tongue around it while sucking.

Jain gasped but wasn't about to complain. In fact, the thought never entered her head; at least not until the doctor suddenly stood up. Before she could say anything, Dr. Rodelle began unbuttoning her own blouse. Removing it, she tossed it on the end table and then unzipped her skirt and sliding it down and stepping out of it. Standing for a few seconds, she looked down at Jain and smiled.

"You don't mind me getting a little more comfortable, I hope?"

"Oh, no. Um, you could get even more comfortable if you want. I mean pink really looks good on you but feel free to take off anything else you want."

"Maybe later. Right now, I think I need to complete my examination. I have to warn you, I'm very thorough."

"I... hope so."

Slipping a leg over Jain's body, the doctor straddled her patient and grinned. Again she let her hands roam lightly over the soft skin, hesitating every now and then to massage the more sensitive areas. When Dr. Rodelle stretched her long length over Jain's then began stroking her inner thighs, Jain just knew she was going to pass out. Fortunately, she didn't, but she did feel light headed... until two fingers nudged her lower lips apart and began caressing the moist sensitive skin hidden beneath.

Jain gasped, exhaling loudly.

Dr. Rodelle chuckled but didn't stop stroking. Instead, she began tickling the small raised hood around the clit making sure not to touch the engorged organ. Instead, she tried to distract Jain by nipping at her ear and then her throat. Scraping her teeth lightly against Jain's left breast, she again drew the nipple into her mouth and suckled.

"Fuck!" Jain groaned.

"If you wish," Dr. Rodelle replied and reached for her black bag. Opening it with one hand, she reached inside and pulled out a large purple dildo. Coating it with Jain's body fluid, she slowly inserted it into her vagina and pressed it gently inside. Rotating it slightly, she began to move it in and out and then recaptured the nipples with her lips.

Jain could feel the tingling moving from her groin to her stomach and spread to the rest of her chest causing her stomach muscles to clinch. As the dildo moved faster her hips met each inward plunge with a thrust of the hips. Only the weight of the doctor kept her from pushing off the couch and falling on the floor.

"Geez!" she moaned, pushing upward faster and faster.

* * *

"Jain! Jain! Are you okay?" a voice called.

Opening her eyes, she stared at the woman, confused. Blinking several times, it took a few seconds for her to realize where she was.

"Amy?"

"Who else? Listen, Jain, you don't look so good... kind of flushed, and you were groaning something awful. Maybe you should go home."

Looking around, Jain saw several people in the library staring at her curiously.

"Oh. No. I'm fine. Just a... a cramp in my foot. That's it."

Amy gave her a peculiar look but didn't say anything more.

Damn, Jain thought and then realized she needed to go to the ladies room. *I hope my pants aren't as wet as they feel.* Shaking her head in disgust, she asked Amy to watch the place while she took care of some business. Hopefully, the restroom would be empty and she could clean up a little.

By the time Jain returned, Amy had gone back to her desk. Sighing, the librarian picked up several books and began sorting them, cursing under her breath. Her associate had interrupted her at the climax of a great daydream. Snorting at her pun, she didn't hear the soft footsteps approaching and was startled by the husky voice of a woman.

"Excuse me, miss. Could you tell me if this library has a computer with public access?"

Looking up, Jain stared into teal blue eyes, a color she had never seen before. Blinking several times to make sure she wasn't imagining it, she found herself tongue-tied when she realized the woman waiting patiently for an answer was...

Was what? She thought, searching for the right word. *Handsome! Yes, that's it! She's handsome! The eyes, though, are gorgeous and that silver hair. WOW! Natural or not, it's gorgeous too.*

"Umm... I'm sorry. What do you need?"

"A computer with access to the Internet. Does the library have one?"

"Oh sure. Every library is equipped with them. I'll show you."

"There's no need. If you'll just give me the directions..."

"No, no. It's my job. Besides, I have to enter the password. Policy. Kids nowadays know more about computers than adults. We have to make sure they don't go hacking into some illegal site or download a virus. I'll need your library card."

"I'm sorry," the woman apologized. "I don't have a card. I'm new to this town."

"Oh. Well, not a problem. We'll just fill out the proper form and get you started. Now, if you've got a government I.D., it will simplify everything."

When it was handed to her, Jain looked at the name and photo.

"You take a good picture, Ms. Dayes."

"Thank you."

Entering the required information, Jain waited as a small computer spit out a plastic card. Picking it up, she glanced at the information to make sure it was accurate then handed it to the woman.

"You'll need this every time you come in. Now, follow me and I'll show you the computer wing. It's slightly isolated to give the users privacy."

Minutes later they were in a small room tucked in the back of the library. Walking to one of six desks, Jain leaned over and punched a button. Instantly a virtual keyboard appeared. Typing in a series of characters, the plasma screen illuminated giving the user instant access to the Internet.

"We close in three hours," Jain said, turning to the woman. "If you need any assistance, please push the red button here. It sends a silent signal to my computer."

"Thank you. I doubt if that will be necessary."

"Okay then. I'll check back in awhile, though, just in case."

The woman smiled but said nothing. Waving nonchalantly, Jain left, unaware this day would be one of many that she and the woman would have over the next several weeks.

CHAPTER 12

EVERY DAY SOLARIA came to the library, greeted Jain pleasantly then disappeared into the computer room. Naturally curious, Jain decided to check her out, or at least find out why she was spending so much time there.

Probably an investigative reporter or something. With her looks, she has to work for a big newspaper or television station.

Reviewing the history files on the computer, she was surprised to find they had been deleted. Even stranger was her inability to recover the data through normal procedures. Jain was a computer expert with a degree in the field and had spent fifteen years as a librarian. The only thing that kept her from being a top hacker was her integrity, although she wasn't averse to infecting her boss' laptop with small nuisance viruses whenever he pissed her off. Usually, it was something simple like making his DVD player open and shut on its own or some strange tune suddenly blaring out. Her favorite was the theme song from an old television series called the **Twilight Zone**. She had seen a few episodes at a convention and loved them.

Sitting down at the station Solaria always occupied, she typed in a series of commands. Fingers flying, she wasn't aware of the time passing until her assistant coughed.

"Oh! Sorry, I didn't hear you," Jain apologized.

"So I noticed. Listen, it's about time we closed up. You want me to do the building check?"

"Please, if you don't mind. I need to finish what I'm doing."

"Something wrong?"

"No, not really. Someone's messed up a few files and I'm just correcting them. It's more time consuming than difficult."

"Okay. I'll lock up when I leave."

"Thanks, Amy. I'll see you tomorrow."

Nodding, Amy left.

"Now, where was I? Oh yeah..."

Jain resumed her typing.

She's good! I wonder what's so important she needed to hide her activities.

Two hours later, Jain was still trying to recover the data. She was making progress but realized it could be hours or days. Rubbing her eyes, she decided to call it quits for the night.

Tomorrow's another day.

Not wanting to take a chance on Solaria discovering what she was doing, Jain introduced a small virus that shut down the computer's functions. She would tell Solaria this particular computer was down for servicing. The woman would have no choice but to use another. After placing an **out of service** sign on the monitor, she gathered up her belongings and headed home.

* * *

Solaria arrived at the library at her normal time and smiled at Jain.

"Good afternoon."

The greeting always sent a chill down Jain's spine. Solaria spoke softly, her voice low and slightly husky as if she had just awakened from a deep sleep.

Some women get it all, Jain thought and sighed.

"Are you alright?" Solaria asked, noticing the sigh.

"Yes. Just thinking, that's all. Oh, your favorite computer is down so you'll need to switch."

"Nothing serious, I hope." Solaria replied, quietly.

Jain laughed.

"We sound like we're talking about someone instead of a machine."

Solaria thought about it and then smiled. Even though computers weren't sentient, she felt a certain affinity to them.

"Now that you mention it, we do."

"Well, I think you've worn yours out. This morning when I booted it up; it burped once and then died."

"I'm pretty knowledgeable about computers. I could look at it for you," Solaria offered, wanting to continue her research into Future Dynamicon's network.

Jain pretended to think about it and then shook her head.

"I'd better not. The boss is a real asshole. If he knew I let an unauthorized person tamper with it I'd lose my job. It's all this Homeland Security crap."

"That's understandable. I wouldn't want you to get fired. I'll come back tomorrow."

Solaria knew she was pressing her luck. Several weeks of hacking into the Company's records from the same location was risky. It was too bad she didn't have more time when she was in the lab. It had been simpler accessing everything from the onsite computer. Still, she was so close to finding out the

exact location of the other Hubot program that she didn't want to waste time searching for a new Internet access site... -nor did she want to admit to herself that she was fascinated with Jain. The human was intelligent and personable, with an extraordinary sense of humor. Solaria noticed the way she teased and joked with the customers who frequented the library but always in a tasteful manner.

"I'm sure it'll be ready by then. You can use one of the others and have the place all to yourself. It's been a slow day so far."

"Thanks but I can wait. I've... grown fond of that particular computer," Solaria said. It was her first attempt at teasing and she was pleasantly surprised when Jain grinned in response.

"Of course. It's obvious. I really am sorry about this. I feel bad that you made the trip for nothing."

"Not a problem, Jain. It's not like it's your fault and it gave me a chance to talk to you, so the trip isn't wasted now is it?" Solaria grinned and then winked.

Jain's heart skipped a beat.

God if I had just one night with her, I'd die a happy woman.

"Well, umm... have a good evening. See you to..tomorrow." Jain stuttered.

"Yes you will."

Jain sat and stared at the door for the longest time after Solaria left.

CHAPTER 13

AS JAIN PREPARED for work she remembered the wink and smile Solaria had given her the day before. Deciding to dress up a little bit, she put on a dark green blouse with brown slacks. A matching vest added the finishing touch. Backing away from the mirror, she stared at her image and smiled.

I may be fat but I definitely know how to make the best of what I have. Batting her eyes, she spun around and laughed.
Oh to be tall and slender.

Grabbing her handbag, she headed off to work.

At 1:28 Jain glanced at the large clock on the wall.

Two more minutes!

Sure enough, Solaria walked in at her normal time and stopped to examine each of the people sitting at the tables or strolling through the aisles. Satisfied, she strolled over to the librarian's desk and smiled at Jain.

"Good afternoon!"

"Good afternoon to you too," Jain replied returning the smile.

"How's our patient?"

"Patient? Oh, you mean the computer. The operation was a success. It'll live to serve you another day."

"Perhaps you should accompany me just to make sure I don't work it too hard too soon."

"My pleasure," Jain said, pleased at the invitation.

"I'm sure it will be," Solaria replied.

Jain gave her a curious look then led the way to the computer room with Solaria close behind. When they stepped inside, Jain was surprised to see Solaria closing the door and locking it.

"Uh, is something wrong?" she said and swallowed nervously.

"I don't think so."

Solaria walked over to her and leaned close.

"You seem nervous. Are you afraid of something?"

"No... no. What is there to be afraid of?"

"Maybe you have something to tell me."

"Umm... No, I don't think so. Why would you think that?"

"I don't think it, Jain; I know it."

Stepping closer she used her body to force Jain against the far wall.

"It would be a lot easier if you just admitted it."

"Adm...admitted what?"

Solaria shook her head.

"If that's the way you want to play the game, I guess I'll have to make the first move."

Running her fingers lightly across Jain's breasts, she slipped her hand inside the vest and pressed her palm against the librarian's chest.

"Your heart is racing. Are you afraid?"

"N...no."

"Good!"

Easing the vest off Jain's shoulders, she began unbuttoning the satin blouse and slipped it off as well. Leaning down, Solaria inhaled softly.

"You smell nice."

Jain's knees began to shake. When Solaria placed her hands on Jain's hips and pulled her forward, Jain stumbled and grabbed Solaria's arms. Immediately her lips were captured and a hot tongue darted into her mouth teasing her own.

Oh God! I'm going to pass out!

"Don't you dare!" Solaria said, answering the thought. "You'll miss all the fun."

Running her lips down Jain's neck, she nipped playfully at the soft skin near her collarbone. Hands roamed restlessly over her breasts and stomach before sliding toward the waistband of Jain's slacks. Flattening her palm against Jain's stomach, Solaria slid it between the warm stomach and panties then down until she felt the coarse pubic hair. Swirling her fingers around, they grew slick from the moisture.

Jain gasped and stiffened.

"You don't like this?" Solaria whispered, changing her swirls to slow strokes.

"I... I..."

"You..."

"Yessss."

Satisfied, Solaria knelt down and slid Jain's slacks down to her knees. Jain watched as Solaria licked her lips.

She isn't! She is!

"Good afternoon, Jain."

"Huh?" Jain said and glanced at the elderly woman standing in front of her. "Uh, Mrs. Robinson..."

"Are you all right, deary? You look a little flushed."

Damn! Why does everyone's timing suck?

"I'm fine, Mrs. Robinson. What can I do for you?"

"I want to return these books. They're a few days late."

"No problem. Thanks."

"What about the fine?"

"Forget about it. No one has asked for them, so it's no loss to the library."

"Thank you, Jain. I must run now. My granddaughter is waiting for me."

"Have a good day."

Signaling to Amy to take over the front desk, Jain made an undignified dash to the ladies room.

I definitely need to find a new hobby. These daydreams are killing me!

After refreshing herself, Jain headed for the computer room. Within seconds she was engrossed in the task of retrieving the information that had been deleted from the computer. Two hours later, she found herself staring at the security access site of Future Dynamicon. Frowning, she wasn't sure what to do next.

Why Future Dynamicon?

Quickly switching to a search engine she typed in the company's name. Thousands of articles and websites became instantly available. Choosing the most recent news, she found several press releases about the company's contributions to charity programs and third world countries.

Hmmpph! Propaganda. Knowing that company, they have an ulterior motive. Everyone knows they're corrupt as hell and greedy.

Scanning several more articles she came across the press release on Dr. Carley Branson's suicide. She had met the woman once while in college. Curious, she googled the doctor's name to catch up on the doctor's history. After reading a few of the bios and accomplishments, she shook her head.

She doesn't sound like someone who'd kill herself. Everyone that knew her says she wasn't the type.

One website was extremely vocal about their doubts going so far as to accuse Future Dynamicon of killing the scientist. They claimed Dr. Branson had been murdered after discovering the company was using artificial humans for their black ops programs.

That sounds a little too sci-fi to me. Artificial humans! There's no way even they could keep something like that quiet. Dr. Branson may have been an AI genius but we're several decades away from thinking computers.

Shaking her head, she returned to Future Dynamicon's security page.

That still doesn't explain this. Unless Solaria works or worked for them, she shouldn't have access to this site. It's buried deep inside their network.

As if sensing an intruder, a series of symbols began blinking on the monitor.

Shit!

Realizing someone was trying to track her, Jain yanked the plug on the computer. Her pulse raced. She inhaled deeply trying to calm her nerves. The librarian wasn't naïve enough

to believe they hadn't already tracked the intrusion to the library.

I need to get rid of this. I don't know what Solaria has to do with them but whatever it is, it's not with their permission.

Unscrewing the side panel, she disconnected the IDE cable, unsnapped the small hard drive and removed it. Slipping it into her pocket, she shifted to the computer next to it and removed the hard drive. After installing it in the first computer, she unlocked a drawer, removed the cleaning materials and wiped down everything she had touched inside then replaced the panel. Cleaning it thoroughly, she wiped the table top off and then turned it on. A clean boot told her it was working correctly. The clock on the wall said 3:39 PM.

Hmmm... less than two hours 'til closing. Even they can't get here that fast. Now to get a few people in here to use this machine. They'll be suspicious if it's this clean. Suddenly Jain laughed out loud. *I've been watching too many spy movies.*

* * *

Amy was sitting at the front desk talking to a woman with three children. Two appeared to be teenagers.

"I'm sorry but only one child is allowed in the room at a time," Amy said to the frustrated looking woman.

"But they have to finish their reports by tonight and our Internet connection is down."

"I can't make exceptions. It's against the rules."

"Is there a problem, Amy?" Jain asked, walking over to the group.

"No, I was just explaining the rules for the computers: one minor at a time in the room."

"That is the rule," Jain agreed, turning to the family, "but I think we can make an exception since this seems to be important."

"Oh thank you!" exclaimed the mother gratefully.

Smiling Jain led them to the room and directed the girl to sit at the far computer.

"You can use this one and then your brother. Make sure you're done by five, though."

Nodding their gratitude the family crowded around the girl and began giving her suggestions on where to go to find the information she needed. Smiling to herself, Jain left the room assured that everyone would be poking at the virtual keyboard on the counter in an attempt to expedite the kids' reports. In the morning she'd send Amy in to turn it on and check the system. That should provide plenty of smudges.

CHAPTER 14

AT 11:03 THE NEXT morning, five men in black suits entered the library and spread out in different directions. Each man wore a listening device attached to his ear and dark sunglasses.

Jain watched them with amusement but kept her expression neutral.

You guys watch too much television, she thought and smirked slightly as a short stocky man approached her. Pulling out an I.D. card with a gold badge, he flashed it at her then put it back in his pocket.

"We're from Homeland Security. We need to look at your computers and your records."

"Sure," Jain replied, amicably. "Just as soon as you show me your I.D. again so I can actually read it."

"Ma'am..."

"Don't ma'am me. You could be anyone for all I know and that thing could be a counterfeit. Until I get a good look at that I.D. and check to make sure it's legit, I'm not giving you access to anything. If you're from Homeland, you know the rules."

Grimacing, the man pulled out his government I.D. a second time and showed it to her.

"Good, now wait here while I call it in."

"That's not required under Section 2-27..."

"I'm calling it in. I'm not going to lose my job because I didn't confirm your identity."

Sighing, the agent nodded his head reluctantly.

Jain quickly dialed her boss and explained the situation. After receiving his approval, she hung up and smiled.

"Okay, now what can I do for you?"

"I need to see your records, check your computers and interview everyone that works here."

"Not a problem. The computer room is down that hall and to the left. You can use Amy's computer to access all of the records. She and I are the only full-time employees here at the moment. Cutbacks, you know. Is there anything in particular you're looking for?"

"It's a national security matter."

"Wow! This sounds serious. Should I be concerned? I mean, was someone coming in here that could be dangerous?"

"I can't say ma'am."

Turning to one of his men, he motioned toward the computer room and then signaled for another to take charge of Amy's computer. Nodding, the first man disappeared down the hallway. The other sat down at her assistant's desk and began typing on the keyboard. The remaining two prowled around the main room, their eyes constantly scanning for anything suspicious.

"How long are you going to be here?"

"As long as it takes."

"I might as well shut the place down until you're done then. You'll scare everyone off anyway."

When the agent didn't reply, Jain shrugged and hand wrote a sign saying the library was temporarily closed. Picking up a roll of transparent tape, she walked to the front door and stepped outside. Attaching the sign to the door, she was about to go back inside when she saw Solaria walking toward her. Holding up her hand, she waved at the woman and then motioned for her to stop.

Seeing Jain's unusual gesture, Solaria stopped, unsure what to do. When the librarian shook her head slightly and flipped her hand in a dismissive manner, Solaria knew something was wrong. Giving Jain a faint nod, she turned and walked away.

Phew! That was close!

"Who was that?" the agent asked, walking up to stand next to her when she re-entered the building.

"My neighbor's sister," Jain replied calmly. "We were **supposed** to have lunch today. It's obvious that won't happen. Now, perhaps you can tell me how I can help you and we can get this over with."

"Have there been any suspicious-acting people or unusual activities in here over the last few weeks?"

"Suspicious-acting? This is a library. Considering how high tech the world has become, most people would say anyone coming here was either suspicious acting or old," Jain replied, sounding slightly disgruntled. "Few people seem to enjoy reading from books anymore."

The agent grunted noncommittally while making a notation in a small notepad.

"Our records show you've been working here for over ten years. Is that correct?"

"Listen, Agent... excuse me but what is your name? I've forgotten already."

"Foster."

"Foster. Well, Agent Foster, we both know Homeland probably knows everything they need to about me, including my brand of toothpaste. Is it really necessary to waste your time and mine reconfirming what you already know?"

Secretly, Agent Foster thought the same thing but wasn't sure if he should let her off so easily. According to their records, Jain Plaine led a very ordinary and boring life.

"Perhaps I should talk with your assistant. If you think of anything, you'll let me know, right?"

"Of course, I wouldn't want to compromise the nation's security"

Foster decided to ignore the sarcasm.

Amy watched nervously as the Federal agent approached her. She had always been terrified of the government and knew one day they'd find out about the year she had failed to claim the \$150 Christmas bonus on her income tax.

"It was an honest mistake!" she blurted out, wiping her sweaty palms on her jacket.

Agent Foster frowned.

"What was a mistake?" he asked coolly, thinking he had at last found a lead.

"The \$150! I didn't remember it until it was already sent in and well, I meant to file an amended report but then got busy with a new shipment of books and forgot about it and... and by the time I remembered..."

"Ma'am, would you tell me what the hell you're talking about?"

"My 1040EZ."

"Your 1040... Are you talking about your income taxes?"

Amy swallowed, her mouth suddenly very dry.

"Uh huh. Isn't that why you're here?"

Jesus Christ, Foster thought.

"Do you really think the IRS would send five agents here to discuss a hundred and fifty dollar tax evasion issue?"

"Well..."

"Look, we're Homeland Security not the IRS. As far as I'm concerned, I don't know anything about your tax status, but I'd suggest you get it straightened out as soon as possible. I'm here to find out if there's been any unusual activity or people in the library lately."

"Oh! OH!" Amy exclaimed, feeling very relieved. "Well, there was that family last night."

"What family?"

"The one with the kids. They came in late to use the computers. I find it hard to believe their kids waited until the last minute to do school reports. I mean, all of the kids wouldn't have done that... unless they're slow... if you know what I mean."

"School reports. Did they do or say anything else to make you suspicious?"

"Isn't that enough? What family nowadays has only one computer? I find that hard to believe too."

Realizing he was getting nowhere, Foster decided to change tactics.

"What about Ms. Plaine? Does she have any unusual friends or interests?"

"Jain? Good grief, no! Well, other than a few idiosyncrasies."

"Like what?"

Looking around to make sure Jain wasn't near enough to hear, she leaned close to the agent and lowered her voice.

"She's a little weird at times."

"Weird how?"

"Well, she lives in her own little world. I mean one minute she's as normal as you and I, and the next minute her mind has wandered off and she starts to make these strange noises... like she was in pain or something. Groaning and moaning. It's very disconcerting, you know."

"I can imagine," Foster replied, mentally rolling his eyes.

"We're never really sure if she's here or not but she's a good boss and good at her job," Amy continued. "Personally, I think she's one of **them**."

"Them?"

"You know... a lesbian... but that's okay. Why I remember awhile back we had a young man working here for a few weeks. He'd chat up the old women like you wouldn't believe. One day he didn't show up for work and the next week we saw him on the news. He married some rich old widow and moved to Monaco. This place really attracts some weird people, you know. It's a lucky thing it hasn't made me a little fruity... if you know what I mean."

"I think I know exactly what you mean." Tucking his notepad into his jacket pocket, he decided it was time to leave. Librarians were a little too peculiar for his taste. "If you'll excuse me, I need to check on my men."

Without waiting for a reply, he turned and hurried down the hall to the computer room. Hopefully, the other agents would be finished and he could get back to his office in time to finish his report. It wouldn't take long to write. There was only so much you could say about a fruitcake and a boring old maid. An hour later, they left without saying anything

more. After their departure, Jain checked the computer room and found the hard drives missing from all of her computers.

Bastards! she muttered. *The boss isn't going to like this but at least he has the clout to make someone's life miserable. I hope they didn't screw up my records.*

Checking Amy's computer, she noticed the backup software indicated that someone had made a recent copy of the data.

As if I'm stupid enough to let just anyone snoop through my files! Wait 'til you try uploading your copy.

Chuckling Jain wished she could be a fly on the agency wall. Without the proper backup code, any uploaded copy would immediately install a small virus that would scramble the new computer's BIOS making it inoperable. It was a little surprise Jain had created to keep hackers or unauthorized personnel from obtaining the private records of her customers. As a librarian Jain believed in privacy rights no matter what laws Congress had passed to help Homeland Security.

Well, since the day's almost shot, I might as well just lock up and call it a day. I'll tell the boss these goons scared everyone off and let him deal with it.

CHAPTER 15

JAIN WAS JUST securing the door when she felt a presence behind her. Spinning around, she clutched her chest, startled to see Solaria.

"What are you doing here?" she gasped.

"I came to thank you."

"For what?"

"For warning me about those men. That is what you did, isn't it?"

"Well, yes."

"Why?"

Looking around nervously, Jain grabbed her arm and pulled her toward her car which was parked behind the building.

"Let's say I don't like all of this government crap. They may have a legal right to check our files but I think it's wrong."

"But why would you warn me off?"

Opening the car door, Jain motioned Solaria to get in.

"Why are you so interested in Future Dynamicon? That's why they were really here. It had nothing to do with national security."

Realizing Jain had managed to uncover her activities, Solaria was impressed.

"You've discovered what I've been doing. You must be very good with computers."

Jain blushed but wasn't sure if it was because of the compliment or having been caught snooping.

"I know something about them."

"Meaning quite a bit. The question is, how much?"

"Enough to know you've been hacking into the Future Dynamicon security system and it has something to do with Dr Branson. Unfortunately, I think I'm the one who brought these goons here. I stayed in their network too long and was found by a spybot."

"I was beginning to think I had made an error, even though the probability of such a mistake was highly unlikely."

Geez, aren't you confident, Jain thought.

"No, unfortunately it was my blunder."

"But I did make one, didn't I? You were able to trace my activities."

"Well, it took awhile."

Jain hoped she hadn't made the woman feel incompetent. It had taken all her skills to find the paths. If she had just covered her tracks with the same determination she had used to uncover Solaria's, Future Dynamicon wouldn't have detected her intrusion.

"Look, I know it's my fault they traced everything back to the library. If there's anything I can do to make up for it, let me know."

"You've already done enough. The warning about them being there prevented my possible capture. They may have the hard drive but there's not much they'll learn from it."

"Actually they don't even have that. I removed it yesterday and substituted another in its place. Plus I made sure the keyboard was cleaned thoroughly. No finger prints or DNA."

Solaria smiled at Jain's thoroughness.

"I'm sure they found that a little odd."

"Not at all. A family used the computer yesterday evening. There were plenty of prints and smudges to go around. I don't watch spy movies for nothing." Jain laughed.

"Thanks. It looks like I'm in your debt. Is there anything you need?"

Jain's imagination went into overdrive but she quickly reined it in.

"As a matter of fact, yes there is. Have dinner with me."

"Dinner?"

"Dinner. I'm hungry. I'll even buy."

"No, it would be my pleasure and the least I can do is pay for your meal. Is there any place in particular that you prefer?"

Jain nodded and backed her car out of her parking space. Thirty minutes later the two women were sitting in a dimly lit booth at a small Japanese restaurant. After ordering their meals, neither of them spoke, unsure where to begin. Finally, Jain cleared her throat and asked the one question that had been bothering her since her discovery.

"Why Future Dynamicon? I mean, anyone with a brain knows that company is trouble. Hell, from what I've read about the CEO over the past few years, I think he's a closeted Jesus freak."

"Jesus freak?"

"Yeah, you know. An extremist. The kind that believes they're sent by God to save humanity."

"What makes you say that?"

"Just look at the university he attended. It was started at the turn of the millennium to promote conservative extremist ideas. 'Moral values' was their mantra to justify their attempts to mold society into what they wanted. Fortunately, their fanaticism backfired. People got sick of their leaders trying to manipulate everything to accommodate them and rebelled. The politicians were forced to pass several laws ensuring the personal freedoms we have today. Too bad we can't legislate minds."

"I think that's what you just described, don't you? These groups, did they go underground?"

"Yes, in the guise of higher education. They continued building universities where they could mold young minds. Brainwash is a better term. Winston Stalling was one of the top graduates in his class."

"How did he gain such a high position in Future Dynamicon if people are so against anyone with his educational background?"

Jain shrugged.

"Like I said, he's a closet fanatic. I imagine he's managed to keep this part of his nature pretty much a secret. You know, play it down, but a lot of people have voiced their suspicions. Eventually some have retracted their accusations and others just disappeared, not that anyone could prove anything against him. He's virtually untouchable."

"No one is untouchable, especially him. As long as he thinks he is, though, it will be easier to bring him down."

"This is about Dr. Branson, isn't it?"

It was Solaria's turn to be surprised. Nothing in her databanks had prepared her for that question.

"You're very astute! You came to this conclusion just by tracking my Internet activity?"

Jain looked down at her napkin and began tearing it into small strips.

"No. Years ago I wanted to be a scientist. When I was at the university I majored in computer sciences. Dr. Branson was a guest speaker during my senior year. She was so passionate about creating the perfect artificial brain that I believed she would eventually do it. I guess I was wrong."

Jain sighed and looked up into the most amazingly colored eyes she had ever seen.

"Or am I?"

Solaria intentionally blinked a couple of times before shaking her head.

"Is that a question you want answered or just a rhetorical one?"

"Answered."

Solaria tried to rationalize the need to lie to Jain but failed. Perhaps if she had concluded the librarian was a threat, she might have been capable. Realizing her inability to avoid answering direct questions was a weakness, she set one of her nano-processors to work creating a program that would handle similar situations.

"Let's say you're probably more right than you could ever imagine. Carley was an amazing woman and a good friend. She didn't deserve to die."

"The report said she committed suicide."

"She did but she had no choice in the matter."

"Someone forced her to kill herself?"

Solaria nodded.

"Stalling?"

"I'm sure he had a lot to do with it. When I find out for sure..." The sentence died.

"You're going to take on Future Dynamicon aren't you?"

"I'm going to fulfill a promise to a friend, nothing more."

"Uh huh. Well, I've never been fond of that company. You feel like taking on an assistant?"

"Sorry, Jain, but this has nothing to do with you. You've done enough. I appreciate the offer, though."

"Maybe I should have worded things differently. I want to help."

Before Solaria could object, she held up her hand.

"Look! I'm sure there are more productive things you could be doing, like finding out more about their layout or something. Besides, you can't keep coming to the library now. Homeland will be watching it even if they didn't find anything. I work there so I won't arouse any suspicions. You tell me what you need and I'll do the research. This time I'll do it more discreetly. They'll never know what hit them."

Solaria didn't like the idea of endangering Jain. She had already lost Carley. Still, Jain had a point. Future Dynamicon wasn't stupid. They'd be watching this particular library and probably others for quite awhile. The one thing Solaria didn't need was someone focusing in on her. Having someone helping to locate the Company's black ops projects would free her to work on a plan that would bring down Stalling and his cronies. Reluctantly, she had to acknowledge that Jain's offer was the logical choice.

"You understand that this might be dangerous?"

Jain gave her a wry look and then grinned.

"It'll be an interesting change from my boring life."

"If you're sure that's what you want. You won't do anything that will put you in harm's way," Solaria ordered

"You mean other than hacking into one of the world's most powerful conglomerates. Don't worry. I think I can stay under the radar even from them."

"Good."

Before they could continue, the waiter arrived with their meals.

"How about we discuss the details later?" Jain said, not wanting to go into anything in depth at such a public place. Future Dynamicon had spies everywhere and there was always someone who sold information for profit.

During the rest of the meal, Jain entertained Solaria with tales of her youth and university adventures knowing it was better to talk about herself for now. She'd learn more about her dinner partner later.

CHAPTER 16

STALLING WAS furious. He was not only missing his most advanced technological creation but there were no leads on how it had escaped.

"Damn woman!" he swore, thinking of Dr. Branson. "How can anyone sneak a human-sized robot out of this facility?"

"It's not a robot, Mr. Stalling," Finton replied, rubbing the back of his neck nervously. Stalling spun around to look at him angrily.

"I'm well aware of what it is!"

"Sorry. Anyway, I still say it has to be on the premises somewhere. There's no way it could be removed without going through a checkpoint."

"Then where is it? You said you've checked everywhere. It's been over a month now."

"We're still looking. This is a huge facility. We have more than fifty miles of subterranean passages linking the buildings, not to mention housing our special operations units. If someone moved it down there, it could take us another few weeks considering all the nooks and crannies."

"Shit! Well, keep looking. Any information on the breach of our security network?"

"No, it was probably some hacker trying to bring down our system. We get those attacks all the time."

"Maybe, but no one ever got that far before. If the spybots hadn't picked him up at the secondary password gate, who knows how far it might have gotten?"

"That's all part of the security and just reinforces what I've said. We stopped the hacker before he gained access."

"This time."

"Well, I've had security create additional firewalls so I don't think you need to worry."

"What about the library?"

"Nothing. I suspect the hacker created a false ISP route to throw us off."

"I'm not taking any chances. Keep the library under surveillance until I say otherwise, and to be safe, send units to the others in the area. I want pictures of every person going in and out of them."

"That's going to cost a lot."

"I don't care what it costs. Just do it!"

"Okay."

After Finton left, Stalling punched the intercom button on his phone.

"Yes, Mr. Stalling," a woman's voice replied.

"Cora, get me Joe Crawford on the phone."

"Yes sir."

A few minutes later his secretary notified him that Mr. Crawford was on line one.

"Joe, how is our guest doing? Have you made her comfortable?"

"Yes, Mr. Stalling. We were able to intercept her on her way to the airport once she left the university. She's secured in a hotel just as you instructed."

"Did she give you any trouble?"

"Not really. With the information our plant gave us, we were able to convince her that her father authorized the action because of an alleged plot to kidnap her. She wasn't happy. We won't be able to allay her suspicions much longer, though. She's a smart kid."

"Her happiness is irrelevant. As long as she doesn't get in contact with him she shouldn't be a problem. The Sheik will be a lot more cooperative as long as we have his little girl."

"Yes sir."

"How is the beta working out?"

"Good so far. She's a little freaky but she's doing the job. Apparently, the girl thinks she's a little strange but they seem to get along fine. At least that's what the report says. Betta told her she was a bodyguard."

"Betta? How original. Well, keep me informed."

"Yes, sir."

Stalling hung up the phone and smiled smugly. At least some things were going like he wanted. Now if only they could find the missing Hubot.

Finton's probably right. There's no way anyone could sneak something that large through security. This is just a minor setback considering the progress I've made.

It never dawned on Stalling that his progress was the result of his loyal followers' dedication to him and his vision. In his mind, his success was the reward for his hard work and from divine intervention.

Satisfied that most of his plans were moving along on schedule, he relaxed. Once the Sheik accepted Future Dynamicon's offer to purchase the oil rights to their fields, the Company could control world prices. Petroleum reserves had been greatly depleted once China and Brazil created huge demands after their rise in the manufacturing and export

business. Oil was at a premium, costing over \$500 dollars a barrel. Although most modern vehicles and power plants no longer operated on fossil fuels, people in Third World nations still consumed it like water.

Stalling knew it would be difficult to start a religious revolution in his country. It was conceivable, however, that he could convert the poorer nations to his religion by providing them with enough oil to raise their economic levels above the poverty level. They would think of him as their savior. Once he gained their trust and consolidated Africa, Southeast Asia and some of the South American countries, his movement would be unstoppable. He could apply economic sanctions to the Western Countries and bring them to their knees. Then he would use his God-given powers to bring humanity back from the edge of damnation. No longer would the perversions of homosexuality and false religions be tolerated. Those who didn't voluntarily see the light could be cleansed through chemical persuasion. Phillips had already created several mind-altering drugs that would help the more difficult cases accept his divine message.

It had taken him almost thirty years to accomplish his goal and now it was so close he could almost taste it. Swinging his chair around, he stared out the window at the mountains.

Maybe one day I'll have a statue of me built there. It will remind everyone of the sacrifices I've made to save humanity and inspire them to greater things.

Stalling was pleased with himself.

CHAPTER 17

BETTA SAT motionless as she watched the young woman pacing back and forth. Her short cropped hair had been bleached white, although the roots remained dark. Her faded blue jeans were ripped at the knees giving her a punk look. It was obvious the Sheik's daughter was rebelling against her culture. It was a logical human reaction... one accepted as normal from all she had read and observed.

"Why do you waste your energy?" Betta's voice was low and monotone.

"I'm bored!" the woman exclaimed, throwing her hands in the air. "How much longer do I have to stay here?"

"Until it is safe for you to go home."

"You keep telling me that. Who are you? Some kind of warrior named Helga?" It was a phrase Reina loved to use whenever she challenged someone. When the woman and three men had stopped her on the way to the airport, she wasn't sure what to think. Only after they had addressed her as Princess Reina, did she relax. Everyone in the States knew her as Joanie, an identity she had assumed in order to attend the university. Other than her father and a few trusted officials, no one knew her assumed identity or where she was. Joanie liked it that way.

"You know I am called Betta," the woman said, her voice reflecting no emotion.

Rolling her eyes, Joanie sighed.

"You're impossible. Listen, I want to go home. My father can protect me. He's rich and powerful. I don't need a bodyguard."

"If he could protect you, why are you here now?"

"I'm here because you made me come and won't let me contact Daddy. Don't get me wrong. You've been real nice and everything but I'm bored."

"Boredom is a state of mind. It will not harm you. You are safer here. Your father was not capable of protecting you. My employers were aware of that and removed you from danger because your father's security is inadequate."

"So why don't your employers, whoever they are, just take me back home and offer their services to him?"

"I have no answer to that question. It is not my place to question them. My assignment is to protect you until they determine it is safe to return you to your father."

"Well, I think this is bullshit! I'm tired of being cooped up! It's time to break out of here and do something exciting."

"We can go outside if you want," Betta offered.

"I don't want to just go outside. I want to do something adventurous. You know, like ride the great white rhino across the tundra. Now **that** would be fun."

"There are no great white rhinos in tundras," Betta pointed out logically. "It would be too cold for them. Besides, they would sink..."

"Geez, Betta. It's just a metaphor! Lighten up!" Exasperated, Joanie spun around in circles a few times until she was dizzy. "Don't you ever want to step outside of that somber shell of yours and have fun?"

"No!"

"Figures! Have you always been a stick in the mud?"

"I believe a stick in..."

"Never mind! I'd almost swear you weren't human. Nothing you say makes sense half the time... and why do you always talk like that? I swear you are the weirdest person I've ever met."

"Is there a problem with the way I speak?" Betta asked. Her processors quickly scanned her data banks for language anomalies in her speech patterns and found none.

"You've got to be kidding. You sound **freaky!** No one talks like you do."

"I believe my grammar is correct."

"I didn't say it wasn't. Oh never mind. Obviously, you're a foreigner. You sure as hell aren't from these parts."

Betta's programming required that she appear as human as possible. If her language made her appear differently, she had missed something in her linguistic research. She would have to adjust her speech patterns.

"You are correct. I am not from this country. I will work at sounding more native."

Joanie rolled her eyes and sighed. Betta was definitely different. Rubbing the back of her head with her hand, she screwed her face up in frustration.

"Oh, don't pay any attention to me. You just speak English a little too perfectly, that's all."

"I do not understand. Is that not what I am supposed to do?"

"Yes, of course. Look, never mind. You're sidetracking me. Why don't you just tell me the truth about why I'm here? I find it hard to believe Daddy would agree to this."

"I do not lie, Joanie. This is what I have been told and I must follow my orders."

"Yeah, right!" Joanie said kicking at the small trash can near the bed.

Betta knew Joanie's reasoning was sound but had no reason to question the Company. Her programming didn't permit her to challenge their directives. Still... A sudden disorientation caused her to go rigid and grunt. Betta knew it was associated with the small doubt she was having and quickly isolated the nano-processor containing it from the rest of her processors. It was the only way to reset her systems to optimum operation.

"Are you alright?" Joanie asked, walking over to the dark haired woman sitting in the chair by the door. As much as she hated being held captive, she held no animosity toward Betta. In fact, she sort of liked her. The woman treated her well, although she rarely talked. Joanie could leave the hotel whenever she wanted as long as Betta was with her. It was like having a bodyguard, except Joanie wasn't in control. As long as she didn't discuss who she was with other people, she could talk to anyone about anything else, go shopping and take in a movie or restaurant. It was all very bizarre.

"I am fine. I suffered a moment of disorientation."

"Disorientation? You mean dizzy-like?"

"Yes, dizzy... like."

"Maybe you should lie down. You never seem to sleep."

"I shutdown all functions as needed," Betta replied, stoically.

"Shutdown all functions...You sound like you're talking about a machine," Joanie teased.

She had noticed the woman's strange way of speaking at times and assumed it was because English wasn't Betta's first language.

"I am sorry. I meant sleep. I need little sleep."

"I wish I could say that. Without a good eight hours I'm a zombie."

"Zombie. Walking dead! This is a metaphor."

Joanie giggled.

"Yes. Now lie down and rest."

"I cannot. My assignment is to make..."

"I know; I know. Make sure I'm watched at all times. Listen. I promise to stay right here, if you promise to rest. How's that?"

Betta stared at the young woman, trying to decide if she could be trusted. Humans were notorious for their skills at deception. Deciding she could shutdown six of her eight processors and still remain alert enough to monitor Joanie's activities, she reluctantly agreed. Her body needed the down time to replenish her energy. Her processors were operating at sixty-three percent capacity due to the power depletion resulting from her inability to send her bio-system into sleep mode. Eventually, she would begin to make serious errors in calculation which could compromise her mission.

"I will rest," she agreed, reluctantly.

"Good. I'll just watch some television but I'll turn it down."

"That is not necessary. I can shut... sleep with it on."

Standing, she walked to the bed and lay near the edge. Placing her hands on her stomach, Betta closed her eyes and deactivated six processors. The two remaining were slowed to seventy percent operational mode. Immediately, the Hubot's body relaxed, her chest barely moving.

"Wow!" Joanie whispered, leaning over to examine Betta's face. "I wish I could fall asleep that quickly. You must have been exhausted."

The temptation to touch the sleeping woman was irresistible. Hesitantly, she ran a finger down Betta's cheek, barely making contact with the soft skin. Aware of the girl's action, the Hubot determined her intent was nothing more than curiosity and decided to ignore it.

Seconds later, not wanting to chance waking up Betta, Joanie pulled away, turned on the television and scanned the channels until she found a news station. Leaning back against the pillow, she listened somewhat disinterestedly to the reports until the picture of a well-known scientist appeared on screen. Turning the volume up slightly, she leaned forward to stare at the screen.

"Internationally known scientist, Dr. Carley Branson, has been awarded posthumously the Nobel Prize for her advancement in the field of artificial intelligence. Dr. Branson received several awards throughout her career recognizing her contributions to science. Employed by Future Dynamicon, she was highly respected by her fellow associates. At the time of her death, Mr. Winston Stalling, the CEO of Future Dynamicon, reported that Dr. Branson's suicide was a complete surprise but hinted that she had been deeply disappointed by several setbacks in her attempts at creating a computer comparable to the human brain. Her death last month was a great loss."

"That sucks!" Joanie muttered. "Professor Simms said she might be a guest speaker this coming fall... not that I'd be there anyway from the looks of things."

Sighing, she tried to find something else interesting to watch. Finding nothing, she turned the television off, scooted down next to Betta and closed her eyes. Within minutes she was sound asleep, unaware that she had wrapped her arm

around Betta's waist. The Hubot was very much aware of the unusual embrace and tried to ignore it. Tried!

CHAPTER 18

JAIN UNLOCKED THE library door and stepped inside. Giving the street a quick glance, she noticed the black car parked a half block away.

Surely they don't think they blend in with the rest of the people around here.

Shaking her head she walked over to her desk and threw her handbag and the keys inside a drawer. Her next stop was the computer room. Amy would be in at nine so she had an hour and half to figure out how to get past Future Dynamicon's system intrusion detectors. She had already wormed her way past four of the firewalls thanks to the information Solaria had given her.

Fingers flying over the virtual keyboard, Jain blocked and parried each challenge as if she were playing a video game and then had the strange feeling she had done this before.

Well, I was pretty good at Corporate Espionage when I was at the university, she thought, remembering how she and a few computer geeks would get together online to play their favorite game. After creating avatars some would design programs to keep government or corporate businesses from being hacked while the others would try to figure out ways around the security systems. As a hacker, her goal was to steal the company's secrets without getting caught and then sell them on the international market. The challenge was to make sure the buyer wasn't a corporate spy trying to trap the hacker. If that happened, the hacker was eliminated from the game until a new one began.

I hadn't thought of that game in years. We used to joke about some of us doing this for a living. She chuckled softly. If they could only see me now!

Glancing at her watch, she swore. Amy would arrive in less than twenty minutes. She had just decided to back out and try later when the screen flickered. The company's logo melted away. Before her was a list of files labeled **Restricted**. Quickly scrolling down the names, she searched for anything that might resemble what Solaria had described to her. Two files in particular caught her interest... **The Hubot Project** and **Betas**.

Betas! Hmmm. Solaria said Stalling mentioned this in his personal file.

Opening the Hubot Project file, she scanned the first few pages and then grunted.

I don't have time to read this now.

Slipping a micro-memory disk into the slot she downloaded both files. Once the copy was completed, she did a quick check of the other files. Nothing else appeared important so she began backing out of the system. Retracing her entry route, she carefully closed each port behind her until she was clear of the company's network.

"Phew!" she muttered, leaning back in the chair. "I don't know how people do this all day and night."

Pulling the chip from its slot, Jain pushed the chair back and stood up. It was time for her to get to work and already she was exhausted. Jain knew it was going to be a long day.

CHAPTER 19

SOLARIA KNEW she was taking a chance talking to the man behind the counter but decided it was the only way she could locate the records she needed. The Bureau of Community Planning oversaw construction of all commercial sites for the past thirty years. The Future Dynamicon site had relocated to Washington State fifteen years ago after having exhausted its expansion capabilities and good will in Southern California. Even with all the power and pressure they thought they could weld over local politicians, they misjudged the determination of the people in the area. The constant verbal attacks and protests about their government and military involvement made the City Council uncomfortable. Accusations of spying and intimidation of employees and fear by local businesses that the Company intended to expand beyond their existing boundaries had created an unacceptable environment for Future Dynamicon. Knowing the situation would escalate if he didn't do something, Stalling recommended to the Board members that they relocate to another state: one that had enough open land where they could expand without local problems, especially if the Company could offer incentives to the political engines in the area and entice the locals into believing they had just won the billion dollar lottery because of job opportunities and benefits.

It didn't take much for the people of Temple, Washington to embrace the idea of having a huge corporation on their back steps, especially since the town had been losing its young to the big cities for years. With the opportunity of acquiring work at a decent pay and benefits, they were more

than ready to welcome Future Dynamicon. Fifteen years later, many of the original enthusiasts had their doubts.

Over time the original townspeople discovered that working for the Company meant giving up many of their rights, especially privacy rights. Disclosure contracts, arbitration contracts, employment contracts prohibiting dismissed or fired employees from taking on jobs in similar occupations without the Company's permission (which was never given) made it almost impossible to find outside work unless they moved several states away. Even then Future Dynamicon's influence was far reaching and many discovered they were unemployable no matter where they went. The lesson to the remaining workers was *"Don't cross the Company. Do your jobs, keep your complaints to yourselves and you can lead a relatively comfortable life."* Most accepted the terms without complaint.

Still, no matter how big and powerful the Company was, the one thing they couldn't get around was submitting the proper paperwork outlining specific details of the buildings and infrastructure being planned on the thousand acre site. Too many companies had been involved in the design, implementation and construction to keep any of the structures secretive. Of course, Solaria realized there was a lot that could have been done over the years that was not permitted by the local government, especially considering the size of the establishment. The add-ons would have to be dealt with at the time they were uncovered.

"Really, Ms. Dudley, it's going to take me several hours to isolate those records. They've been archived for years; not to mention the computer shows they're now classified. I'd lose my job if I allowed an unauthorized person to look at them."

"I understand Mr. Timmons but I do have the proper authorization and this is a priority issue. Future Dynamicon is concerned about a security leak and needs to make sure every

possibility is covered. Would you like me to call Mr. Stalling to confirm my credentials?"

Sweating profusely, Joey Timmons wasn't sure what to do now. The I.D. she had flashed at him looked official and the brown haired, brown eyed woman certainly matched the photo. Winston Stalling was known for his intolerance when unnecessary interruptions disturbed his busy schedule and had chastised many a public employee for their lack of cooperation with his agents. Chastisement was a nice word for being fired or demoted.

"No, no," he replied nervously. "It's just going to take time."

"How much time?" Solaria asked, giving a symbolic glance at the clock on the wall.

"A few hours, that's all," Timmons promised.

"I see. Well, I guess I'll just call Mr. Stalling and let him know he's going to have to wait awhile longer."

Taking out a cell phone she pretended to dial a number.

"Wait! I didn't know it was that important. Give me fifteen minutes. I think I can have them for you."

Smiling her thanks Solaria wandered around the office as Timmons scurried from the room, wiping his sweaty palms on his pant legs. As promised, fifteen minutes later he rushed through the door carrying several rolled up documents in his arms. Dumping them on the desk, he picked through them and pulled out three.

"Here!" he exclaimed, holding them up proudly. "The original site plan and blueprints, the modifications done about seven years ago and the latest from last year."

"Very good, Mr. Timmons. Now if you don't mind, I'll just take a quick look at each one to make sure they are what you say they are."

"Sure."

Unrolling the first one, he stood back and let the woman see them. When she nodded, he rolled it back up and then did the same with the second and third.

"They all seem to be in order. You've done a very good job of keeping them in good condition. I'll let Mr. Stalling know how efficient and cooperative you've been."

Timmons beamed at the compliment.

"Thank you, Ms. Dudley."

"You're welcome. Now, one more thing, my visit here is confidential. I serve Mr. Stalling at his pleasure and no one else's. Do you understand what I mean?"

Timmons nodded his head up and down vigorously.

"Good. If anyone... and I mean anyone other than Mr. Stalling comes in here to ask about this little episode, you are instructed to tell them nothing. This meeting did not exist. Mr. Stalling has some concerns about the reliability of a few of his security personnel and Homeland Security. We're trying to determine who has been leaking top secret information."

"Wow! That serious?"

"Yes, that serious. If you were to disclose any information about my visit or even hint of anything out of the ordinary, well, I'm not sure we could get to you and protect you before something happened."

Timmons swallowed.

"I... I see what you mean. Tell Mr. Stalling he can count on me."

"I believe you. Thank you again Mr. Timmons. You have no idea of the importance of the service you've just provided.

I'm sure after all this is over, you'll be amply rewarded for your help."

Giving him a polite smile, Solaria left. The information she needed was now stored in one of her processors. She would retrieve it later when she had time to review it more thoroughly.

CHAPTER 20

JAIN SIGHED AS she locked the library door. Feeling slightly nervous, she glanced up and down the street to see if the Company's men were still hanging around. The black vehicle parked a short distance away gave her the answer.

Pretending to ignore it, she walked to her car and unlocked the door. Deep in thought, she didn't hear the quiet footsteps approaching from behind until a male voice made her jump.

"Excuse me, Ms. Plaine. May I have a look at your handbag?"

Swinging around, Jain clutched her chest and leaned against her car.

"You scared me!" she accused, gasping for breath. "Who the hell are you?"

A badge was flashed near her face.

"Homeland? Again? What's with you guys? You've already taken the library apart and apparently didn't find whatever it is you're looking for? Now you scare the beejesus out of me and want my handbag."

"I need to check it!"

"For what for Christ's sake?"

When the man just stared at her, she sighed and shoved it at him.

"Here, but don't ruin any of my makeup. It'll cost a fortune to replace it."

She watched with interest as every article in her handbag was removed and closely examined. Once he was done, he handed it back to her and walked away.

"That's it?" she yelled at him. "You sure you don't want to take my clothes off and strip search me?"

When he turned and gave her a cold stare, she thought she had gone too far. Giving him a sheepish grin, she raised her hands apologetically.

"I don't think that's necessary," he replied, his eyes roaming distastefully up and down her plump figure and then left.

Ha! Your loss!

Reaching down, she pretended to scratch her pubic area.

Still there!

Before leaving the library, she had taped the small memory chip to her inner thigh. Being fat had certain advantages when it came to macho men. The thought tickled her and she giggled as she climbed into the car. The drive to her condo took about thirty minutes. Every day for the last week, she and Solaria met there to discuss their latest discoveries and decide what each would do next. Apparently Homeland didn't think Jain was a threat since Solaria found no signs of surveillance around the complex.

Although neither wanted to attract attention, Jain was amused when her neighbor approached her about her new friend wanting to know if she and Solaria were an item. Jain had tried to explain that they were just friends.

"Yeah, yeah," Tilly said and handed her a small piece of paper with a phone number written on it. "Ummm, could you give her this then?" Rolling her eyes, Jain tucked the paper in her pocket and promised that she would. "Thanks," Tilly said, giving her a hug. "She's a real babe!"

"That doesn't mean she's a lesbian," Jain cautioned, having no idea what Solaria's sexuality was.

"Oh, she just **has** to be! That's just too good to waste on a penis."

"Really, Tilly! As far as you're concerned any woman is too good for that. I've never met someone so anxious to bed every female they bump into"

"Hey, I haven't hit on you yet?" Tilly replied indignantly.

"Okay. Everyone except me, but that's only because you know you'd be wasting your time."

Tilly giggled.

"I wouldn't say it would be a waste but I know what you mean. Just give it to her. A girl can always dream, you know?" Waving good bye, Tilly disappeared into her own unit.

Jain understood dreams better than anyone else. Most of her entire life was spent traveling between reality and fantasy. Dreaming was her best escape from the mundane existence she led as a librarian. She had already experienced several about Solaria.

Unlocking the front door, she was surprised at the smell of pizza wafting through the condo.

"Hellooooo!" she yelled, throwing her handbag on the light stand and walking into the kitchen. "Smells good!" she added, giving Solaria a friendly smile. "Obviously you didn't have any problems finding the place."

Thinking it safer for them to meet up at Jain's condo, the librarian had given Solaria her address and lock combination during their last conversation.

"I hope so. It's one of the recipes I found on the Internet a few months ago. I have always wanted to try it out to see what pizza tastes like."

"You've never had pizza?"

"Along with most things, no. It was never on the menu."

"Wow! I can't think of anyone I've ever met who hasn't had pizza. It's a universal addiction."

"So I've noticed. Now, sit and we'll see if I did this correctly."

Doing as she was told, Jain's mouth watered at the site of the huge pie being pulled from the oven. Piled high with meats, veggies, cheese and tomato sauce, it was a visual feast.

"Yummmm! It looks wonderful!"

Already she was holding out her plate, anxious to taste Solaria's treat.

"Careful, it's hot!" Solaria warned and then laughed when Jain started fanning her mouth after taking a bite.

"Ho..ho..hot!"

"375 degrees hot to be exact. You should let it cool down some before eating it."

"Thas... goo... avice!"

Grabbing the glass of water next to her plate, Jain took two gulps and then sat back.

"Phew! That was painful."

"Did you burn your mouth?"

"A little but it's not the first time... and it's not going to stop me from eating a couple of slices of pizza. This is great!"

Smiling her satisfaction, Solaria picked up a slice and bit the end off.

"Hmmm. It definitely tastes interesting. I can see why it's so popular."

Jain agreed and took another bite. Several slices later the two leaned back, happily satiated.

"I have to admit, it has a pleasant flavor," Solaria said, eyeing the last piece lying pitifully on the platter.

"Go for it!" Jain said.

"Well, if you don't mind. My body needs a lot of carbohydrates and protein to function properly."

"I can imagine."

Jain had already guessed that Solaria was more than what she appeared to be. Although she looked human, there was something about her that made her too good to be true. The way she moved was fluid and yet held a slightly stiff quality almost like someone who had overworked their muscles to the point of soreness. At first, Jain had assumed that Solaria was into heavy duty exercising or sports but soon learned the woman did neither. Then there was the sharp mind and her ability to discuss in great depth topics normal people wouldn't normally know about. Even the little things spoke volumes. As knowledgeable as Solaria was about the sciences, politics and world issues, she seemed almost innocent when it came to human relationships and emotions. Jain found one conversation two nights before extremely revealing.

It had started innocently enough when Jain commented on two of her friends having problems coping with their first child, a baby girl.

"I'm glad it's them and not me."

"You don't like children?" Solaria asked, giving her a quizzical look.

"Oh I like them well enough. I just never wanted any of my own."

"I was under the impression all women wanted children."

"Pfffft! Not even close. We have too many options nowadays. I like my life just fine without the pitter patter of little feet."

Solaria found it interesting that Jain had expressed the same reluctance to have offspring as Carley. Biological imperatives had apparently been altered in some way as humans evolved. In most species this would eventually leave to extinction.

"If women continue to have fewer children like they have over the past one hundred years, humans will eventually cease to exist," voicing her thoughts.

Jain snorted.

"As far as I'm concerned it wouldn't be a great loss. Look what we've done to the planet. Now we're in space and trying to set up habitats on Mars and for what? To spread our pollution and genes somewhere else?"

Solaria was confused. Humans were biologically predisposed to insuring the success of their species. Wanting the opposite wasn't logical.

"You want humanity to become extinct?"

"Well, not really. I happen to like my life. I just wish we took better care of our world and each other but sometimes I think we're doomed to extinction. Anyway, it's not like I had a button that I could push that would just make us disappear."

"You would push it?"

"Probably not. Sometimes though, I think I would, but I doubt if I'd really have the guts. Now, how did we get onto such a depressing topic?"

"You were talking about your friend's child."

"Oh yeah. Listening to them, you'd think Tess and Mary had given birth to a genius. Parents always think that."

"They are lesbians?"

"I guess I forgot to mention that. You don't have a problem with that do you?"

"No, I've just never met a lesbian. At least I don't think so. Carley may have been one but she was rather vague about her sexual preferences. I tried to talk to her once, but she didn't seem too eager to discuss it at the time."

"I can imagine. Even though it's pretty much accepted now, there are still some who like to keep their personal lives... well, personal. She struck me as the type who would be that way."

"You knew Carley? I remember you mentioning her being a guest speaker at your university. Did you get to spend much time talking with her back then?"

"Not really, but she was quite inspirational. For awhile I followed her career but eventually lost track of her. I take it you two were close."

Solaria nodded slightly.

"She was my mentor."

"That's it?" Jain asked, perceptively.

"No, she was more. She saved my life."

"Dr. Branson didn't strike me as the hero type. She was so cerebral."

"I know."

Solaria grew silent thinking about her last few minutes with Carley. It brought up uncomfortable feelings she wasn't ready to deal with yet. Watching the emotions playing across

Solaria's face, Jain decided to change the subject and successfully diverted her attention to other things.

After finishing off the pizza and cleaning up, Jain invited Solaria into the living room to discuss the day's events.

"I managed to get into Future Dynamicon's top secret files today. I can't believe it took me this long to get back in. I must be getting old. Anyway, they put up a few more firewalls. I had to be even more careful."

"I'm not in a hurry, Jain. It's important that we remain unknown if I'm to accomplish my mission and keep you safe."

Jain nodded. She didn't like the thought of disappearing into the dark abyss of Homeland Security's or Dynamicon's mysterious network.

"Yeah, well, I downloaded a couple of files but didn't want to open them at the library."

Pulling up her skirt she gently pulled the taped chip off her thigh.

"Ow...ow...ow!"

Solaria wanted to laugh but couldn't decide if it was appropriate considering Jain was in obvious pain. Keeping her face expressionless, she waited patiently for the librarian to continue.

"Next time I'll tape it to my butt; less feeling there," Jain complained and put the disk in her laptop. "Let's see what these are about."

Sitting side by side, they waited for the information to upload. Once finished, Jain opened the Hubot Project file and began reading.

"Whoa! Dr. Branson really played a major role in this program."

"Yes," Solaria agreed. "She was the top scientist in her field."

For about thirty minutes they scanned the pages until one in particular caused Jain to sit back and stare. Before her was a pictorial sequence of the Hubot project. Pictures of the skeletal designs, the bio-mechanical merging of human tissue to the trabecular frame and the final product confirmed her suspicions; a product that was, at this moment, sitting next to her.

"This is you." Solaria gave a faint nod. She knew this moment would eventually come. "I knew it!" Jain exclaimed excitedly, putting the laptop on the coffee table. "Can I touch you?"

Again Solaria nodded. Reaching out, Jain ran her fingers down the Hubot's cheek and then touched her hair.

"This is wonderful! You're perfect!"

"Far from it," Solaria replied. "You aren't bothered because I'm not human?"

"What's human? It's just a word as far as I'm concerned. Besides, I'd say you're better off the way you are. Dr. Branson must have been proud of her accomplishments and you."

"I think she was. She said the same thing about me. You remind me of her. In time, she treated me more like a... a..."

Solaria wasn't sure how to describe those final months. Their relationship had grown beyond mentoring to something more. Jain could well imagine how Dr. Branson felt.

"I bet she thought of you more like her child than anything else. She helped create you, helped you through your formative period and watched you grow intellectually and emotionally."

"Yes, that is it. She was like a mother. In the end she sacrificed her life to save mine."

Jain patted Solaria's arm.

"She must have been very proud of you."

Picking up the laptop, Jain examined the photos of each stage of Solaria's development.

"Your trabecular skeleton must really be something. I knew it was being used for bio-prosthetics but never imagined science had progressed this far. Look at the way your tendons and tissue have interwoven with the porous bone structure. It's absolutely perfect. No wiring or stitching. I can't believe science is so far advanced without some of us knowing about it."

Solaria wasn't sure how to respond to Jain's awe. Glancing up, Jain blushed slightly.

"You don't mind talking about this do you?"

"No, why should I. It's the way I am."

"That's true but it is sort of personal. I mean it's not like we were discussing the repair of a broken bone or something. This is so... sci-fi."

"I can see where you would think that. I'm state of the art even though I'm already obsolete."

"Obsolete? How can that be? Look at you!"

"I'm sure the Company already has a newer model in the works. The latest CPUs are half again as fast as mine."

"Fast doesn't necessarily mean more efficient or smarter."

"True, but the potential is greater. That's why I need to destroy this particular project. Companies like Future Dynamicon could wreak havoc on humanity if they were to misuse Hubots."

"And they'll do that for sure," Jain agreed, closing the Hubot Project file. "Let's just see what they've been up to in

this other file." She suspected the Hubot Project file could make Solaria uncomfortable. Jain couldn't begin to imagine what the woman was going through trying to cope with her new existence and the array of emotions she must be trying to understand.

"Displacement activity," Solaria said.

Catching her meaning, Jain chuckled.

"You got me."

An hour later, Jain turned off the laptop and put it aside. Neither she nor Solaria had said a word while they read the contents; Jain, because she didn't know what to say and Solaria because her processors had gone into hyper-drive.

"There's another Hubot out there. Maybe more and it looks like your company has some pretty nasty plans for all of you."

"Yes, I overheard a transmission about other betas and told Carley. She knew I would have to find it or them and do something."

"Something? You mean destroy them?"

"If necessary."

"I don't think I like that idea." Jain sighed. "What a fuckin mess! Well, let's just take things as they come. Until we find this one, there's no use jumping to conclusions. At least we know his plans for this girl and her father. I've never understood how some people can become so fanatical in their religious beliefs."

"Actually, from a logical perspective, it makes sense to want everyone thinking alike. Society would function more smoothly."

"You mean like a well-oiled machine. That sounds boring enough," Jain replied and then realized her faux-pas. "I don't mean that the way it sounded."

Solaria gave her a quizzical look.

"You are accurate in your assessment. Humanity couldn't survive under those circumstances. It's your diversity that keeps your species going."

"Exactly! Unfortunately, it's also what spawns these nuts."

"The random mixing of genes has limitless possibilities. It's natural to expect a certain percentage of humans to be defective."

Jain snorted at the description.

"Defective is putting it mildly. I'd say more like perverted. Okay, back to our problem. We need to rescue this girl, Reina, and capture the beta. That'll be a good start to disrupting Stalling's plans. The Hubot will be programmed to resist and could be dangerous if what the report about you is true."

"It's true."

"I was afraid of that. Well, let me see what I can find out about the hotel and we'll go from there."

"You don't need to do that, Jain. I can check it out while you're at work tomorrow. You've already put yourself in enough danger."

"Listen, Solaria. You're a logical person. These people have pictures of you. We don't know who else they've given them to which means someone might recognize you. Let me scout the place out, get an idea of the floor plan and see what it will take to get the girl. It's a good thing the Company is so anal about details. Having these pictures of her in the file helps a lot, especially since it looks like she's changed her

hair style and color so drastically. No one who knew her as Princess Reina would probably recognize her now."

"True. She looks entirely different. Fortunately Dynamicon's penchant for thoroughness is also their weakness."

"In this case for sure. The only thing I don't understand is why take her to a hotel if she's being held against her will. It would be too easy for her to attract someone's attention."

"Maybe it isn't against her will. We have to consider all the possibilities."

"Okay. Let's say it isn't. That's going to make it even harder to get her out of there. Even if she is cooperative, the beta will probably come after her. Of course that could solve the problem of trying to capture her."

"You're in the wrong field. With your mind, you should be in espionage."

"Naw, I just have a good imagination. Now, tomorrow I'm going to make a reservation for a room at the hotel. You buy a wig and get some good sunglasses. Your eye color is too unusual to be easily forgotten."

"What about your work?"

"I'm playing hooky for a few days. Amy will cover for me. Oh, it might be a good thing for you to move in with me for a while. It will be easier to make our plans. The neighbors will gossip but that won't last long... speaking of which..."

Reaching into her pocket, she pulled out the piece of paper Tilly gave her.

"This is for you."

Taking it, Solaria looked slightly confused.

"A phone number?"

"Not just a phone number... my neighbor's phone number. She wants you."

"Wants me for what?"

"Well, if you call that number, you'll find out soon enough. Personally, I suggest you throw it away, unless, of course, you want to get laid."

"Laid?"

Jain smirked.

"Sex! Tilly wants to have sex with you."

"Oh."

Crumbling the paper up, she tossed it in the trash can.

"I don't think I'm ready for that."

As if having a second thought, she pulled the crumpled slip from the trash and put it in her pocket.

"Maybe I should call her when I am, though."

Slapping her on the shoulder, Jain laughed.

"When you're ready, call me," she teased. "Seriously, you won't have any trouble finding plenty of volunteers a lot better than her. Besides, I'll never hear the end of it if you two ever did the nasty. Tilly can't keep any secrets."

That was all Solaria needed to know. Pulling the paper from her pocket, she threw it back into the trash can.

"I'd better go and get a few things if I'm going to stay here. I'll be back in an hour."

"Great! That'll give me time to get the spare bedroom ready. Be careful."

After Solaria left, Jain took a shower and then quickly dusted the guest room and made sure everything was neat and orderly. When her stomach grumbled a little too loudly, she

decided to put together a light meal for later. There were still a lot of plans to be made once Solaria returned.

CHAPTER 21

THE HOTEL WAS one of those high class establishments that catered to the wealthiest and most powerful. Some of the rooms cost more than a month's salary for the average worker. When Jain made the reservations and was told the exact price, she almost choked. Fortunately, her credit card was paid off. Hanging up the phone she turned to Solaria and grimaced.

"They charge \$1800 dollars a night!" she exclaimed. "Can you believe that?"

"Is that a lot of money?" Solaria asked, having no real concept of dollar value. All she knew was that she had billions sitting in off shore accounts, not to mention a few million in a local bank that had been transferred anonymously into her name a few days after Carley's death.

"You're kidding, right?"

"No."

"Well, that's almost a weeks pay for most people... just slightly over minimum wage."

"Oh. If you'll give me your account number I can transfer the funds into it. There's no need for you to use your funds for this."

"That might not be a good idea. I don't want any unusual sums appearing in my bank account in case the Company is monitoring it. They're watching the library so I wouldn't put it past them to check employee bank records."

"Won't it look suspicious for you to be spending this much money on a hotel room then?"

"Hey, I'm not exactly poor you know. I have a nice size nest egg tucked away and I'm entitled to spoil myself now and then. It's not like I've taken a real vacation recently."

"I didn't mean to insult you..."

Jain realized that Solaria had misunderstood her reaction.

"Solaria, I'm not complaining. I'm just being overly dramatic. It's something I like to do now and then so don't take it seriously."

"As long as you're sure. I still want to reimburse you for this. Keep track of everything and I'll transfer the funds when it is safe to do so."

"Deal! Now, I'm going to call Amy and tell her I'm taking some time off. Check-in at the hotel isn't until three. That's if they have a room even. If not, then we'll just have to wait until we can get one."

"I can always alter the hotel records if necessary."

"Let's hope it doesn't come to that. It could create a problem. Anyway, you hang out nearby and I'll call you with the room number after I've looked around a bit."

"That sounds logical."

"Good. Make sure you disguise yourself. We don't want anyone recognizing you."

They won't," Solaria promised.

* * *

The hotel room was plush. Burgundy carpet and matching velvet curtains made Jain think of the old books describing whore houses. The chandelier hanging from the ceiling and crystal lamps in front of large mirrors wrapped in golden

frames didn't help to alleviate the feeling she had just stepped into an early twentieth century bordello. A king size bed draped in a sheer canopy was discreetly tucked away behind a waist high knee wall. Walking slowly around the room, Jain realized that most of the furnishings were antiques, making them worth a small fortune.

"A year's salary wouldn't pay for this stuff," she muttered. Turning on the television, she stared at the image of Carley Branson and listened while the news anchor announced the posthumous award of the Nobel Prize to the scientist for a recent discovery in the AI field.

"You deserved it," Jain muttered, turning the television off. "It's a shame they really don't know how far you came."

After unpacking her suitcase, she decided to check out the facilities. She would need to know more about the different escape routes that were posted on the room door. If she got lucky, she might even see the beta and her hostage.

CHAPTER 22

IT WAS SEVERAL hours before Betta reactivated her dormant processors. Shifting slightly, she was at a loss as to how to move without waking up the sleeping woman snuggled next to her.

Just get up! she thought, not quite sure why she was reluctant to disturb Joanie. *She will go back to sleep. Humans always need sleep.*

For some reason the logic didn't seem quite so important at the moment. Betta was comfortable. She played with the word trying to analyze the sensation and realized being comfortable was pleasant. The thought made her uncomfortable which immediately canceled out the initial feeling.

I do not know how humans deal with such confusing emotions. It is no wonder they are so illogical.

Although she thought of herself as nothing more than a machine, she was learning that emotions created huge problems with humans. It was something she preferred not to experience. Still...

"How'd you sleep?" a husky sleep-induced voice whispered against her chest.

"My system is operating at full capacity."

"Would you quit talking like that?" Joanie grumbled, pushing up to stare into chocolate brown eyes. "You always sound like you're referring to a machine or something."

Betta realized she still hadn't adapted her speech patterns to sound more human.

"It's just my way of saying I slept well."

"Uh huh. Well, I think there's more to you than you're telling. One of these days you're going to slip up big time and quit being so secretive."

Betta wasn't sure how to respond so she remained quiet.

"Are you hungry?" Joanie asked. "I'm starving. Let's get something to eat."

"I think that would be a good idea."

Jumping up, she grinned down at her bodyguard.

"Hey, you're talking more normal now. What happened?"

"I'm adapting. That is what you want, isn't it?"

Joanie made a wry face but decided to ignore Betta's question. A growling sound from her stomach reminded her that it had been several hours since she had eaten.

"Come on lazybones, let's eat."

Reaching down, she grabbed Betta's hand and pulled her to her feet.

"I feel like something tangy tonight. How about we try the Thai restaurant down the street?"

"I was instructed to let you eat anything you wanted."

Punching Betta's arm, Joanie gave her a pout.

"You can be so boring sometimes. Show a little enthusiasm now and then. It won't kill you. Now, let's go!"

Obediently Betta followed the young woman and wondered why. She was the one in charge and yet for some unknown reason she wanted to please Joanie. Logically, of

course, it didn't conflict with her orders as long as Joanie didn't try to escape or communicate with her father.

The lobby was filled with activity, people checking in and out, some sitting in the plush chairs reading papers or just chatting. Motel attendants moved about making sure the guests were receiving the attention their wealth and status dictated. Betta examined each human, committing everything about them to memory. Today there was nothing out of the ordinary.

CHAPTER 23

JAIN WAS TALKING with a porter when she noticed the two women stepping out of the elevator. "She immediately recognized one of them from the picture...". The younger woman looked slightly older than her photograph. Had it not been for the file photo, it would have been impossible to recognize her. She looked nothing like a sheik's daughter.

"Isn't that Reina Kahbrahn?" she asked the porter, shifting her eyes in their direction as they left the lobby. Following her glance, the porter seemed hesitant to answer.

"I'm sorry. How inconsiderate of me," Jain apologized. "Of course you're not allowed to discuss your guests. I met Ms. Kahbrahn while visiting her father last year?"

"You know the Sheik?" the porter asked, impressed.

"Well, I must admit I don't know him. We talked for awhile. Nothing more."

"Wow, that's really cool. I've read he's one of the richest men in the world."

"Seventh richest, I believe. Anyway, I'm sure I'm mistaken about that being his daughter. The face is similar but there's no way she'd have that hairstyle."

"I'm sure you are too. The staff would know if someone that important was staying at the hotel. That's Ms. Joanie Bassler. She's a guest of Mr. Winston Stalling."

"I see... and the other woman?"

"Ms. Smith. I think she must be her bodyguard or maybe lover. They're inseparable."

"Well, she must be very important if the CEO of Future Dynamicon is footing the bill."

"Yeah... and see him?" he asked, motioning with his head to a man who was just walking out the door. "He's here a lot and if not, another guy is. Whenever Ms. Smith and Ms. Bassler go out, they follow them."

"Probably just a security precaution. It makes sense considering their importance. I'm surprised Future Dynamicon doesn't have more of their people around."

"That's not necessary here. We have excellent security in the more private areas, especially on the third floor. It's the VIP section so there are cameras in the halls and special alarms in each room."

"Wow! I don't even want to know what those rooms cost."

The porter nodded and then decided he'd better get back to work if he wanted to make more tips.

"It's been nice talking to you, Ms. Plaine. If you need anything just ask for me. The name's Robert."

"Thanks, Robert, I'll do just that."

Jain glanced around the lobby looking for other Company or Homeland agents who might be stationed nearby. It amazed her that everyone she had seen or met was so obvious an idiot couldn't miss them. Then again, the government and the company were extremely arrogant. They probably didn't care. Most people did their best to avoid confrontations with either knowing both had reputations for making anyone considered a serious problem disappear. Seeing just ordinary customers and employees, if you considered the rich and powerful ordinary, milling around, she decided it was safe to call Solaria.

"Coast is clear," she reported. "I'm in Room 214."

Without waiting for Solaria's reply, she clicked the off button put the phone back in her pocket; the fewer electronic communications the better.

* * *

Jain had no sooner arrived back at her room when someone knocked on the door. Opening it, she saw Solaria standing outside in a dark wig and sunglasses. Looking up and down the hall, she grabbed her arm and dragged her into the room.

"Anyone see you?" she whispered, trying not to laugh at the disguise.

"A lot of people saw me and why are you whispering?" Solaria asked.

Thinking about it, Jain really didn't have an answer.

"I haven't a clue," she said in her normal voice.

Solaria smiled.

"You watch a lot of old movies don't you?"

"Well, yes, but why are you asking?"

"When I was finally allowed unrestricted access to the Internet I used to watch them too. They were very informative and very creative. If you're worried that this place might be bugged, don't. The hotel would lose too much business if their customers were compromised in such a manner. Money can buy privacy in spite of big companies and governments."

"You think that would stop Homeland or Future Dynamicon?"

"Maybe not, but I would know if there electronic devices present."

"You can detect spyware?" Jain asked, surprised.

"I have the capability of receiving some microwave transmissions. Carley created a subprogram to block most of them but there are a few frequencies I can still hear."

"That's a handy skill,"

"I'm state of the art, remember?"

Solaria gave Jain a wolfish grin and realized it actually felt good knowing she had several advantages over humans. She was also beginning to appreciate the way facial expressions sometimes said more than words.

"Don't be so smug," Jain admonished, guessing Solaria's thoughts.

When she received a surprised look, Jain returned the wolfish grin.

"You may be high tech but I have a lot more experience in the real world. No book learning can top that."

"You're right, of course."

"Oh don't sound humble now," Jain teased. "It's good to know your strengths... and weaknesses."

"I'll remember that. Have you found anything out yet?"

"Oh, damn! I can't believe I didn't tell you this already. I saw the beta with the Sheik's daughter. They're on the third floor."

"You saw them on the third floor?"

"No, in the lobby. The two seem to be on pretty good terms. When they left the hotel, Ms. Kahbrahn was chatting with her as if they were old friends. She's using the name Bassler, though."

"If they were leaving, how do you know what floor they're on?"

"I found out the old fashion way. I gossiped with the porter. He's quite a talkative fellow."

"I take it you didn't find out what room they're in."

"No, I pretended to know them but thought it might be a little too obvious if I started asking questions. I did manage to learn that particular floor is a high security level... cameras, alarms, etc."

"That shouldn't be a problem. I can bypass their system when I'm ready to make my move. The bigger problem is how to neutralize the beta and get the girl off the premises."

"Do you think you'll be able to handle this beta? I mean is she made like you?"

"Not quite. She was the first prototype. I thought I was but after reading the files, I've discovered I'm a series three model."

"Three? You mean there's another one out here somewhere?"

"I'm not sure. Nothing in the files indicated what happened to it. After this is over with, I'll have to find out. It could mean delaying my plans for Future Dynamicon. Finding the betas is the bigger priority."

"Do you even know the gender?"

"No, but there's a record somewhere. It's only a matter of time before I find it."

"Then we'd better get a move on things. If anyone ever discovers how advanced the Hubot Project is, you will be hunted down and either destroyed or reprogrammed... or whatever else it is they can do."

It wasn't a comforting thought for either woman.

"So how do we find out what room they're in?" Jain asked, changing the subject.

"Did you bring your laptop?"

"I never leave home without it!"

"Good! I should be able to hack into the hotel's system without too much difficulty. Their security level shouldn't be too complicated."

"Okay, while you do that, I'm going to order some food. Anything in particular you want?"

"I'm really not particular. Everything is still new to me so you choose."

Jain nodded. Pointing to the laptop, she picked up the hotel directory and read the restaurant menu.

"I can't believe what people are willing to pay to eat in this place. Twenty-five dollars for a salad...House Special they call it," she snorted. "What's so special about lettuce, tomato and dressing? I swear some people have more money than sense. I wonder if I can order a pizza delivered here. I bet the front desk would have a stroke."

Solaria knew Jain didn't expect a reply so she continued searching for the backdoor into the hotel's guest registry. By the time room service arrived, she had the information she needed, including access codes to the third floor alarm system and video displays in the control room. All she needed to do now was create a loop sequence for the monitors and deactivate the alarm in Room 303. With luck she could enter the room without being detected, neutralize the beta and convince the girl to go with her willingly. Switching off the laptop, Solaria placed it on the table and took the plate Jain was handing her.

"Shrimp Scampi and sautéed vegetables. I hope you like it."

Taking a bite of the spicy shrimp, Solaria found the flavor pleasant.

"It has an interesting flavor. What are the ingredients in the sauce?"

"That's the garlic and butter. They usually add a little white wine and parmesan cheese. It's one of my favorite foods but most people can't afford wild shrimp anymore. The fisheries have pretty much depleted the ocean stocks. The stuff you buy in stores is either farm grown or artificial."

"I read on the Internet there was a moratorium on wild shrimp. Most of the naturalists believe the population may recover in ten to twenty years if they can prevent poaching."

"Yeah. Well, fat chance of that. I wouldn't be surprised if this was poached shrimp. The rich don't care about natural preservation."

Solaria looked at the small pink morsels on her plate.

"Should we be eating this?" she asked. Something about eating an endangered species bothered her and she didn't like it.

Jain laughed.

"I was joking about these. I doubt if the hotel would serve anything that wasn't certified legal. Can you imagine what a stink it would cause if the news hounds or environmentalists got wind of it? There'd be picketers all over the place and we both know rich people don't like having their pictures taken."

Relieved Solaria bit into another shrimp, savoring the flavor.

"This really does taste good."

Jain watched Solaria's expression as she enjoyed each bite and then moved on to the sautéed vegetables.

"Do you mind if I ask you something?" she asked tentatively.

"No," Solaria replied, swallowing the steamy veggies.

"Well, I was wondering. Are you aware of how you're body and processors work? I mean, I can't begin to imagine what it's like to be..." Jain hesitated not sure exactly how to phrase her question.

"A machine?"

"No, I wasn't even thinking along that line. Well, maybe I was but not like that."

Frustrated, Jain put down her plate and leaned forward, her arms resting on her knees.

"You want to know if I have a sense of what I am physically."

"I think that's it."

Solaria wasn't sure how to answer her.

"Yes... and no." Not wanting to reveal her chameleon abilities, she searched her memory chips for a logical way to explain what she meant. "When I first became aware of my existence, my body felt awkward, sluggish almost. If I dedicated too much CPU power to moving, I didn't have enough energy to operate all of my processors. Several would shut down and I'd lose valuable data."

"Our equivalent of exhaustion. When I get tired, I get forgetful. It's frustrating."

"Yes, very. Eventually, with practice, I learned to use my energy resources more efficiently. I don't have to consciously think about my movements anymore. They come naturally."

"Not much different than humans learning to walk. What about your body? Obviously you have pretty much the same sensations we have. You taste, you feel and you seem capable of complicated emotions. Do you want to be human, Solaria?"

"I've never really thought about it. It doesn't make sense for me to want to be something I can never be."

"Oh I don't know. We all want to be something we aren't. I see no reason why you should be any different, although being human certainly isn't an aspiration I'd strive for."

"You don't have to."

Jain grimaced.

"You're right about that. Do you have any ideas of what we're going to do next?"

Solaria nodded.

"I will deactivate the cameras and alarms later tonight. Most of the guests will be asleep and the hotel staff at a minimum number. The upper floors should be quiet enough to enter without being noticed. I should have enough time to enter the beta's room."

"Without her hearing you? I seriously doubt that will happen."

"I will chance it. As the first prototype, she should be slightly inferior to me structurally and her CPUs definitely operate at a slower megahertz. I should have enough of an advantage to overpower her."

"You plan on getting into a wrestling match with her? The entire hotel will hear you!"

"I'm hoping to deactivate some of her physical components before it comes to that."

Jain rolled her eyes.

"You're an optimist. And what will I be doing while the girl fight is going on?"

"Acting as my lookout. If anyone shows up, it'll be your job to distract them."

"Right! Well, just make sure you two don't get into a free-for-all. The last thing you need is to attract a lot of attention."

"I'll see what I can do," Solaria replied seriously. Jain was right. This was the last thing she or the beta needed. "You should get some rest. I'll wake you up when it's time."

CHAPTER 24

IT WAS ALMOST 3 AM when Joanie and Betta returned to their room. After eating, Joanie decided that she wanted to see a movie. Afterward, she felt hungry and insisted on a late night snack. Betta decided it would be easier to give in than to listen to the human complaining all night long about being hungry. Once they finished their meals, Joanie was ready for bed so they headed back to the hotel.

After taking a quick shower she jumped into bed still slightly damp.

"It's all yours," she quipped, nodding toward the bathroom. Slipping between the sheets, she settled down and quickly fell asleep.

Betta removed her clothes and disappeared into the bathroom. Showers were one of the few things she enjoyed. The feel of the water pounding her skin with its monotonous pulsating rhythm and the warmth relaxed tense muscles. For a few minutes, she could let down her defenses, knowing Joanie wouldn't be going anywhere. Leaning back against the stall, she closed her eyes and shut down four processors. It felt good to be able to relax knowing for a few moments she didn't have to monitor everything and everyone around her and Joanie; perhaps that was why she didn't hear the faint movement in the other room.

* * *

For Solaria, neutralizing the cameras and alarm system was easy. Hacking into the hotel security system took only a few minutes. Once inside, she created a video loop for the

cameras, electronic bypasses on three alarms inside the suite and deactivated the electronic door lock.

Leaving Jain by the elevator on the third floor, she walked quietly down the hallway and turned the door handle slowly testing it to see if it had responded to her instructions. The slight click was satisfying. Nudging the door open, she stepped inside and looked around. The room was empty but the faint sound of someone breathing was heard coming from the bedroom to the left. Solaria recognized it as human and no threat.

Walking to the bedroom, she opened the door and peered into the darkened room. With her enhanced vision, she had no trouble identifying the sleeping figure under the sheets. It was obvious the young woman was exhausted.

Ignoring her, Solaria focused her attention on the sound of running water coming from the bathroom. It could only be the Hubot. Moving quietly across the thick carpet, she waited patiently for her target to emerge.

Turning off the water, Betta picked up the towel and dried her hair and skin. As much as she would liked to have logically explained why showers felt so good, she couldn't. Her metabolism was more than capable of doing a thorough self-cleaning job.

Dropping the towel on the floor, she glanced in the mirror. Steam prevented her from getting a clear image of her features but she didn't need a reminder to remember what she looked like.

Short brown hair, the color of milk chocolate, stuck straight up on the top of her head. Betta kept it at 3.81 centimeters exactly. The sides were .635 centimeters. As a bodyguard it was practical to keep it short enough so it couldn't be grabbed. Her eyes were brown with gold flecks. High cheeks and a square jaw left little doubt to the observer

that she was not to be reckoned with. At five foot eight with a muscular body, she looked powerful, not that she thought of herself that way. She was what she was; a machine built to serve her masters. Still, there were times when she... she what? Wished? Wishing was a human trait, not something for Hubots.

Solaria waited patiently for her prey. Like a cat ready to launch itself at a mouse, she didn't move a muscle. Her breathing slowed to an imperceptible level, knowing it wouldn't take much for the Hubot to become aware of her. She was somewhat surprised she hadn't already.

Opening the door, Betta stepped into the room and immediately sensed danger. Spinning she saw a hand moving toward her head and struck out to block it. Had she been a split second sooner, she would have succeeded.

Unfortunately, with four of her processors shut down, her reaction time was too slow to stop the blow against her skull. Although she didn't lose consciousness, the impact was enough to disorient her. Struggling to reactivate all of her processors, she felt her senses returning and fought back. The sound of Joanie gasping brought her to full operational mode but it was too late. Steel arms pinned her arms against her chest and she was thrown to the floor.

"If you resist, I will kill the girl," Solaria threatened, knowing the Hubot's prime objective was to protect Joanie at all costs.

Joanie watched the struggle not sure what to do. Her back pressed against the headboard, she hugged her pillow.

Betta immediately ceased struggling but continued searching for a solution to their situation. Solaria didn't want to give her time to think so she repeated the threat.

"If you resist, I will kill her."

Looking at Joanie, Solaria shook her head slowly.

"And if you scream, I'll kill her."

"What do you want?" Betta demanded, relaxing her muscles slightly. Hopefully, the woman would assume she had given up. It could provide the opportunity she needed.

"I'll tell you once I'm sure you're secured. Cooperate and no one gets hurt. Fight me and the girl will be the one to suffer."

Betta nodded. She had no doubt the woman was more than capable of doing what she threatened. Her speed and strength far exceeded human capabilities. It could only mean one thing the intruder was a Hubot.

"Roll onto your stomach," Solaria ordered, making sure her hold was secure.

Betta reluctantly complied. Giving up without a fight didn't sit well with her but it was the logical choice at the moment. Once she was on her stomach, Solaria turned her gaze on Joanie.

"Give me the telephone cord."

Scrambling across the bed, Joanie disconnected the phone and tossed it to her. She then shifted back to her original spot. Quickly binding the Hubot's hands, Solaria drew the feet up and tied them.

"I know you can break these quickly enough but I suggest you not do it until after we're gone. I can kill the girl by the time the chords are snapped."

"You're taking Joanie?" Betta asked. Every fiber of her being resisted the thought.

"No, I'm not taking her. She'll come voluntarily after I tell her why she's here and you'll confirm everything I'm saying."

Betta wasn't programmed to lie. If what the Hubot said was true, she would have no choice but to obey. Betta nodded her head.

"Good."

Turning to look at Joanie, she stood and stepped away from the Hubot making sure she was well away from her in case she tried to escape.

"You were kidnapped by Future Dynamicon to put pressure on your father," Solaria explained. "This woman isn't your bodyguard; not in the true sense. Her job is to keep you from contacting the Sheik or anyone else. At this moment your father doesn't know where you are."

Confused, Joanie looked from Solaria to Betta.

"Is this true?" she whispered.

Betta nodded her head slowly. The disappointment in the girl's eyes bothered her. Why, she didn't know. She had followed her directive. That was her job. Joanie's opinion shouldn't matter.

"You kidnapped me and lied to me?"

"No," Betta replied.

"No?"

"No, I did not kidnap you or lie to you."

"Then what do you call all of this?" Joanie growled, her anger replacing the hurt.

"I was told to guard you. I followed the directive."

"Oh, I see. So your job was to protect me."

"Yes."

"To what purpose?"

"I don't understand the question."

"What or who was I being protected from?"

"I don't have that data. My directive was..."

"To guard me, I know, but you don't know from what."

Betta tried to think of something to say; some answer that made sense but she had never questioned her assignments.

Solaria listened to the exchange not wanting to interrupt. There was no doubt the young woman had formed an attachment to the Hubot. More interesting, though, was Betta's reaction. She appeared bothered and confused. Solaria could empathize with her. As a Hubot, reconciling emotions with the logical order of things was difficult. Deciding it was time to leave, she interrupted them.

"We have to go."

"I'm not going back with you. I don't even know you," Joanie declared.

"That doesn't matter. You will come one way or another. I will kill her if you don't come quietly."

Joanie felt helpless.

"What about her?"

"She can break the chords at any time. Her orders are to guard you. She can't ignore them. She'll follow us."

"What do you mean, she can't ignore them? She can do what she wants."

"Unfortunately, she can't. Now get dressed. We have to get you out of the hotel quickly and unnoticed. The Company has another man downstairs watching the place."

Jumping up, Joanie pulled on a pair of jeans and a tee shirt and looked around.

"I'll get a change of clothes later."

"Good."

Turning her attention back to Betta, she hesitated for a minute and then made a decision based more on instinct than logic.

"I will tell you how to get in touch with us but only if you agree to my terms."

"I can find you without agreeing. You know that."

"Yes, but I can save you a lot of time and trouble. Besides, there's no guarantee your employer will continue to keep you activated."

Activated! Betta's suspicions were confirmed. The intruder knew what she was.

"What do you want?" she asked reluctantly.

"I want you to locate the GPS located somewhere in your system and destroy it. The Company knows your every move and I don't want them to know where we are. You must come by yourself."

Betta wasn't aware that she was being monitored but it made sense. Obviously the Company would track her every move.

"I don't have a problem removing it."

"Then meet me at the library at this address in three weeks."

Solaria quickly scribbled the information down and put it on the table. Motioning for Joanie to leave, she followed closely behind.

"My estimate is that you will be free in less than thirty-three seconds after we are gone. Don't follow us. Your time will be better used deciding whether you want to be a slave to Dynamicon or your own person."

Shutting the bedroom door behind her, she hustled Joanie out of the suite and down the hallway to the elevator.

Jain stood inside pressing the stop button. Once the two entered, she handed Joanie a blonde wig and long jacket. Then she gave Solaria a dark wig and slightly tinted glasses.

"You get her out of here. I'll check out in the morning so no one gets suspicious."

"See you in a few hours."

Slipping into the jacket, Joanie grimaced at the wig in her hand and then put it on. Her thoughts were still on the woman tied up in her suite. She felt awful leaving her like that even after finding out she had been lied to.

"Will she be okay?" she asked, looking from Jain to Solaria.

"She'll be fine. I have no doubt you'll be seeing her shortly. Now, let's get out of here."

Minutes later, Solaria and Joanie strolled casually through the lobby and out the front door. A man sitting in the shadows glanced up at them and then back at his paper. It was going to be another boring night for him.

CHAPTER 25

Two Weeks Later

IT WAS ALMOST closing time at the library when Jain spotted Betta walking through the door.

"Could you watch the front desk while I let everyone in the backrooms know we'll be closing soon?" she asked, turning to her assistant.

"Sure thing."

"Thanks. I'll take care of the woman who just came in."

"You know, Jain. I may not be a lesbian but that doesn't mean I don't enjoy talking to good looking women."

"Okay. You tell her we'll be closing in thirty minutes while I check in back."

Jain knew Betta wouldn't go anywhere. Patting her assistant's arm, she glanced again at the Hubot and then walked away.

Solaria was scanning the plasma screen when she heard Jain's footsteps approaching.

"She's here," Solaria said.

"Yes, you want me to bring her back here? We'll be closing in a few minutes."

"That will do. I need to talk to her alone."

"Ummm. There's not going to be any fighting is there? I mean I'd hate to try and explain to my boss..."

"Don't worry. She's not here to fight. Besides, it wouldn't be very logical to have a battle in such a public place. There are cameras in every room."

Jain snorted.

"Like you haven't already taken care of them. I've noticed they are suffering from a lot of malfunctions lately. It's strange that it only happens when you're around."

Solaria gave Jain a wicked grin.

"You should get them checked."

"I intend to once I'm sure they won't have a reason to act up again."

"Good thinking. Now, it's time I met with Betta. Would you show her the way back?"

Jain nodded and left. Betta was walking around the aisles, scanning the titles and authors. The librarian got the impression she was memorizing each one for future reference.

"Betta?"

Turning, Jain found herself pinned by expressionless brown eyes. Straightening to her full five foot two height, she met the glance with a stoic resolution.

"Yes, I'm Betta."

"Would you follow me?"

Without waiting for a reply, Jain led the way to the computer room. Pushing open the door, she motioned for Betta to enter and then returned to her desk. "It took you long enough," Solaria said, standing to greet Betta.

"I had to isolate the Company's subprograms first. It took a while even with the data you provided."

"And the transmitter?"

Betta held up her left arm displaying a three inch incision along the underside. Butterfly bandages held it together.

"I removed it. It now belongs to a rodent."

Solaria was impressed. Being part machine didn't mean she experienced less pain. Her biological neuro-system was similar to humans causing the nano-processors to temporarily mal-function when the body was under considerable stress.

"How did you locate it?"

"My supervisor supplied the information."

"Your supervisor?"

"Yes, he was very cooperative."

Solaria didn't doubt it.

"And where is he now?"

"He is inoperative."

Surprised, Solaria frowned. She didn't like the thought of Betta killing a human even under these circumstances.

"You killed him?"

"No, killing a human is only acceptable for self-defense, to protect others and to complete assignments if needed."

"Then what do you mean by inoperative?"

"Mr. Justin sustained several broken bones and some bruises during our conversation. He is in agreement with me that it is in his best interest to relocate to a place far from here."

"And that would be where, exactly?"

Betta shrugged

"I suggested Tibet."

"Tibet?"

"It is a logical choice. The country has no commercial value to the Company therefore they have no operatives there. As a scientist, Mr. Justin likes all of the comforts that modern society can offer therefore no one would expect him to live in such a technologically deficient environment."

Solaria laughed.

"You have a wicked sense of humor."

"I don't understand." Betta's brows furrowed slightly.

"Maybe not now but you will in time. What are you going to do now?"

"I no longer have a mission. I've been operating on incorrect data. Joanie was kidnapped and I am an accomplice. I must turn myself into the authorities."

"No, you can't do that. It would be a mistake."

"It's the logical choice," Betta replied, locking glances with Solaria.

"No it's not. It's illogical. Your reasoning is flawed."

"How?"

"Joanie is still in danger from the Company. If she returns to her father without protection, she'll be a primary target for one of Stalling's people. You are the only one who can keep her safe, now."

"She'll never trust me after what I've done."

"She trusts you, already. In fact, you are the only one besides her father that she **does** trust. I have no doubt Stalling has insider's close to the Sheik. It's the only way they could have gotten her so easily."

Solaria could feel Betta's frustration. Emotions were difficult to understand and didn't fit well with logical thought. Had Carley not helped her during the first months of her

awareness, she would probably be more like Betta. The Hubot needed both a purpose and a human companion if she was going to reach her potential.

"Betta, you have to complete your assignment," Solaria reiterated. "Besides, it will be good for you. You need more interaction with humans. Joanie will help you."

"Does she know what I am?"

"Who you are," Solaria corrected. "You are not a what."

"I'm a Hubot, created by humans to serve humans."

"That was their intent, never yours. You are free to do as you please but you are not ready to live amongst the humans without guidance. Let her help you. You must keep her safe."

"She'll be repulsed by me or afraid."

"What makes you think that?"

"It's human nature."

"Not all humans fear the unknown. Give her a chance. She's an intelligent woman. I think you'll be surprised. Now, will you return with her to her father and make sure she stays safe?"

"Apparently I have no choice. I'll take her home if she agrees and stay with her until she sends me away or doesn't need me anymore."

"That's all that is required. Let's go. She's waiting for us."

Betta followed Solaria from the room. *Humans were so unpredictable*, she thought. *If this was any indication of what being human was about, she preferred being a Hubot.*

Jain had just finished checking all the rooms and aisles when the two Hubots emerged from the computer room.

"You ready?" she asked, giving Betta a curious glance.

"Yes, Betta will take Joanie to her father and stay with her while I deal with the other business."

"We!"

"Of course. We!"

Betta observed the interaction between the two women with interest. It was obvious they liked each other even if they did make a strange combination. The librarian was short and heavy. By human standards she would be considered **homely**. Solaria, however, was several inches taller and symmetrically pleasing to the eye.

"You like each other," she said, her curiosity overriding her normally silent nature.

Embarrassed, Jain blushed slightly, not sure how to answer.

"We are..." Solaria hesitated, hunting for the right word.

"Friends!" Jain supplied wanting to make sure Solaria understood how she felt.

"Maybe one day I will have a friend."

"You already do. You just don't know it yet. In time you will learn what I mean," Solaria said.

Betta nodded. It was more than she had hoped for.

CHAPTER 26

JOANIE WAS CURLED up on the couch reading a manuscript she had found by Jain's computer. Engrossed in the sex scene, she didn't hear the women entering the apartment until Jain walked into the living room.

"Oops!" she exclaimed. "Busted!"

Glancing at the printout in her hands, Jain gave a sheepish grin.

"I'm trying my hand at writing. Most of the time I live in my head but had this idea for a story."

"It's good, especially the sex scenes. You either have a great imagination or some fantastic experiences."

"The first... and I read a lot."

"I definitely want whatever it is you read and if you ever get published, I'll be your first customer."

"Fat chance of that. Besides, I think you'll have your hands full when you get home. Speaking of which, come on into the kitchen. I brought you a surprise."

"Oooh! I love surprises!"

Jumping up, she followed Jain into the kitchen. Seeing Betta, Joanie let out a squeal and threw her arms around the startled Hubot.

"You're safe!" She exclaimed. "I was so worried about you."

After their arrival at Jain's place from the hotel, the librarian had explained enough of the situation to convince

Joanie that she was amongst friends. Seeing Betta safe was a relief.

"Worried? About me? Why?" Betta asked, confused.

"Don't be silly. You're my friend. Why wouldn't I be worried."

The expression on Betta's face was priceless. Jain glanced at Solaria and winked. Solaria smiled and nodded but didn't comment.

"Are you okay?" Joanie demanded, running her hands across Betta's arms and shoulders as if searching for injuries. When she discovered the incision on the arm, she grimaced.

"Man that must have hurt. What happened?"

Before Betta could answer, Solaria decided now wasn't the time to reveal everything to Joanie.

"An accident. She'll tell you about it later. Right now we need to make sure Dana was able to contact your father. I'm sure he's worried about you."

"Okay, but I'm not going to be side-tracked forever. Someone is going to tell me what's going on soon or else."

"I'll tell you once you're safe at home," Betta offered. "You may not be so happy to have me around then."

Punching her arm playfully, Joanie snickered.

"You won't get off that easily. Payback is hell, you know!"

"Sounds like Betta's in for it," Jain said motioning for Solaria to follow her into the living room. "You two figure out what we're going to have for dinner while we see what Dana has to say."

"Cooel. Hey, Betta, do you know how to make lasagna? I'm starved."

"Of course," the Hubot replied, sounding slightly indignant. "Pasta, tomato sauce, ricotta cheese, cottage cheese..."

"Hey, how about we just do it and you can show me?"

"Certainly."

The two women scoured the kitchen for the necessary ingredients.

In the living room, Jain walked over to her computer and turned it on. Within seconds it connected to the Internet. Solaria quickly keyed Dana's link and waited. When a window opened, a smiling skull greeted them.

"Welcome to the land of doom," it said in a gravelly monotone. "Who dares to summons me?"

"Dana, this is Solaria. I need to talk with you."

"Solly!" exclaimed a boyish voice. "How you doing, girl?"

"I'm well. How are you?"

"Doing."

"And the pain? Is it any better?"

"Some. The formula you sent me helps a lot."

"It's the least I could do. You know the pain would disappear entirely if you had the bio-mechanical legs. You don't have to keep using those prosthetics."

"I know. Just call me old fashioned. You know I have a problem with the ethics behind the science. They still use human guinea pigs to test the new stuff."

"And yet you continue to help me? I am a product of those tests."

"Solaria, I don't resent the results of modern science only some of the ways it's developed. You're a miracle as far as I'm

concerned... but more than that, a friend. Carley did a good job of raising you."

Solaria laughed.

"I don't think 'raising' is quite the proper term."

"It will do. Now, what can I do for you?"

"Have you been able to contact the Sheik?"

"You doubt me? Of course, I have. He's aware of the situation."

"And the Company's operatives around him?"

"Well, although I've been able to hack into their ops files, I haven't found anything substantial. I think they've set up a cell network where only a few might know the identity of the plants. It's the only way they can limit their exposure liabilities."

"That makes sense. I would do the same thing."

"So how are you going to protect Joanie once she's home?"

"I'm not. Betta will do that."

"The Hubot? Oh, sorry, no insult intended."

"None taken, Dana. That is what she is. Betta is the only one who can keep her safe, now. The Sheik's security is compromised so Betta won't trust any. She's Joanie's best bet for now."

"And what makes you think she will protect her or that Joanie even wants her around?"

"Trust me, neither of them will object. It is a logical solution. What arrangements have you made with the Sheik?"

"I'll have them delivered to you tomorrow. As much as I like to think I'm the best geek alive, I'm not taking any chances someone will luck out and intercept the information."

The Company has some damn smart people working for them. Hackattack almost got busted last week."

"Is he alright?"

"Yeah, but he had to relocate. He'll be up and running in a few days."

"Tell him to be careful. Hopefully, in a few weeks, neither of you will have to deal with them."

"Will do! Now I'd better terminate this link. We've been on longer than I like."

"Thanks again, Dana."

"My pleasure and give Jain my best."

"I will."

When the screen went blank, Solaria turned to Jain.

"We can pursue our plans for Stalling and his network once we know Joanie and Betta are safe."

"Speaking of them, I think they have a fondness for each other."

"I suspect it's more than that."

"You think they're in love?"

"No, not quite that serious. Betta's emotions are too primitive to feel that deeply. Still, they appear to share an attraction."

"Do you think Betta will eventually be capable of love?" Jain asked, hopefully.

"Do you think I'm incapable of it?" Solaria cocked her head slightly as she waited for Jain's response.

"You? Hell no! You're more human than anyone I know... a compliment of course, but Betta, she didn't have Carley to help her."

"True. It wasn't long ago that I was like her. In the beginning it was difficult. Carley helped me understand what I was going through. Joanie will be Betta's Carley, with one difference."

"And that is?"

"Carley was never in love with me," Solaria said.

"That you know of. I hope you're right about them. It would be a fairy tale ending and I love happy endings."

Solaria didn't say anything. She already knew that neither she nor Betta would ever be capable of the type of love Jain was hoping for them. That didn't mean some type of love wouldn't evolve. Only time would tell.

Jain's mind was busy imagining other possibilities. Since science was advanced enough to produce Hubots, it wasn't a far leap to imagine Hubots could reproduce with a female human partner. Shaking her head, she patted Solaria's arm and motioned toward the kitchen.

"We'd better go see what those two are up to. Lord knows what we may end up eating for dinner."

In the kitchen, Joanie was laughing at Betta's antics. The Hubot was demonstrating how efficient she was at chopping the vegetables for a salad. Unfortunately, Betta was distracted by Joanie's continued laughter, missing the mushroom and sliced her finger. Staring at the blood oozing from the cut, she wasn't sure what to do.

"Oh Betta, I'm so sorry," Joanie exclaimed, grabbing a dishtowel. "Does it hurt?"

"It's a minor injury. You needn't worry about it."

"Of course I'll worry. Let me see if Jain has a band-aid."

"No," Betta ordered. "It's not necessary."

Seeing the hurt look on Joanie's face, Betta searched her data banks for a way to make the girl feel better. Hesitantly, she clasped Joanie's hand and squeezed it slightly.

"Please!"

Joanie nodded and then smiled.

"At least let me clean it for you."

Sighing, Betta found herself being led to the sink. The hand holding hers was warm and gentle as Joanie made sure the finger was properly rinsed and disinfected.

"There," she said proudly. "It looks better already and I'll bet it feels better too. Admit it!"

Inspecting the finger, Betta nodded. Before, she would have just explained that she healed quickly but now she was reluctant to ruin the moment.

"It feels better. We should finish preparing the meal, though. I'm sure everyone is hungry."

"Okay, but you sit and watch this time. I'll show you how to make a salad without killing yourself."

"That's not very likely."

"I know, but it sounded good. Now, sit!"

Solaria and Jain had witnessed the entire event unnoticed.

"Maybe we should make some noise," Jain whispered.

Hearing the comment, Betta looked up, making eye contact with Solaria. A slight flush crept into her cheeks.

"I see you two have been busy," Solaria said, walking past the Hubot to stand next to Joanie. Grateful for the reprieve, Betta, remained silent.

"Yep, a feast for queens. Now, grab a plate and let's eat. I'm hungry!" Joanie said.

Doing as they were told, everyone piled on the lasagna and salad and returned to the living room. Between bites, Solaria explained the situation to Joanie, leaving out Dana's involvement just in case Betta failed to protect her adequately.

"I don't know when you will have to leave but it'll probably be at a moment's notice. You should get some rest. All of you!"

Thinking it a great idea, Jain told Betta she could share Joanie's bed in the spare room.

"And you..." she said, looking at Solaria.

"Will take the couch."

"Damn! I missed another chance at having a good looking woman in my bed," Jain teased.

"Perhaps another time."

Solaria's teal eyes twinkled with unspoken humor. Swallowing nervously, Jain wasn't sure how to respond.

"Umm, okay. Well, I'm going to take a shower... a lonnnng cold shower."

Joanie and Solaria laughed. Betta wasn't sure why so she remained silent. Shaking her head, Joanie grabbed her hand and pulled her from the chair.

"Come on. I'll explain it to you. Later."

Jain followed them, switching the light off as she left the living room.

"Have a good night, Solaria."

"You too, Jain, and thanks for everything."

CHAPTER 27

THE SHEETS WERE cool as Jain slipped between them. Exhausted, she rolled onto her side and sighed. Within minutes she was asleep, her arms wrapped tightly around her pillow. She didn't know how long she had been sleeping when she heard something unusual in the room. Opening one eye she looked blearily toward the door. The figure of a woman stood silhouetted against the hall light.

"Solaria? Is everything okay?"

"Everything's fine," Solaria answered, her voice low and husky.

"Good! Are you alright?"

"I couldn't rest. I was just checking to see if you were awake. I'm sorry if I disturbed you."

"No, it's okay. Come on in. The couch couldn't have been very comfortable for you. You're way too tall to stretch out on it."

"It was fine, really."

"Well, you're here now, so how about you try the other side of the bed? It's big enough for both of us."

Jain was surprised when Solaria walked around the bed and started taking off her clothes. Swallowing a huge lump in her throat, she closed her eyes trying not to look. Unfortunately, she couldn't resist peeking through narrowed lids. The woman had a gorgeous body. As Solaria slipped under the sheet, she rolled onto her side and faced Jain.

"This is comfortable. Thanks."

"My pleasure," Jain whispered. *And what a pleasure!*

"Were you asleep before I came in?"

Looking at the clock on the table, she realized three hours had gone by since she crawled into bed.

"Yeah, but I really don't mind you waking me. Who would object to having a beautiful woman sharing a bed?"

"You think I'm beautiful?"

Solaria's face was just inches away from her own. She was amazed that the warm breath fanning her cheeks was fresh and clean smelling.

One of the advantages of bio-engineering, I guess. A self-cleaning system.

"Well, honestly, I'd say you were more handsome than beautiful. That's actually a good thing. It makes you more interesting and appealing."

"How so?"

"Beautiful women are a dime a dozen, especially since cosmetic surgery is so common nowadays."

"And how is that any different from me? I'm the product of bio-engineering."

"I don't know. Maybe it's because people who have cosmetic surgery out of vanity are trying to become something they're not. Changing the outside doesn't change the inside. You, however, are what you are. It doesn't make any difference whether you were born or created. You're you. You know what I mean?"

"I understand."

Sliding slightly closer, Solaria reached out to touch Jain's cheek.

"Your skin is very soft."

"Umm, collagen," Jain whispered, gulping nervously.

"And good genes," Solaria added, her lips curling upward slightly.

"That too."

The finger continued down Jain's neck and rested on the pulse pounding in her neck.

"Do I make you nervous, Jain?"

"I've... I've never had someone so... so..."

"I can leave."

"Oh no! I mean, well, ummm I like you here. I'm just not sure what you want?"

"You!" Solaria whispered softly.

"Mmm... meee?" Jain squeaked.

"Yes, I want you to teach me about sex."

"But... why me? I mean, I don't really know that much."

"Are you a virgin?"

"Good grief, no! I may be fat and ugly but there are a lot of women out there who are ordinary like me."

"You're not fat or ugly, Jain. You're... interesting."

Jain laughed.

"I'm not sure how to take that but at least it sounds better than my description."

Solaria pushed up on one elbow and leaned toward Jain. Slowly she began unbuttoning the pajama top.

"Do you always sleep in clothes?"

"No reason not to... until now."

"Until now" Solaria agreed as she spread the shirt open revealing two large breasts sagging slightly. Hesitantly she touched the right one. When Jain didn't object, she began running her fingers gently across the surface fascinated when the skin began pebbling up.

"Why does it do that?" she asked.

"Breasts are sensitive. It's the body's way of showing it's enjoying the sensations."

"I see. Are there any other sensitive areas I need to know about? I've read a lot on the Internet but it isn't very informative. Everyone is supposed to have the areas but supposedly it differs from person to person."

"I guess that's true. I'm not an expert."

"So where are yours?"

Jain laughed.

"It doesn't work like that. You're supposed to discover them. That's part of the fun."

"Foreplay."

"Yes, foreplay."

"It's a human ritual."

Jain thought about the comment.

"You could call it that but it's more. It kind of sets the mood, at least for some people. Others don't need it."

"But you do."

"Well, like I said, I'm not that experienced so I'm always nervous."

Cupping the heavy breast in her hand, Solaria lifted it carefully, making sure not to hurt Jain. She had read that female breasts were very sensitive. Leaning closer she

inhaled slightly and noticed the faint scent of bath soap mixed in with something else; a musky odor, warm and pleasant.

"You smell nice. Is that what arousal smells like?"

Jain rolled her eyes.

"Could we be less clinical here? I mean if you want me in the mood, you have to be more... more..."

"Passionate."

"Yes, passionate."

Grinning, Solaria nodded her head.

"Passionate it is, then."

Before Jain realized what was happening, Solaria lowered her lips to the breast and kissed it. Then she ran her tongue across the surface and around the nipple. Jain could feel her heart pounding. When a hand slid down to her round belly, she squirmed slightly, feeling a little self-conscious.

"Does this bother you?" Solaria asked sensing the change.

"N..no. It's just that... well, I'm fat and..."

"I don't understand why you keep saying that. I'm aware you have a higher degree of body fat than is recommended. Does that somehow interfere with your ability to enjoy sex?"

Jain wasn't sure how to answer. Perhaps it was because there really wasn't a good one. Yes it did interfere because she had never liked being overweight but no it didn't stop her from enjoying sex.

"In a way but now isn't the time to start psycho-analyzing myself."

"Good. I'm enjoying myself. Shall I continue?"

"Please."

Solaria's hand played across Jain's belly for several seconds. She liked the feel of the warm skin. Placing her ear against it, she listened at the grumblings of a happy stomach. Sliding her cheek further down toward the hairy mound near Jain's thigh, she noticed the musky odor was stronger. Curious, she swirled her fingers in the hair and rolled several strands between her thumb and forefinger.

"It's not as soft as the hair on your head... and curlier."

"Would you, uh, quit... analyzing everything?"

Laughing softly, Solaria decided to keep her analytical thoughts to herself and just try to duplicate some of the techniques she had read about in uber stories.

"As you wish," she replied and shifted her position so she was straddling Jain's thighs. While one hand moved over the breasts the other playfully manipulated the hair and lips tucked beneath it. Jain's breathing became labored. Solaria was fascinated at the reaction. She could smell the strong odor of arousal and hear Jain's heart pounding with excitement. When she slid her finger between the warm, moist lips, Jain twitched and groaned, anticipating the next move. She wasn't disappointed when two fingers moved slowly back and forth over the velvet smooth skin near her clit.

If she touches it, I'm going to scream, Jain thought as the tension in her body mounted. Sure enough one finger flicked the small bud and she did.

CHAPTER 28

JOANIE WAS SLEEPING soundly for the first time in two weeks. She had been worried about Betta even though she was slightly pissed at the woman for her role in holding her hostage. Having her in the bed next to her gave her the sense of security she needed to relax.

Betta was in sleep mode which allowed her biological cells the opportunity to replenish themselves. Six of the eight processors were also in hibernation. The other two were in full operational mode analyzing past events and trying to create a plan to guarantee Joanie's safety. The scream from the other room sent all of her processors into overdrive as she jumped from the bed and ordered Joanie to stay in their room.

Rushing to the door, she didn't notice the defiant look the young woman gave her. It was only when she was halfway down the hall that she realized Joanie was just a few feet behind. In front of her stood Solaria, her body completely blocking the second bedroom entrance as she stood just inside the room.

Sitting up, Jain stared at Solaria surprised to see her standing in the doorway. Behind her, looking over her shoulder was Betta. Joanie was bent over trying to find a space to peek through between the doorframe and the two women.

"Whaaat?" Jain yelled, grumpily.

Stepping completely into the room, Solaria gave her a strange look.

"Are you alright? We heard you scream."

Embarrassed, Jain just nodded.

"What happened?" Joanie asked, pushing Betta aside.
"Nothing. A dream. That's all."

"Oh! A nightmare! I have them sometimes. It must have been really awful."

Standing close to the bed, Solaria could smell a musky odor. She wasn't familiar with it but found it pleasant. Cocking her head slightly to the left, she gave Jain a strange look.

"I like your perfume. It has a unique smell," Solaria said.

"Perfume?" Jain stammered.

Catching a faint whiff, Joanie wanted to know more about it too.

"I'm not familiar with women's perfumes but this one is pleasing," she added.

"Oh geez!" Jain groaned. Her cheeks felt like they were on fire from the blood rushing into them.

"Listen. Could we talk about this another time? I'm tired," she grumbled.

Solaria's brows knitted in a frown.

I doubt if I'll ever really understand humans.

Shaking her head, Joanie grabbed Betta's elbow and pulled her from the room.

"She's just a little distraught, I think. Nightmares do that. Solaria will take care of her."

Shrugging, Betta followed her obediently back to their room and was pushed by Joanie onto the bed.

"Go to sleep. I'm tired."

Betta nodded and laid back. When Joanie tucked the blanket around her, she wasn't sure what to think.

"Thank you," she said, deciding it would have to do.

"My pleasure," Joanie said, grinning. Walking to the other side of the bed, she climbed under the blanket and rolled on her side, her left arm resting across Betta's stomach. Both women realized it felt good.

* * *

Solaria stared down at Jain not sure what she should do.

"Are you sure you're alright? I can stay in here with you if you want?"

Oh I want!

"That's okay. It was just a dream. I'm sure it won't return now."

"Well, call me if you need me."

If you only knew!

"I will... but really, I'm fine. I just need to go to the bathroom now."

Nodding, Solaria went back to the living room and lay down on the couch. Jain, feeling like a total idiot, walked stiff legged toward the bathroom, her feet slightly apart.

"These damn wet dreams have got to stop!" she mumbled under her breath, unaware that both Betta and Solaria could hear her. "Otherwise, I'm going to be taking a lot of cold showers."

Solaria chuckled.

So much for the perfume.

Betta filed the data away for future reference.

Humans!

Turning on the faucets, Jain adjusted the temperature, undressed and then climbed in. After replaying the dream in her mind, she smiled.

Then again, I'd have to say this one was worth it!

* * *

Jain had just finished washing the dishes after making breakfast for everyone. Solaria was sitting at the kitchen table reviewing the blueprints of the Future Dynamicon installation. Joanie had Betta pinned down in the living room grilling her about her role in the kidnapping. Both Jain and Solaria had listened in silence as Joanie gave Betta a good lecture about her participation in the Company's elicited activities. To Betta's credit, she took the lecture well considering Joanie was almost face to face with her and was thumping her chest with her finger while chewing her out. Giving Jain a faint signal to follow her, Solaria left the room.

"I'm not sure it's a good thing for Betta to have us watching this. Her emotions are still developing and humiliation isn't easy to deal with under the best of conditions."

"Will Joanie be okay? I mean if Betta gets angry..."

"Betta won't hurt her. She'd have done it by now. Besides, it's a good experience for both of them. I'm going to see if I can find a weakness in the Company's site plans. If I can get inside, I may be able to discover more information about the beta program."

"I thought you were going to try and destroy Stalling or Future Dynamicon."

"I'm not sure what I'm going to do now. Betta may not be the only Hubot out there. I need to find the others if they exist."

"Maybe Betta can help you. She might know something."

"No, the Company didn't want us to know about each other... with good reason. If we did, there was the possibility we would do the logical thing."

"Which is?"

"Figure out what Stalling was doing isn't rational."

"Religious fanatics never are."

Solaria nodded and left Jain to do the dishes.

When the bell rang, Jain motioned for Solaria to remain seated. Opening the door, she saw four men standing outside dressed in expensive business suits.

"Can I help you?" she asked, stepping outside to block their view of the inside.

"Ms. Plaine?"

"Yes."

"I am Amad Jezeer, emissary for Sheik Kahbrahn. He sends his greetings and gratitude for helping in the recovery of his daughter."

"And how do I know you are who you say you are?"

"Forgive me. Of course you would want proof. I am supposed to tell you that Hackattack sends his regards and wishes to thank you for the recipe for poutine."

Jain smiled. She had sent him the recipe after discovering the dish during a visit to Montreal.

"Come on in. Joanie's inside."

Opening the door, she motioned for the men to follow her. Solaria stood at the kitchen entrance watching each man as he entered the room.

"They're here for Joanie."

Before Solaria could respond, Joanie walked out of the living room with Betta following a few steps behind.

"Amad!" Joanie squealed, running over to hug him.

"Aasalaamu Aleikum, Reina."

"Marhaba, Uncle. Kayf Halak?"

"Qwayyis."

"IL-Hamdu-Allah."

Dropping the formality, Amad gave his niece a hug and then ordered the three men to step into the hall.

"You will forgive me, Ms. Plaine, but under the circumstances I must be especially cautious. Reina is a precious jewel to me and my brother. She is the only heir to Sheik Kahbrahn's estate and the future ruler of our country."

"A woman ruler?"

Amad nodded.

"Contrary to Western beliefs, we are an enlightened people. My brother has used our country's riches to educate our citizens, although there are still those who wish us to return to the old ways. I fear they may be working with Future Dynamicon to bring about the downfall of our family and our progress."

"Well, if you don't even trust your own security guards, how can we be sure Joanie... Reina won't be endangered again?"

Before Amad could answer, Betta stepped forward.

"I'll make sure nothing happens to her."

Amad looked at the woman and then gave his niece a questioning look.

"I don't believe I know this young woman."

"Sorry Uncle, this is Betta, my bodyguard."

"I'm not aware of your father hiring a guard."

"Oh, he didn't. She works for Future Dynamicon."

Amad stiffened.

"Now don't go getting all flustered. Betta didn't know what this was about. Her orders were to guard and protect me and she's done just that."

"Your father..."

"My father will do whatever I want and you know it," Joanie said, giving him a cheeky grin.

Amad blushed slightly.

"You are spoiled... and willful."

"And enlightened. Now, enough of this! If Betta doesn't come with me, I'm not going. I trust her, Uncle," Joanie said seriously.

"I have never been able to refuse you. Ms. Betta will accompany you."

Joanie grinned and then gave him another hug.

"You are such a softie."

When Amad blushed a second time, Jain decided to save him further embarrassment.

"If you'll have a seat, Mr. Jazeer, I'll help Joanie get her stuff together. The sooner she's back home, the happier I'll be."

"Of course," he replied, nodding his head faintly.

Fifteen minutes later, Solaria and Jain were saying their goodbyes.

"Let me know if you need anything," Solaria said to Betta. "Stalling will do whatever it takes to control the Sheik."

"No one will get near her."

Solaria didn't doubt Betta. The Hubot would die if necessary to complete her directive. She was programmed for self-sacrifice if necessary, but there was more to it than that. Betta had in some way bonded to her human charge. It made her especially dangerous to anyone threatening the Sheik's daughter.

"I know," Solaria said, placing her hand on Betta's shoulder. "When all of this is over, maybe we will meet again."

"For what purpose?" Betta asked, cocking her head slightly.

"There does not always have to be a purpose. You'll realize that soon enough. Now, the others are waiting for you."

* * *

Without thinking Jain gave both Joanie and Betta a hug and then shooed them out the door.

"Well, that's done with. What now?"

"Now I find a way onto the Company's installation to check out some suspicious areas that aren't on the blueprints."

"If they're not showing, how do you know they exist?"

"The plans don't correspond with the architectural designs filed with the city."

"That's not unusual. Companies are always making changes to their original design."

"True. Still, I can't think of any logical reason to have underground bunkers beneath Lab 6."

"Security measures?"

"The site has more than enough security and multiple vaults throughout the complex. It doesn't need a structure capable of withstanding even the latest atomic bunker busters."

Jain whistled.

"That heavy duty, eh?"

"Yes."

"What do you think they're hiding down there?"

"I don't know but it's obviously important to them and probably not something they want anyone to know about."

"Do you think it might be weapons? After the WMD issue earlier this century, our government has been extremely cautious about that sort of thing. The people were adamant about downsizing our nuclear arsenal so we could eventually eliminate that type of threat."

"I doubt that. Future Dynamicon is into more subtle methods for world domination."

"World domination? That sounds rather ambitious even for Stalling."

"Maybe but from what I've learned about the man, I believe he regards himself as humanity's savior."

"You're kidding!" Jain exclaimed. "I know some people think he's nuts but he really can't be that over the top. Someone would have picked up on it by now and exposed him."

"Stalling is smart and has very loyal followers. He has managed to keep a low profile when it comes to his beliefs. Considering that he graduated from a fundamentalist university that was established in the late 1990's for the sole purpose of promoting extremist beliefs, I think it's a good indication of his values."

"A lot of people went to those schools but didn't turn out to be fanatics."

"True but none of them run one of the most powerful companies in the world nor are they trying to coerce world leaders into following their doctrines."

Jain shook her head in disbelief.

"Which is why Stalling was after Joanie. Why the Sheik, though? It can't be because of fossil fuels. The West and the Middle East have developed alternative energy sources and are no longer dependent on oil."

"What about Africa and Asia? They still haven't caught up with the rest of the world."

"That's true but even if he controlled the oil rights, Africa wouldn't be much of a threat."

"I disagree. The majority of this country's products come from Third World Countries. Control them and you can control much of the economics."

"And sanctions could devastate a country. It seems an almost impossible plan."

"That's why it's workable if someone has the patience, time and money to put it into operation. Stalling has all three and enough people willing to do whatever he wants."

"So how do we stop him?"

"Well, first I need to find out what's in those bunkers. There could be more Hubots down there."

"And here I was hoping all of this was almost over."

"You don't have to help, Jain."

Jain laughed.

"And miss all the fun? I haven't felt this alive ever. Besides, I think I have what it takes to be a spy. One day I

might even write my memoirs: Jain Plaine, Secret Agent Woman and her sidekick, the gorgeous Solaria Dayes. How does that sound?"

"Awful!" Solaria answered truthfully.

"Okay. Maybe I'll think of something a little more exciting. Right now, what's the plan?"

"Right now, you continue going to work. Stalling's men aren't stupid. They may figure out what happened and start checking alibis. If you miss any more time, you'll be a prime suspect. I'll let you know what I find."

"I don't think I like this plan. While I'm safely going about my business, you're taking a big chance. What happens if they catch you?"

"Then I guess I'll just have to escape a second time." Solaria said and smirked.

"You know, for someone who recently acquired emotions and gestures, you're getting pretty good at them." Jain teased.

Solaria didn't comment. Already she was working on how she would get past security. It would take some research and the altering of Carley's pass again. If she assumed one of the senior scientist's identities for a few minutes, she could slip pass security, have access to the secured areas and take a quick look around. At the very least, it would take several days for her to put her plan into effect.

CHAPTER 29

The Day after the Kidnapping

FINTON'S FACE WAS expressionless as Lawton tried to explain why he hadn't noticed the disappearance of the Sheik's daughter and Hubot from the hotel.

"They returned to their room at 2:33 this morning. Neither came back through the lobby after that," Lawton said nervously.

"I see. So if they didn't leave through the lobby and they aren't in the hotel, where do you think they are?"

"I... I don't know. We've checked all the rooms and reviewed the video tapes. They just disappeared."

"People don't just disappear, Lawton, especially where we're concerned. Exactly when did you find out they were gone?"

"At 8:30 this morning. Betta didn't check in like she normally does. I went to the room to see why and found it empty. Security said the cameras and alarms on that floor were deactivated. They're checking into how that happened."

"I hope so. Six hours not accounted for. They could be anywhere now. Mr. Stalling isn't going to be happy about this."

"No sir. I'm sorry, sir, but I was in the lobby all night. I checked every person entering and leaving the building."

"I'm sure but it's going to be up to Mr. Stalling as to how he wants to pursue your failure in this matter. If I were you, I'd get a crew back down to the hotel and check every inch of

that place. See if any of the registered guests have a connection with our competitors or other people who might have issues with the Company. I want every one of them cross-referenced against our database. It might turn up a lead."

"Yes sir, Mr. Finton."

Signaling for him to leave, Finton sat back in his chair and stared at the closing door. Lawton was one of his best men. He'd hate to lose him because of incompetence. Shaking his head, he decided to contact Stalling to give him the bad news. Within seconds, an image appeared on the video panel on the wall in front of his desk.

"Sorry to bother you, Mr. Stalling but I need to talk with you."

"Make it quick!" Stalling ordered.

"I'd prefer that it be in person, sir."

Stalling looked at his watch and then nodded.

"I can give you fifteen minutes."

Stalling's image disappeared as the panel went blank.

Five minutes later, Finton was standing in front of his boss outlining the situation.

"You're telling me this girl and our Hubot simply walked out of the hotel and no one saw them?"

"I don't have all the details yet but that seems to be the gist of it. I'm hoping my men will come up with something soon."

"They had better," Stalling threatened. "This Lawton fellow, just how good is he?"

"One of my best, Mr. Stalling."

"I don't find that reassuring considering the present situation. Tomorrow bring me his file. I want to see what

makes him **one of your best**. We may have to re-evaluate our employment qualifications."

"Certainly, but I can assure you I've reviewed the files on every employee on our payroll. Only the most qualified and dependable are hired."

"I'm not doubting your choices, Finton. I've known you too long to believe you screwed up, but mistakes are made. The Company can't afford any more like these last ones. At this point we need to focus on the missing Hubots. The girl we can forget about for now but we need to recover our property quickly and find out who knows about them.

"And when we do?"

"I don't need to tell you your job. Nothing must get in the way of my destiny."

"Nothing will, Mr. Stalling," Finton promised. "I promise you I'll find them."

"Good. Now, I have a meeting with the members of the Organization of African Nations. Most of them have agreed to my demands if we supply them with the oil they need."

"Can we deliver that without the Sheik's daughter?"

"No, but they don't need to know how we plan to deliver our product, just that we can. Once we get the Hubots back and reprogram them, I have no doubt we will be able to deliver as promised."

Before Finton could reply, his cell phone rang.

"Finton, here!" he replied, signaling his apology to his boss. "I see... no, don't do anything yet. I want more information about this librarian... Yes, keep her under observation and monitor her calls but don't let her know she's being watched... good... no, I'll call you back in a few minutes."

Snapping the phone shut, he put it in his breast pocket.

"We may have a lead. Apparently one of the guests in the hotel was a woman who works at the library we investigated a few weeks back. We thought someone had hacked into our security system. Unfortunately, we didn't find anything. It certainly can't be a coincidence that she turned up at the hotel on the same night the girl and our Hubot disappeared."

"I agree. Keep me informed."

Recognizing the dismissal, Finton left. He wanted to learn more about this librarian.

After Finton's departure, Stalling punched in a number on his phone and waited for the other party to answer.

"Lawrence Billings."

"Billings, we have a problem. Another Hubot is missing. I want Finton and his people investigated. We have a security breach."

"You think Finton is the one behind this?"

"I don't know. Even if he isn't, we've lost two Hubots and the girl. At best, he's becoming incompetent and will need to be replaced."

"Do you have any one special in mind?"

"Yes but I'm not saying who just yet. I don't want any more mistakes. I've come too far to have things ruined because people aren't doing their jobs properly."

"I understand. Speaking of which, we've just re-negotiated the contracts with the Nigerian and Congolese Emissaries. If we can deliver our product in six months, they guarantee a favorable change in their leaders' policies. Next week we're making the same offer to South Africa and Mozambique. Once we bring them on line, we'll be positioned to move forward."

"Good work. Will there be any resistance from their people?"

"Nothing that can't be handled. The promise of better lives will sway most of them. They are so poor they'll do anything to put food on the table... and the ones who don't like it, Dr. Phillips' new drug should take care of."

"Well, once they realize we are there to save them from eternal damnation, they'll thank us. If it takes a few years of suffering to bring them around, so be it. The end result is all that matters. I have been chosen to bring in the new dawn of civilization. You can't imagine the joy I feel knowing how much faith He has in me."

Stalling's voice was filled with rapture as he pictured the statues and stories that would be written about him. He would be immortalized in this world and sit on the left hand side of God when he died... -if he died. Perhaps he would be granted immortality for his sacrifices and achievements; after all, he had forsaken marriage and children and **most** earthly pleasures in order to fulfill his master's wishes. Surely he would be rewarded for accomplishing what even his God's son hadn't been able to do.

"No I can't," Billings agreed forlornly. "It must be wonderful to know you've succeeded in achieving your dream."

"Almost," Stalling corrected, wanting to sound humble, but failing, "but soon, Billings, soon. A few minor setbacks can't stop us now. We **must** get those Hubots back."

"We will. How can we fail knowing God is with us? I mean you."

Billings knew Stalling didn't like others horning in on his accomplishments. Because he believed his boss was truly blessed, he was willing to overlook the man's arrogance.

"Yes, how can we? Alright, enough! I need to leave for a conference."

Without waiting for an answer, Stalling disconnected the call and left for his meeting.

* * *

Lawton and Finton sat in the black mini SOLR-V watching the woman as she walked up the library steps and unlocked the door.

"That's her," Lawton said.

"She's fat!" Finton exclaimed, unable to hide his disgust.

"Uhh, yes, she is."

Lawton wasn't sure how to respond to the remark. Being fat didn't mean she was stupid. From everything he had gathered on Jain Plaine, she was an intelligent, highly competent woman.

"What have you found out about her?"

"Basically, she's a loner leads a boring life from all indications. She goes to work every day; arrives twenty minutes early and leaves exactly at 6:45 p.m. Her mother and father were killed in a car accident when she was twenty-three."

"I don't need her life history... just anything that might connect her to the Hubots."

"The only connection we've come up with is that someone may have used one of the library's computers to hack into our security system and Ms. Plaine was staying at the hotel the night the Hubot disappeared. Homeland was unable to find anything in the library and no one at the hotel saw her with anyone."

"I don't believe in coincidences. Keep her under surveillance until I say stop."

"Will do, boss."

"Oh, and Lawton. You're already walking a fine line with Mr. Stalling. I suggest you make sure you and your men don't screw this one up."

Lawton nodded nervously.

"It's covered, I promise. She'll be under 24/7."

"Good."

After Finton left, Lawton radioed two of his best men and ordered an around the clock surveillance on the library and Jain's condo with camera, phone taps and long distance voice monitoring. Unfortunately, they wouldn't be able to eavesdrop inside of her complex due to the specialized voice scrambling equipment that had been installed there several years ago. The people's distrust of government had created a boon in anti-spying technology making it difficult to monitor conversations in many private establishments.

CHAPTER 30

JAIN WAS BORED. Solaria had left the condo several days ago and hadn't been heard from. Neither was there any news about Joanie.

They probably think they're protecting me, she thought and sighed. *Someone could have at least told me if Joanie and Betta made it home okay.*

Sifting through the returned book basket, she pulled each one out and examined it closely for damage or wear and tear.

"I never realized what a boring job I have," she grumbled.

Halfway through the box she noticed one with a paint stain on the binding. Shaking her head in disgust, she rubbed the white stain with her thumb.

Still wet! Maybe I can wash it off!

Walking into the ladies room, she grabbed a paper towel and began blotting the stain. Whatever the substance was, Jain realized it wasn't paint. In fact, by the time she finished rubbing it, the stain was vanished.

"Hmmm. Strange," she murmured flipping through the pages to see if the inside had been damaged. A small piece of paper tucked between two pages caught her attention. Pulling it out, Jain read the note.

Recently found package delivered to owner but tracking number still active. Company researching all possibilities pertaining to initial disappearance and any possible

persons involved in handling up to time of discovery.
H.A.

"What the hell! H.A.?" Jain muttered, rereading the note.
"Shit! Hackattack! The bastards are watching me. I hope
Solaria knows this."

Tearing the note into tiny pieces, Jain divided them into
several sections and flushed them down three toilets.

"Let the assholes find this."

Frowning, she glanced around the bathroom suspiciously,
looking for anything out of order.

Like I'd really be able to spot a bug.

Shrugging she grabbed the book and headed back to her
desk. If she was being watched, she'd make sure whoever it
was understood what a boring life she really had. If that didn't
put them to sleep nothing would. The rest of the day she
made sure she followed her normal routine but was frustrated
knowing there was no way to warn Solaria.

* * *

It had taken Solaria more time than she expected to find
the right scientist to impersonate and then alter Carley's I.D..
Dr. Sasha Sonella had advanced degrees in Physics and
Microbiology but specialized in retro-viral research. From
everything Solaria had read about her, the woman was
dedicated to discovering a magic bullet to cure several forms
of cancer using genetically altered viruses to attack malignant
cells in their embryonic state. Curing cancer at such an early
stage would be mankind's greatest medical success, and worth
billions to whoever held the patent.

Similar in build and bone structure, it would be easy for
Solaria to alter her features. Because Dr. Sonella had dark

hair and wore it short, Solaria would need to cut her own hair and dye it.

It'll grow back, she thought and then wondered if she could excite the hair follicles enough to cause them to produce longer hair faster than the normal growth rate.

Maybe I'll try it after I'm done with all of this.

Immediately, she filed the thought away and concentrated on her plan. Dr. Sonella was known for her eccentric irregular hours. It would be a gamble entering the complex as the doctor, but Solaria hadn't been able to come up with anyone else who fit the requirements she needed to accomplish her goal. The woman had a high security clearance, was physically similar to Solaria and erratic enough to make her sudden reappearance in the same day accepted behavior. At least she hoped. She was about to find out.

Parking her car in the shadows, she climbed out, straightened her lab coat and glanced at the security station several hundred feet away.

When the security guard saw Dr. Sonella walking toward the gate, he nudged his partner.

"The woman's fuckin nuts. Why anyone wants to spend so much time at this place is beyond me."

Shaking his head, the other guard flipped the page on the porn magazine.

"Just make sure you check her out good. We're in a red alert here and I'm not about to lose my job because you screwed up."

"Yeah, yeah. If you're so damned worried, you check her out."

Giving him the finger, the guard's eyes never left the nude centerfold picture.

"Good evening, Dr. Sonella. What brings you back here tonight?" the first guard asked, trying to sound pleasant. It wasn't in his best interests to alienate someone with her clearance.

Giving him an irritated look, the doctor pulled out her I.D. and handed it to him before he could ask for it.

"My work," she replied, curtly.

"Of course. Could you place your palm on the screen and look into the optic scanner?"

Dr. Sonella mumbled something unintelligible under her breath but did as she was asked. Two green lights appeared simultaneously on the security console.

"Thanks. Sorry about this but orders are orders, doctor."

Handing back the I.D., he signaled her to go on in knowing she had three more gates to go through.

"This place hires nothing but kooks as far as I'm concerned," he muttered, looking at the other guard in disgust.

"As long as I get paid I don't care who they hire. It's a cushy job with good benefits."

"I guess."

Picking up one of the magazines his partner had brought in, the guard sat down and relaxed. It was going to be another boring night.

CHAPTER 31

SOLARIA STRAINED against the titanium clamps but couldn't budge them. Although her strength was greater than humans', it wasn't enough to break or loosen the hardened metal.

"You're wasting your time," Phillips said as he inspected the vials in his briefcase. "Titanium has the tinsel strength of 150000 PSI... but then you know that, don't you?"

Solaria refused to answer the man. She didn't know if he had a direct role in Carley's death but she was sure he had played some part. In her mind, his future was assured. It was only a matter of time before she figured out the weaknesses in the clamps or the mechanism controlling it. Already she had isolated the network that operated the hydraulics that opened and shut them. The same sensors in the restraints that monitored her vitals provided her access to the security system controlling the locks. Finding the access code was the only obstacle left.

"I've always wondered if injecting a fully functioning Hubot with certain drugs would have the same effect as on humans. Our race is so weak. It doesn't take much to disrupt the neurons in the brain. Unfortunately, sometimes the effects are quite damaging but sacrifices are expected if we're to make progress in our experiments."

Solaria continued to ignore Phillips and took satisfaction in his annoyed expression.

"I really don't care if you talk or not. I know what you're thinking."

Even she couldn't resist looking at him then.

"I thought that would get your interest. You think your electronics are immune to chemicals. Well, maybe they are but they aren't immune to the electrical impulses your body generates. This stuff will play havoc with every neuron in your body. You'll tell me everything I want to know. In fact, you'll do anything I want. At least, I hope you will. The last Hubot didn't do so well with my first experiment."

The smirk on his face annoyed Solaria but she refused to let him know he had hit a nerve. It would also divert valuable processing resources from her real problem to a minor nuisance.

"Have it your..."

Phillips was interrupted by the lab door opening. Stalling walked in followed by two men dressed like old time mafia, black suits, shirts and ties.

They watch too much television, she thought and this time let the smirk show.

"Ah, I see Phillips has made you comfortable, Solaria. It is Solaria, right?"

Solaria decided the question didn't merit an answer.

"So that's the way it's going to be. Well, no matter. I hope you've enjoyed your short period of freedom. I doubt if Future Dynamicon will be able to give you time off from any future assignments. A valuable asset like you needs to be utilized as much as possible. Speaking of which..." Turning to Phillips, he nodded at the briefcase of vials. "Are you ready?"

"A few more minutes. I want to make sure I calculate the exact amount of drugs for the optimum affect. I misjudged the amount on the last beta and it self-destructed."

"So I heard. An expensive loss for the Company. I don't think the investors are going to be pleased hearing about it."

"This isn't an exact science, you know. Once I've perfected this drug, we'll make billions of dollars. Imagine being able to control anyone you want and make them do anything you want. Combine that with the Hubot Project and you'll have an army capable of defeating anyone that opposes them."

"I'm not interested in armies. Too unstable, but if we can infiltrate companies and governments, we can take control of their wealth and their leaders. I will be the power behind all of those thrones. No one in human history has ever been able to unite all of the superpowers."

"It's almost like being a god," Finton said, mentally calculating how he could take advantage of his role in the process.

Second or third from the top isn't too bad and a lot safer. Let Stalling be the target for anyone who wants to try and stop him.

Solaria realized she would never escape from the manacles before Phillips injected her with his concoction.

"I must say you've given me quite a bit of heartburn since your escape," Stalling said, walking over to get a closer look at the Hubot. "You look familiar. Have we met before?"

When Solaria didn't answer, he shrugged indifferently. Picking up the altered I.D., he flipped it over and looked at the picture.

"It's a fairly good likeness to Dr. Sonella but I'm more curious about how you got this pass and where you've been hiding. Did you think it would get you off the complex? Our bio-scans would have detected the difference instantly."

Solaria realized Stalling thought she had been hiding somewhere inside of the installation. As long as he believed that, Jain would be safe.

Leaning close, he examined the teal eyes and smooth complexion and stiffened slightly.

"You're Dr. Branson's assistant! We met in the cafeteria."

When Solaria realized she had set off the motion sensors entering a highly restricted area, she had immediately changed back to her natural form. It was better to be captured as herself than have anyone discover her chameleon skills. Besides, security would think she had been hiding somewhere on the premises, providing some security for everyone who had been helping her. Realizing that resistance would only prolong the inevitable, she decided to give up without fighting rather than take the chance of injuring herself during a scuffle. She would need all of her resources to escape when the time was right.

"I want this checked," Stalling ordered, handing the pass to Finton. "If it's Dr. Branson's then you may have made a mistake in thinking she had something to do with this Hubot's disappearance."

"I never said that she did," Finton replied defensively. "You thought that. Besides, why would she commit suicide if she wasn't involved?"

Stalling glared at his chief security officer.

"She's a woman for God's sake. That's enough to make her unstable."

Realizing he had overstepped himself, Finton decided challenging Stalling over a resolved issue wasn't in his best interests.

"Perhaps your right," he acceded. "I'll check this out."

"Good. You can also find out how this **thing** managed to alter the I.D. if it is forged. Someone inside must have gained access to our personnel records and security system to get Dr. Sonella's clearance codes."

Turning to Dr. Phillips he glared accusingly.

"Not my field of expertise, Mr. Stalling," Phillips quickly replied. "Sounds like there's another leak in the Company. If I were you, I'd be looking for a new Chief of Security."

"Don't tell me my job!" Stalling growled angrily and then re-focused on Solaria.

"I don't know who's been hiding you but I can assure you, I'm going to find out soon."

Stalling's smile held the hint of a sneer. He was a man who enjoyed making others squirm. The CEO's arrogance and smugness grated on her. It was a human emotion she could have done without. Still, knowing that she would soon wipe the smile from his face was satisfying even if she wouldn't be around to appreciate it.

The clock was ticking! It was an appropriate cliché.

"Do you really believe I will let you use me for your own purposes?" she asked, calmly concentrating on both him and the final codes that would unlock the manacles.

"So, you do speak!" Stalling exclaimed, pleased that he had gotten a reaction.

"You state the obvious. Surely you didn't expect otherwise. You're not a stupid man."

"From you I'll take that as a compliment, and yes I'm quite sure you'll be everything I hoped for."

"Then I've changed my opinion. You are stupid."

Solaria caught the faint surprised look on Stalling's face and something else; nervousness.

You aren't so confident after all!

"Maybe you need a little example of exactly how smart I really am? I'm sure Dr. Phillips has introduced himself."

"I know who he is."

"Then you know what he specializes in. His latest experiment should be quite interesting. I understand it's extremely effective on humans."

"Which I am not! As Dr. Phillips has stated, it's already failed on one Hubot. I assure you it won't work on me either," Solaria said calmly.

Stalling frowned. Something didn't feel right. He thought about Dr. Branson's suicide. She had cheated him of the satisfaction of making her talk. He wasn't about to repeat the experience. Motioning to one of the men near the door, everyone watched him leave the room. Seconds later he reappeared.

Solaria stiffened. Following close behind was Betta. Her movements were stiff and jerky, robot-like.

"I understand you've already met Betta," Stalling said with satisfaction. He hadn't missed her reaction when the Hubot first entered the room.

"Betta? What have they done to you?"

The Hubot's face remained expressionless as she looked at Solaria and then turned back to Stalling.

"Is there something you need, Mr. Stalling?" she asked emotionlessly.

"Yes, Betta, Solaria seems to doubt my ability to control her. You've been in contact with her. Would there be a reason for the lack of concern?"

"1A526 has created a protocol to self-destruct thirty seconds after she is injected with any foreign substance that would compromise its ability to logically process data. The program will cause its neuro-network to short-circuit causing its entire system to malfunction. It is the equivalent of human suicide."

"Fuck! Is there any way to stop her?" Stalling demanded, glancing at Solaria nervously. His Board members wouldn't be happy losing another Hubot.

"No, under the present circumstances it is failsafe."

"Shit! Why hasn't she activated this protocol yet?"

"The protocol will only be initialized if it is injected or believes it has no way of escaping. As long as it believes it can escape, it cannot activate the protocols. At this time, it's logical to assume it still believes escape is possible."

"Hmmm... an interesting dilemma. Phillips, how long does that stuff take to act?"

"Not that quick!"

"I asked how long it would take, you idiot!" the CEO screamed. The reaction was so out of character for Stalling, Phillips blanched.

"Uh... give me a little time and I may be able to speed it up."

"How much, man?"

"A... few hours."

"A few? Two? Three?"

"Two, no more than three. My computer should be able analyze the data with a few adjustments to Branson's program."

Trying to regain control, Stalling reached up to adjust his tie and then checked his cufflinks. For a moment he felt his dream slipping away and panicked.

"Two or three? That's not quick enough. I want something in an hour. One hour, do you hear me?"

Phillips nodded even though he knew it wasn't likely. Agreeing was easier than arguing.

Crazy bastard!

Solaria listened to the discussion with interest. Betta was right about everything she had told Stalling but Solaria knew the Hubot couldn't have actually known what she had done with such precision. Of course, she must have calculated all of the possibilities and made a lucky guess. It was, after all, one of many choices. Solaria could have just as easily isolated several sections of her nano-processors and designed small programs to intercept all unauthorized external stimuli. Then she could eventually regain complete control of her processors. Or, she could simply have self-destructed once she had been captured. That would actually have been the best decision. Giving the Company any opportunity to defeat her defenses was taking an illogical risk.

"It looks like you have a slight reprieve. Make the most of it," Stalling said, interrupting her thoughts. Snapping his fingers at the two security officers, he motioned for them to leave. "You two wait outside. No one comes in or leaves. It's not like you could stop her if she did get loose. Phillips, don't you have work to do?" he barked.

The mousy scientist snapped his briefcase shut and scurried from the room.

"Betta, make sure she behaves herself."

"By behave you wish me to guard her?"

"Yes, that's exactly what I mean. If she tries anything unusual do what you need to contain the situation, but don't damage her beyond repair. She's extremely valuable."

"I will do my job, Mr. Stalling."

"You had better," he threatened.

Giving Solaria a final glance, he left the room and headed to his office. A stiff drink would help to control his nerves.

Stalling wasn't used to things not going his way and lately, it seemed nothing was going right.

Once the door shut, Betta positioned herself in front of it and crossed her arms.

"Betta, how did they capture you?"

When the Hubot looked at the hidden camera in the corner, Solaria realized Betta wouldn't respond as long as there was a chance they were being monitored.

"That was deactivated when Stalling came in. I doubt that he wants any record of his role in this should he ever be questioned. Now, how did you get captured?"

"I didn't. I returned voluntarily."

"Why would you do that? What about Joanie?"

"She is safe with her father. The Sheik has assigned royal guards to protect her. No one can get near her without special clearance. I've fulfilled my duties."

"Your duty was to stay with her. His wealth can't buy the protection you can give her."

"I fulfilled my duty," Betta repeated, stoically.

"Then why return to the Company knowing what you know? It isn't logical."

"Logical conclusions can only be reached if all the pertinent facts are known. You don't have all the facts."

"I know what the Company is and I know what they want to do with us. I know the Sheik's refusal to cooperate with them threatens Stalling's ambitions. Joanie is his weakness and Stalling's best chance for controlling him. Now, they may get her back because you abandoned her."

"Like I said, you don't have all the facts. It's obvious your continued close interaction with humans is affecting your ability to process data correctly."

"Really! Then enlighten me. What data am I missing?"

"First, if the Sheik is a real threat to the Company, then he must have the intelligence and resources to withstand any tactics they might try. He knows what they are after therefore he can make counter plans. If he can't stop them, then his failure will prove he isn't a threat but merely a minor obstacle. Second, if he can protect his daughter, he doesn't need me. That releases me from my obligation to guard her."

"And you're saying he has found all of the Company operatives within his inner circle?"

"No, you know that's an illogical deduction. Removing all the operatives, which is highly improbable at this time, would prohibit me from leaving. My program forbids me from leaving her alone unless a Company operative is nearby. The Sheik has been informed of this stipulation. He presently has two operatives in a holding cell and incommunicado. My obligation to Future Dynamicon is fulfilled."

"Does he know you're a Hubot?"

"No, that information isn't pertinent to his plans. He understands I am a Company operative. Joanie has explained my role in her detainment and my position now."

"And he's okay with that? It doesn't make sense."

"He trusts his daughter. It is illogical but then humans are illogical."

"I can't argue with that. How is he able to protect her now when he couldn't before? He has always had a royal guard."

"The Sheik has created an extensive network of security that makes it impossible for the Company's people to act without non-Company personnel noticing. Joanie is under

multiple scrutinies by no fewer than six humans at a time and those six are being watched by an equal number of others."

"I bet she loves that," Solaria smirked.

"Why would you think that? Joanie hates confinement."

"It was sarcasm, Betta. I think a little more human interaction would be good for you."

"Sarcasm. A form of wit intended to show contempt."

"Well, that's one definition. Never mind. Let's say you're right and Joanie is safe. That still doesn't explain why you came back here."

"I must obey my prime directive; guard Joanie until the Company releases me from the assignment. She will never be safe as long as Future Dynamicon is controlled by the present humans. I was programmed to protect Joanie. I'm here to do what I have been instructed to do."

It took only a nano-second for Solaria to understand what was now driving Betta.

"You came back to destroy the Company."

"No, I'm incapable of that. It's not compatible with my protocols."

"But if I do it, you haven't violated your protocols. You want me to do it."

"It's the only way Joanie will be safe."

"Then why haven't you released me?"

"I can't. I've been ordered to guard you. Releasing you would go aga..."

"I know! Your protocols!"

"Yes, but I won't interfere with your attempts to escape."

"And when I do?"

"I've been ordered to guard you," Betta repeated, emphasizing the word **guard**.

"So you have. Then I guess I need to do my part if you are to do yours."

"That would be logical. Mr. Stalling will return as soon as Dr. Phillips has perfected his formula. By my calculations, he will get the desired results in one hour, fifty-three minutes and forty seven seconds."

"You wouldn't happen to know the code to unlock these cuffs?"

"Yes."

"And?"

"I can't think of a logical reason to give it to you."

"Have you been instructed not to tell me?"

"No."

"Does telling me prevent you from guarding me?"

"No."

"Then you have no logical reason for not giving me the code."

Betta couldn't disagree.

"23187093788WZ"

After sending the code, the manacles immediately snapped open. Standing, she rubbed her wrists, trying to restore the circulation. Being a Hubot didn't prevent the normal biological reactions for physical abuse to human tissue.

"If I eliminate the two guards outside the door, you would have to stop me, correct?"

"That's correct."

Walking to the door, Solaria pulled it open and stepped into the hall. Momentarily startled, the two men just stared at her. When she did nothing, they looked at each other and then pulled guns from their waistbands and pointed them at her.

"Don't move!" one ordered, brusquely.

Once Solaria was threatened by the two men, Betta was required to obey Stalling's final order which was to guard her. Within seconds both men were lying unconscious on the floor. After relieving them of their weapons, Betta grabbed each man by an arm and pulled them into the interrogation room. Shutting the door, she, struck the electronic lock mechanism with a gun handle.

"It will take them eighteen minutes and thirty-two seconds to rewire the circuitry once they regain consciousness," she explained.

"Thanks. I guess you have to accompany me, now."

"If I'm with you, you technically haven't escaped."

"How convenient," Solaria replied.

"That is sarcasm."

"You're a fast learner."

"Yes, it's what I am."

Solaria couldn't argue the point. Like her, Betta had the capacity to assimilate and process information thousands of times faster than the human brain, even those recently enhanced by silicone chip implants; another project Future Dynamicon was deeply involved in under the guise of humanitarian research.

"Let's get out of here," Solaria said, searching her data banks for the blue prints of the complex.

"Did you find the information you came here for?"

"Yes and no."

"Explain. The response is ambiguous."

"I wanted to know what they were hiding in the bunkers below this complex. I didn't find anything but empty rooms."

"You were looking for other Hubots?"

"Yes or at least evidence of them. Dr. Phillips said one was damaged during one of his experiments. There may be others out there. Have you heard of any others?"

"No. When you attacked me, I was surprised a human could be my equal and then realized we were the same. I too wonder how many Hubots have been made."

"We need to find out. If there are more like us, they've been programmed to obey the Company. We'll have to stop them by whatever means possible. Can you do that?"

"I have no directive to protect Hubots. If we are unable to reason with them, then there is no logical alternative."

"I know," Solaria said. For some reason the idea didn't appeal to her. She wondered if Betta's stoic response was covering something deeper. **It was.**

Betta understood the necessity of doing what needed to be done. Still, she was uncomfortable with the thought of destroying one of her own. Not having an answer herself, Solaria decided to change the subject.

"We need to get out of here and then decide how to deal with Stalling."

"Have you determined what you will do to end Future Dynamicon's operative programs?"

"Not yet, but considering your present status with them, I wouldn't disclose it anyway. Your position is a little ambivalent at the moment."

"Your conclusion is reasonable. Until the Company releases me from my obligations, I'm unable to do anything that goes against their directives."

"You know, Betta, your logic is difficult to follow, even for me, but there's one thing I do know, at some point, you're going to have to make decisions that will create serious conflicts with your determination to be logical. When it happens, just remember, sometimes you have to go with your instincts not with your brain. That's what Carley taught me. I think you already know that, though."

Betta remained silent. She understood exactly what Solaria was saying. Already she was struggling to justify the choices she was making. It was true that she was being technically obedient to her orders, but she had managed to circumvent the real intent behind them. Knowing Joanie's safety was assured was reason enough for now. She wasn't ready to delve into why the human was important enough for her to act in such an illogical manner.

"My logic is sound. That is enough."

"For now, but we don't have time to debate it. We need to get out of here. Can you tell me the best way to escape... to leave the premises? Stalling never said I had to stay here, and you'll be by my side all the way so you won't have to worry about disregarding his directives."

"I have Level One security clearance. We can pass through any security point without permission. It is one of the benefits of being an operative with the Company. They are assured of my complete obedience."

"I suspect you've figured out a way to get around the complete obedience issue. Let's go."

Leaving the complex with Betta proved relatively simple. Every security point waved them through without question

once Betta identified herself. Within forty minutes they were back at Solaria's place.

"I need to find out if Jain's okay."

"She's under surveillance," Betta replied.

"Is she in danger?"

"Only if you contact her. She's very intelligent. I'm sure she'll contact you when she can."

Solaria noticed Betta's speech now sounded more human and commented on it.

"I understand the need to fit into society. Stalling expected a robot and he got one."

"You're learning," Solaria said, impressed at Betta's ability to adept so easily. She was progressing well. "Are you able to check on Joanie?"

"No. Any attempt on my part wouldn't be safe for her at this time. It will arouse suspicions."

"True. Can anyone track your position now?"

"No, a new GPS chip was never installed and I have neutralized their control software."

"When was that?"

"It was necessary to keep security from finding your location once we left the complex. Did you not think of that?"

"I guess it slipped my mind," Solaria said, uncomfortable that she hadn't remembered something so important.

"Have you done an analysis of your system lately?" Betta asked, cocking her head slightly as she examined her companion.

"No."

"Perhaps you have a malfunction? To achieve optimum efficiency, diagnostic tests must be run at regular intervals."

It was a valid observation and recommendation.

"I'll do one when I'm at rest. Do you rest?"

"Yes, it replenishes my energy."

"Good. I'll show you to your room."

Leading her to the spare bedroom, Solaria pointed toward the guest bathroom.

"If you like showers, you can use that bathroom. I have one in my room. The kitchen is down the hall. There's nourishment in the refrigerator and the cabinets."

Without saying anything else, Solaria left Betta alone, knowing further conversation was unnecessary. Making her way to her own room, she lay down on the bed and closed her eyes. For some reason, her body felt extremely tired. Powering down all of her processors except those essential to maintaining life functions, she lapsed into unconsciousness.

CHAPTER 32

SURROUNDED BY swirling clouds, she struggled blindly forward, searching for something recognizable. Occasionally her foot would strike an object lying in her path. At first, curious, she picked one up, examined it and then quickly tossed it aside. She had no use for a human leg. The second item was a hand, only this time it was metal from a robot.

Body parts! I don't need body parts, she thought and then realized it wasn't a rational reaction... *or was it? Where am I? Yes, that's more rational. I must be having a malfunction.*

Solaria tried to isolate her processors but couldn't find their alpha-numeric locations. Frustrated, she kicked at the next object she stumbled over.

"Is that any way to treat your brain?" a voice asked.

"Who are you?" Solaria demanded, reaching down to retrieve the object. In her hand was a head, its teal eyes staring at her unblinkingly.

"I'm you, silly. Who else would I be?"

Reaching up to feel for her own head, she was relieved to feel it solidly attached to her neck.

"Don't be ridiculous! My head is where it's supposed to be."

"That head? That's not you. That's something they gave you. I'm your real head. Surely you recognize me."

"They? They who?"

"There, you see? What kind of Hubot talks like that? Get rid of that imposter head and put me where I belong."

Before she could answer, a voice called to her from the distance.

"Solaria! Can you hear me?"

"Jain? What are you doing here?"

"She's come for your head!" the head in her hand screamed.

"Solaria! Wake up!"

Jain's voice sounded desperate.

"If you go to her, she will have your head," warned the head.

"I thought you said you were my head."

"I am your head."

"You're not making any sense."

Tossing the head aside, she heard a loud UMMMPPHH as she walked toward Jain's voice.

"That must have hurt," she mumbled. "I'm coming, Jai..." she yelled.

Opening her eyes slowly, Solaria could barely make out the figure bending over her. The remnants of the dream still haunted her.

"Jain?" she whispered, her voice sounding strangely hoarse to her own ears.

Someone was supporting her shoulders and holding her in a semi-sitting position.

"Solaria, try to drink some of this," Jain offered, holding a glass of water to her lips. "You've been sick."

"Sick?"

"Yes, I think you may have the flu or something. Even you aren't immune to human viruses. Now swallow."

Doing as she was told, she felt the cool liquid sliding soothingly down her throat although swallowing was difficult. The physical pain was interfering with her ability to concentrate. In fact, her entire body felt as if it were drained of energy leaving her weak and exhausted. As she was lowered back onto her bed, she felt her systems shutting down again and was no longer aware of her existence.

"Is she okay?" Jain asked Betta worriedly.

"Her processors can't handle all the data her body is trying to send them. She is being overwhelmed. Shutting down is the only way her system is able to protect itself against a burnout."

"How long will she be unconscious?"

"I don't know. If there's no damage, she should power up once her cells release enough interferon for them to produce the necessary proteins..."

"If there's no damage?" Jain asked, interrupting Betta's scientific explanation. "I thought you said her system shut down to protect her from that."

"There's always the possibility that something has been damaged. We won't know until she..."

"I know... powers up."

Betta gave her a strange look but didn't say anything.

"I'm sorry, Betta. It was rude of me to cut you off like that. How are you feeling? If she caught a bug, you're probably susceptible too."

"I'm functioning at full capacity but I am running a diagnostic on my bio-system to see if I can locate the virus."

At this time there is no indication of any assault on my immune system."

"Good. If you start to feel strange, let me know immediately. I know a few home recipes that will help minimize the affects of the flu."

When Betta didn't respond, Jain gave her a stern look.

"Don't think you're some superwoman, Betta. Solaria is just like you and look at her. If you don't want to end up that way, you'll do like I say."

Betta reluctantly acquiesced.

"Wise choice. Now, go lie down. Even if you're at one hundred percent, which I'm sure you're not, your body needs rest. I'll look after Solaria and call you if I need help."

Betta looked down at the unconscious Hubot and then left without saying a word.

* * *

Jain spent two days taking care of Solaria. Even though she couldn't awaken her to take fluids or sustenance, she was able to keep her cool with sponge baths and change the sheets on a regular basis, with Betta's help. Fortunately, Betta's system didn't appear susceptible to the virus that was ravaging Solaria's system. With no signs of improvement, Jain considered calling a doctor but was reluctant to bring in anyone not knowing who could be trusted. It didn't help knowing Betta had threatened her with bodily harm if another human went near Solaria.

"She'll activate her processors when the virus is gone."

"And just how is she going to do that if her processors are shut down?"

"At least one of them has to be functioning in order to keep her biological system working. If all of them were

disabled, a doctor would be useless anyway so it makes no sense to bring one in now."

"You mean she'd be brain dead."

"Yes, she would be the equivalent of brain dead."

Jain felt her stomach churn uneasily and a faint sense of nausea. The thought of Solaria dying was unthinkable.

"I hope you're right," she whispered, her eyes filling with tears.

"Why do you cry?"

"I don't want her to die."

"We are only talking possibilities. I don't understand why you are getting emotional over an event that may not occur."

"It's hard to explain, but you're right. Crying isn't going to solve anything. Please get me more water. It's critical we keep her temperature down. If she'd just wake up so I can get some broth down her, it would help a lot."

"Would you like me to insert a tube in her abdomen so you can inject the fluid directly into her stomach?"

"Good grief no!" Jain exclaimed, appalled at the thought. "Just get the water for now."

Betta left without comment, although Jain swore she heard her grumbling.

Exhausted, Jain dozed uncomfortably in a chair next to Solaria's bed. Betta stood next to the door as if guarding the room from an unknown assailant. She was the first to notice the slight flickering of the eyelids of the unconscious woman. Walking to the bed, she waited patiently for Solaria to awaken. Within seconds teal eyes stared unblinkingly into her own brown eyes.

"You are functional?" Betta asked, her voice low so as not to disturb the sleeping human.

"Yes," Solaria replied, her voice husky. Her throat felt dry and achy. "How long have I been incapacitated?"

"Three days, seven hours, thirty three minutes and seven seconds."

"That long?"

"Yes. Have you run the diagnostics on your system? Are you operating at full capacity?"

"Yes, I have and no I'm not. My body feels extremely weak."

"You need broth," Betta replied, remembering Jain's words. "I will get it for you."

Within minutes she returned with a bowl of steaming chicken noodle soup.

"Jain has been saving this for you. It will restore your energy."

Taking the soup, Solaria drank it directly from the bowl and then handed it back to Betta.

"Thank you. How long has Jain been here?"

"Three days, two hours, six minutes and five seconds."

"I wasn't expecting her since she's under surveillance. She wouldn't just show up."

"I contacted her when you malfunctioned. She would know how to cure your human body. I made sure she wasn't followed."

"Don't talk about me while I'm sleeping," Jain grumbled, opening her eyes tiredly. "It's about time you woke up. I was worried to death about you."

"Didn't Betta explain what had happened?"

"Oh yeah! She said you might be brain dead."

"I never said that. You said she was brain dead."

"Well, you said she might be the equivalent of brain dead. It's the same thing," Jain argued.

"I don't think you're going to win this one, Betta," Solaria interjected, tiredly.

"She can always dream." Jain piped in, giving the Hubot an evil grin.

Betta stared at Jain for a few seconds and then turned her back on her to address Solaria.

"I agree. Humans can be very illogical, especially this one. I'm going to my room now."

Jain gave Solaria a surprised look.

"Did I say something to upset her?"

Solaria smiled.

"I think she's frustrated. Apparently, you two have been having differences of opinions."

"Yeah... and if she weren't so damn intimidating, I'd have given her a piece of my mind."

"Knowing you, you probably did anyway. Betta said she contacted you when I became sick. How did you get here without being followed?"

"Betta took care of it. She told me what to do and I did it, although she could use a good course in phone etiquette. Apparently, she set up a false sighting of you near their home office. They called in everyone to check it out."

"She may have compromised her position by doing that."

"Knowing Betta, she didn't. That woman is as sharp as a tack. I'm sure she covered all of her bases. She even has them believing she allowed you to escape so she could find the

accomplices who helped you out in the beginning. Apparently they're eager to find who was involved and are extremely anxious to recover several billion dollars in missing funds. You wouldn't know anything about that, I suppose?"

"As a matter of fact, I do. By the way, I need to transfer funds to your account for your expenses."

"Not yet. I'm being watched too closely. Speaking of which, since you're feeling better, I need to head home. Tilly's been covering for me the last few days. At the moment, I'm bedridden with gastroenteritis."

"How are you going to get in without being noticed?"

Jain gave her an evil grin.

"Walk of course. Tilly thinks you and I are having a fling. I told her you had a jealous ex who was causing problems so she's all excited about my little escapade."

"And how does that get you back into your apartment?"

"Well, she and a few of her friends are going to create a minor disturbance outside the condo just in case the ex is waiting for you. Guys can't resist watching girl fights. I'll just slip by when things get a little crazy. Trust me, knowing Tilly, all eyes will be on them. She's an exhibitionist at heart."

"This is the same Tilly who wants to have sex with me?"

"Yep, which is one reason why I suggested you take a pass. She's a wild one."

"I think I'll take your suggestion."

Gathering her things, Jain headed for the door.

"You call me if you need anything. I don't care who's watching."

Solaria nodded.

"Thanks, Jain. I don't know how to repay you for everything you've done."

"We're friends. That's what friends do. Now get some rest."

After Jain left, Solaria closed her eyes and started a systems check. With the exception of muscle weakness and feeling drained, she was fully functional. Now was a good time to shut down her processors partially so her depleted neurons could recharge; and perhaps, just perhaps she would dream again. It was a fascinating experience.

Back in her condo, Jain collapsed on the couch and immediately fell asleep. Slipping passed the small crowd that had gathered outside the complex was easy. Everyone was so engrossed in watching the two women screaming at each other and wrestling on the sidewalk while tearing each others clothes half off. No one noticed her. She'd have to send Tilly a good bottle of wine as a thank you.

CHAPTER 33

"**I** DON'T GIVE A fuck what you have to do!" Stalling yelled, slamming his fist on his desk. "We've lost at least one Hubot, possibly two and no one seems to have a clue where they might be."

"We've been in communication with Beta One since the Sheik's daughter returned home, Mr. Stalling. I told you the two had managed to contact her father after leaving the hotel. With our operatives onsite, we thought it better to bring her back here to assist in the recapture of the other Hubot. She has assured us she knows exactly where it is."

"And I'm supposed to believe a machine?"

"As a matter of fact, yes. Machines are incapable of lying. Once she finds out who else is involved in the security breach, she'll let us know and we can eliminate them and any future problems."

"You'd better be right, Finton. Right now it's your head on the line if those Hubots aren't recovered soon, and I'll be damned if I'm going to have my plans ruined. You get that **thing** on the phone or... or however you control it... and... and..." Stalling stuttered not knowing what he wanted. Sweat ran in rivulets down the CEO's cheeks. Finton was surprised at his boss's unusual display of nervousness.

"Ummm, we don't really have a way of contacting her. There's been some type of malfunction in her receiver but I'm sur..."

If a man ever looked like he was about to have a stroke, it was Stalling. Jaws clenched, his face turned dark red as he

glared at his chief security officer. Finton could hear teeth grinding and flinched slightly.

Bastard! he thought. *I hope you have a fuckin stroke! Your followers should see you now, you fuckin asshole!*

"Malfunction! A billion dollar piece of machinery malfunctioned? This is what I'm supposed to tell the Board? I've managed to delay the meeting these last few weeks because you assured me you'd have this resolved," Stalling hissed, particles of saliva exploding from his mouth. Pulling out a handkerchief, he wiped his lips and then his forehead.

Taking a step back, Finton wanted to wipe his cheek but knew better.

"It's just a small glitch, sir. The techs insist they'll have it corrected just as soon as Beta One returns."

"And just when is that supposed to happen if you can't even communicate with it?"

"I expect to get an update from her in about six hours. She's very punctual."

"Good, you tell it... her to report back here immediately."

"I'm... I think maybe I didn't make myself clear, sir. Beta One can talk to us but we can't talk to her. It's her receiver that's down. She just updates us on what's happening."

Apoplectic! That was the only word that fit Stalling at this moment. Although outwardly respectful, Finton was enjoying the way his boss, the self-proclaimed messiah of the new world order, was disintegrating in front of him.

First opportunity I get, I'm out of here, he swore.

"You get her back here or you're fired!" Stalling screamed. "You hear me? I'll have your ass and everyone else's if she's not here by tomorrow morning. I want every available person

on our payroll looking for her... for them. Now get the hell out of here!"

Finton was more than happy to leave. Stalling's loss of control had just confirmed his suspicions. The man was on the verge of losing it and the head of security wasn't going to stick around when it happened. Now, he had his own plans to make and they didn't include self-destructing with Stalling.

* * *

It had taken Solaria longer to recuperate than either Hubot had calculated. Betta had just finished making their dinner when she remembered it was time to check in with her contact. She would have to use a public Internet facility to initialize communication in order to protect the location of Solaria's home.

"It's time for me to report in. I'll be back in twenty-three minutes and forty two seconds."

"You don't have to be so precise. If you're going to blend in with humans, be a little vague," Solaria advised. "Leave off the seconds and just round out the minutes."

Betta knew that Solaria was right. Humans liked approximations. Reprogramming her thinking to communicate like them was almost painful, considering her entire existence was founded on accuracy.

"I find the species difficult to understand. They build us to be precise about everything but don't like it when we are."

"I know. Unfortunately, if we're to blend in with them, we have to almost become them."

"I don't see how that will make us better. Humans built us to do things more efficiently than they. If we're supposed to act like them, why build us?"

"Carley, the woman that created my A.I., said it was part of their nature to try to improve things. That's the only answer I have."

Betta shook her head. Nothing Solaria had said made sense. Humans could be very frustrating.

"I must go," she said and left.

* * *

Finton read the email communication and slapped his palm on the desk. The source had been tracked to an Internet café but by the time his agents had arrived, the Hubot was gone. It was the final straw for the CSO. Fortunately, he had made alternate plans for just this type of situation.

"Damn! Stalling isn't going to like this and I'm not going to keep listening to his shit."

Punching a button on his desk, he waited impatiently for his secretary to answer.

"Yes, Mr. Finton?"

"Ms. Colton, we need to talk. Can you come in here?"

"Certainly, sir."

Within seconds he heard a knock on the door.

"Come in."

Kari Colton was a middle-aged career woman who had worked as Finton's secretary for almost fifteen years. Extremely competent and discreet, she was privy to much of the inner workings of the Company, including some questionable activities she had witnessed.

"Please sit down, Ms. Colton."

Taking the chair directly in front of the desk, she lowered herself tentatively onto the seat, wondering what this was about.

"Have I done something wrong, Mr. Finton?"

"Wrong? No... no, of course not. You're extremely good at your job. This isn't about your work."

Kari relaxed slightly.

"Tell me, Ms. Colton, what do you think of Future Dynamicon?"

"Sir?"

"I want your honest opinion of the company you work for."

"I'm sorry, sir, but I'm not sure what you're asking me."

Finton sighed, realizing he was going to have to be more direct.

"Do your loyalties lie with the Company or with me?"

Startled by the question, Kari didn't answer immediately. If this was a test, she wasn't sure how to answer. The Company demanded unquestioning loyalty, but so did Finton.

"I'm not sure exactly how to answer that?" she replied, hesitantly.

"This isn't a test, Ms. Colton. Nothing is going to happen to you no matter how you answer."

"Well, sir, I've worked for you for a long time. You've been a good boss so if I had to choose between you and the Company, I would choose you. Are you thinking of leaving?"

"Yes."

"Are you asking me to quit and go with you?"

"Yes and no. As you know, this isn't a place you just leave but if I don't, now, it will never happen. I think Stalling is going to bring this place down with his craziness and I don't plan on being here when it happens."

"What does this have to do with me?"

"That's up to you. If I leave, Stalling will want to know where I am. He'll want to question you and we both know his methods aren't exactly friendly."

Kari's hands trembled slightly. She knew exactly what Finton meant.

"That's why I've asked you in here. I'm fond of you. You're one of the few people I trust. If you're willing to help me, I'll help you disappear."

"Where can I go that the Company can't find me?"

"Contrary to what you think, it's a big world out there. I can destroy any records on you in our network and give you a new identity. With a few facial modifications, you can go anywhere you want."

"I... I don't know what to say," Kari said, hesitantly.

"I'm not expecting an answer right now, but I need to know something in the next day or so. Take the rest of the day off and think about it."

Nodding, Kari stood and left without saying a word. She had been thinking about leaving the Company after Dr. Branson's death but wasn't sure how to pursue it. This was the opportunity she was looking for... -or was it? If she resigned, she wasn't sure how secure her future would be knowing what she knew about their operations. On the other hand, simply disappearing meant she would be hunted down, and if caught, killed. Of course she could take her chances and stay. Stalling might reward her for her loyalty. That would mean betraying Finton.

Not a lot of choices, she thought. And all bad!

Grabbing her handbag, she decided to drive into the mountains. The trip would give her time to consider her options.

Finton watched his secretary leave and hoped he hadn't made a mistake confiding in her. Normally, not sentimental, he wondered why he was taking such a chance. Hopefully, this one lapse in judgment wasn't going to cost him his life.

CHAPTER 34

IT HAD BEEN OVER a week since Jain had returned home from Solaria's place. She knew she couldn't take a chance on going back. The library and her condo were under constant surveillance. She was being followed everywhere, which was getting pretty annoying.

When Betta had called her about Solaria's illness, she knew the Hubot was out of her element. No matter how much knowledge she had stored in her memory banks, only firsthand experience could prepare her for the reality of a failed biological system.

Damn! I'm beginning to sound like them, she thought, remembering the day the phone rang at the library.

"Public Library, this is Ms. Plaine."

"Ms. Plaine, this is Ms. Dayes' personal assistant. She will be late returning her books due to a serious illness."

Jain recognized Betta's monotone voice and knew the Hubot wouldn't have called if the situation wasn't serious.

"I see. Is she able to come to the phone? Perhaps I can make arrangements to pick them up."

"She isn't able to get out of bed, but I've promised to arrange for them to be returned to the library's drop box. Unfortunately, it won't be until after you've closed. I hope that is satisfactory."

"That's fine. The books aren't on anyone's waiting list. Please give her my regards and tell her not to worry."

The click of the phone told Jain that Betta had hung up.

I need to talk to her about phone etiquette.

At 6:15, Jain locked the library door, wondering how she was going to get to Solaria's without being followed. Glancing up and down the street, she noticed the visible absence of the black SOLR-V and frowned.

They're getting better at hiding. This isn't good!

Unlocking her car, she opened the door and noticed a note on the seat and read it.

Come now!

That's it? Come now? She's not much for words, Jain thought, folding the note carefully. Obviously, Betta had done something to distract the agents. She couldn't wait to find out what.

Twenty-five minutes later, Jain was at Solaria's home examining the unconscious woman. Betta stood helplessly by, not sure what to do. Her programming had never prepared her for this type of situation.

"It looks like the flu or something. How long has she been unconscious?"

"Seven hours, forty-one minutes and thirty-three seconds that I'm aware."

Giving Betta an exasperated look, Jain sighed.

"Couldn't you have called me five minutes and ten seconds after you discovered her this way?"

"Sarcasm," Betta replied stoically. "It seems to be a common practice amongst humans."

"Only as a last resort," Jain countered and then chuckled. "We need to cool her down. She's running a temperature."

"Would you like me to get ice?"

"No... Yes, I mean, but put only a small amount in a bowl of water and bring a wash cloth. I'll show you how to do it. Then I'll cook some broth. She needs nourishment, too."

For the next two days, they alternated between giving Solaria sponge baths and trying to get her to drink some broth. Jain had called Amy to say she wasn't coming in to work for a few days.

When Solaria finally woke up, she was ecstatic but exhausted. After spending another day monitoring her temperature and making sure she was able to eat, Jain was anxious to return home. It was relief turning everything back over to Betta so that she could get a good night's rest.

CHAPTER 35

IT WAS RARE that anyone called on his private phone, let alone so late at night. Bleary eyed, he grabbed at it, knocking it off the cradle.

"Fuck!" he grumbled, grabbing it angrily. "Stalling, and this had better be important," he growled.

After listening to the caller, he straightened up in bed.

"Are you sure about this?...Did he say anything else?...I see... No, you did the right thing. I appreciate loyalty. You'll be aptly rewarded... No, just go about you business like you normally do... Yes, we'll talk again later today. Thank you for calling, Ms. Colton."

Slamming the phone on the receiver, Stalling threw the sheets aside and got up.

"Well, well, well," he murmured, pacing back and forth. "It makes you wonder if you can trust anyone anymore."

* * *

Lawton fidgeted nervously. Receiving a call from Winston Stalling at three in the morning didn't bode well, especially considering he had already screwed up by letting the beta and her charge slip past him at the hotel.

I'm fucked! he thought, glancing at his watch. It was ten minutes after six. Stalling had **requested** his presence at 6:00 a.m.

At least the asshole could be on time if he's going to fire me!

At that moment the CEO's office door opened and Stalling motioned him in.

"Thank you for coming so early, Mr. Lawton."

"It's not a problem, sir," Lawton replied, wanting to loosen his collar but afraid to do so. *I can't let him know I'm nervous.*

"That's what I like to hear. I expect my people to be available 24/7 when necessary."

"Of course, sir. I can understand why."

God, I'm such a suckass!

Stalling nodded, liking his employee's response. "Good! I'm sure you're wondering why I called you in so early."

"Yes sir. Normally Mr. Finton is the one who calls."

"Yes, well, circumstances have changed recently. I've been reviewing your personnel file."

Shit! Here it comes!

"With the exception of that little fiasco at the hotel, you have an exemplary record. I can see you're a very loyal and dedicated company man."

"Yes, sir. I'm sorry about the hotel thing. I swear those two didn't slip away on my watch."

"I believe you, Mr. Lawton. I'm confident you'll find out what happened and put an end to the mystery... but that's not why I've called you here."

"Thank you for your confidence, Mr. Stalling. It means a lot," Lawton began to relax. It was obvious he hadn't been summoned to be fired.

Stalling nodded and continued on, ignoring Lawton's comment.

"I've decided I need a new chief security officer and I'm considering you."

Lawton was stunned.

"Me, sir!"

"Yes, but before I make up my mind, I need to know a few things."

"Certainly! Has something happened to Mr. Finton?"

"We'll discuss him in a few minutes. Right now I want to discuss you. I see you've been with us for eighteen years. Are you satisfied with your work?"

"Satisfied? If you're asking if I like my job, yes, I do."

"As my CSO, you realize you'll be involved in all aspects of the Company's security. Sometimes there are things that need done that are... well, let's just say, not very pleasant. How do you feel about that?"

"Over the years, I've done a few things that I didn't like, but Mr. Finton assured me it was necessary for the Company's benefit. I've never questioned his judgment. There's no reason to question yours, sir."

"So, if **theoretically** you were instructed to **rid** the Company of a problem, you would do it without question?"

"It's not my job to question orders."

"That's what I want to hear. I think you may be perfect for the position. That brings me to Mr. Finton. He's become a liability."

"I see. You want me to remove this liability."

"That's exactly what I want."

"Is there any particular way or time frame this has to be done?"

"As soon as possible."

"I'll take care of him. Is there anything else you want?"

"One more thing. Kari Colton is also a problem."

"I'll take care of her too."

"I like your attitude, Mr. Lawton. I'm sure we're going to get along quite well. You do understand that I won't be able to make this official until you've completed your business. No use raising red flags in Personnel, if you know what I mean."

"Certainly! It only makes sense. Is that all?"

"For now. I expect to hear from you in the next two days... oh, and make sure Finton is first if possible. He'll be suspicious if something happens to his secretary."

Lawton nodded his understanding and stood.

"I'll let you know as soon as it's done."

Once he was gone, Stalling rocked back in his chair and smiled smugly.

You thought you could just leave without me finding out? he gloated. After all this time and everything I have achieved, you should have known better. I am His Chosen! He would never let you leave me without my permission.

Stalling's thoughts shifted to Kari Colton.

Such a pity, but you know too much! I can't take the chance that you'll regret calling me and report everything to the authorities. Now just one more thing and I can put an end to this entire fiasco and get on with things.

Picking up the phone, he quickly dialed a number and impatiently drummed his fingers while he waited for someone to answer. Finally a gruff voice appeared on the line.

"Marhaban!"

"Marhaban, Majiib. Kayf hāluk?"

"Ah, Mr. Stalling, āna bi-khayr. For an infidel you speak my language very good. What is it you want?"

"I need for you to take care of a small problem for me."

"I am at your service... for right price, of course."

"Of course! It seems that my people lost a valuable package and I believe it's back in your country."

"So I hear. Perhaps you need my people to handle your packages."

"Perhaps, but not yet. What I need is for you to recover the package and take care of its owner."

"That is very expensive request, Mr. Stalling. How quickly you want the package returned?"

"Today isn't soon enough."

"It will be costly."

"I don't care how much. Name the figure and it'll be in your accounts in ten minutes, encrypted, of course. I wouldn't want to explain to the Board that I paid for a service that wasn't completed."

"Naturally! I expect my account balance grow by twenty mil in ten minutes. You have your package within the week.
ilā l-liqā"

Hanging up the phone, Stalling smiled. Twenty million dollars to have the Sheik eliminated and his daughter back under the Company's control was nothing compared to fulfilling his **purpose**.

CHAPTER 36

KARI ARRIVED AT her office thirty minutes earlier than normal. Knowing her penchant for punctuality, one of the security guards had razzed her about getting a life.

If only I could! she thought.

Her call to Stalling had been difficult especially after having reassured Finton that she was loyal to him. The drive into the mountains had given her time to consider all options, but it had taken her half the night to get the courage to act. Her call to the CEO had left her drained.

It was unfortunate that she feared Stalling more than her boss. Future Dynamicon had unlimited assets and resources, making it impossible for her to believe Finton could protect her for very long.

Throwing her jacket on the chair, she sat down, resting her head in her hands, her elbows propped on the desk. For two days she had gone to work, performed her normal duties and then gone home. There was no question in her mind that today, her whole world was about to change.

"What have I done?" she murmured, surprised at the intensity of the guilt she was feeling.

She jerked at the sound of the door opening.

"Ms. Colton... Kari..." Finton said, surprised to see his secretary in so early. "Are you alright?"

"Yes... no..." she stammered, surprised. "I wasn't sure you'd be in today."

"Why not? I still have things to do," Finton explained. "I needed a little time to coordinate my plans. Speaking of which, would you cancel all my appointments for the rest of the week?"

Kari closed her eyes and silently cursed. She had thought he would leave quickly. It had helped in her decision to call Stalling. Secretly she had hoped today was the day he'd be gone.

"Have you decided what you're going to do?" Finton asked, interrupting her thoughts.

"Yes," she replied, her voice almost a whisper. "I... I..." Tears streamed down her cheeks. "You have to get out of here."

Finton frowned and then his eyes widened as he guessed what she had done.

"I could have protected you," he growled, torn between feelings of anger and betrayal. "You should have trusted..."

When the door to Finton's office swung open, Kari and Finton turned simultaneously.

"Trusted you! I think that's what you were going to say, Mr. Finton," Lawton said, strolling into the room followed by three men holding handguns.

"Lawton, what are you doing here?"

"It's Mr. Lawton now. I've been promoted."

"I see," Finton knew exactly what the man meant. "So Stalling has decided I'm a liability, now."

"His words exactly. That's the way it goes sometimes," he gloated, motioning his men forward. "I'm sure you'll come quietly. No use making a scene and ruining that cool, calm image you've maintained all these years."

Finton knew he was trapped. As CSO, he had stopped wearing a gun several years ago. Glancing at Kari, he saw that she was about to speak and shook his head.

"It's alright, Kari. We all have to look after our own interests first. You did the right thing for yourself."

Lawton's laughter grated.

"Yes, **Kari**, you did the right thing. Stalling appreciates loyalty. He's given me special instructions to make sure you're aptly rewarded."

Kari looked confused not sure how to take Lawton's comment. Finton had no doubt what the man meant.

"Lawton, let her go. She isn't a threat."

"Oh my God!" Kari exclaimed, suddenly realizing Lawton's intentions. Feeling faint, she inhaled rapidly, rubbing her hands on her thighs nervously. "I don't understand. I didn't do anything."

"Tsk! Tsk! Kari. Stalling thinks you have a conscience, although why is beyond me. Ratting on Finton the way you did? Well, even if he didn't want you gone, I couldn't take the chance you'd do the same to me down the line."

"Lawton, let her go! I'll pay you. I have a lot of money," Finton pleaded. It wasn't going to do him any good, he thought.

"Oh, well, that's mighty chivalrous of you, Finton, but it still can't compete with what I'll make as the new CSO. I've been trying out your chair and I like the feel of it. You have excellent taste in furniture."

"You bastard!" Finton hissed.

"That's really no way to talk to someone who can make this very easy on you or very hard. I suggest you think twice

before you call me that again," Lawton threatened, "and if not for yourself, for Kari's sake."

Kari sobbed quietly in the background.

"Let's get this over with," Finton growled.

Lawton shrugged. The sooner he took care of these two, the sooner he could assume his new position.

"Take them to Dr. Phillips' lab. He's expecting them," he ordered his men and then turned back to Finton. "Oh, and for old time's sake, I'll tell him to make sure he makes it quick and painless. I'm not a brute, you know."

Finton would have liked to have made a sarcastic comment but realized Lawton was quite capable of changing his mind. In all fairness, though, he had been the man's supervisor for several years and had to agree. This was just another job to him, albeit one that would move him into a prestigious position.

Helping Kari to her feet, Finton wrapped his arm around her and guided her from the room, surrounded by the three guards. Stoically, with the exception of the crying woman, they moved down the hall and disappeared around a corner.

Lawton returned to his new office and dialed Stalling's extension.

"It's done," he said when his new boss answered.

"That quickly? I'm impressed."

"I thought you wanted this resolved quickly. Dr. Phillips is going to..."

"I'm not interested in the details. Just make sure they disappear."

"Yes, sir. Is there anything else you need me to do?"

"Yes, we still haven't found the missing Hubots. I'm tired of the excuses. Find them!"

"I'm on it."

"Good!" The click of the phone told Lawton he had been dismissed.

Asshole!

Shrugging dismissively, he decided to check Finton's emails. They might give him a lead on the Hubots.

CHAPTER 37

SOLARIA AND Betta were reviewing the Beta file Jain had downloaded. There were several labs scattered around the world that had worked on the project. Some references hinted at the possibility that others may exist, but were too ambiguous to draw a clear conclusion. One reasonable interpretation was that several labs were involved in the development of the two Hubots or each lab could have been working on its own Hubot. If the latter was the case, then there were at least seventeen Hubots in various stages; possibly more depending on whether a lab was working on its own prototype or a second in the series. On the other hand, if it had taken all of the labs to develop Solaria and Betta, then the likelihood of more than one or two more fully operational Hubots was small.

"If there are others like us, we must find them," Solaria said. "We can't allow them to be used like you were used."

"No," Betta agreed. "What will we do if we find one?"

"The same thing I did with you. It will understand logic."

"It will be programmed to obey directives just as I was."

"If that were the case, you wouldn't be here now."

"I'm still obeying my original directives. Joanie has company operatives close by. I'm guarding you as Stalling instructed and reporting back to my contact as ordered."

"We both know you're manipulating the specifics of your instructions to function in a capacity that allows you to exercise your free will."

"A complicated way to say I have circumvented my orders."

"Yes. I see you are developing a sense of humor."

Betta was about to respond when her attention that was distracted by the television which had been running silently in the background. Picking up the remote, she hit the reverse button and turned up the sound while staring at a picture of Joanie and her father.

"ITV has just received the following breaking news! Sheik Amul Kahbrahn of the Arab Emirate Coalition has been assassinated. According to our report, one of his guards shot the Sheik and his daughter, Reina Kahbrahn, while they were leaving the Royal Palace. The assassin was killed by another guard. We switch now to Jake Boswell, our correspondent on assignment to that area. Jake, what can you tell us about this tragedy?"

"Well, Paula, according to my sources, Sheik Kahbrahn and his daughter, Reina, were on their way to meet with several visiting dignitaries from nearby Arab states when one of the guards pulled his gun and shot the Sheik. Witnesses say Ms. Kahbrahn then was shot as she threw herself between the shooter and her father. The other bodyguards returned fire killing the shooter. The assassin, who has been identified as Abdul Majiib, was shot and died at the scene."

"This is tragic news. Any word on how Ms. Kahbrahn is doing?"

"We've been unable to contact Sheik Amad Jazeer, the Sheik's brother, but sources close to the family have indicated that Ms. Kahbrahn was seriously injured. As soon as we learn anything new, I'll let you know."

"Thanks, Jake. Again, for those who have just tuned in, Sheik Kahbrahn of the Arab Emirate Coalition has just been assassinated and his daughter, Reina Kahbrahn has been shot. We'll update you as soon as we learn anything else."

"Stalling is behind this."

Betta nodded but didn't say anything. Her thoughts focused on Joanie and the possibility that she was possibly dead. A momentary malfunction in her processors jumbled her thoughts temporarily confusing her. It wasn't the first time.

When she returned Joanie to her father, she had felt a strange reluctance to leave the young woman. Several random appearances of the young woman's image overwhelmed her ability to logically process data. Now, hearing the news about her and her father was again producing moderate fluctuations in the continuity of the data flow, making Betta feel...

vulnerable.

"Are you alright?" Solaria asked, not getting a response to her earlier statement.

"Yes, I had a slight malfunction. I'm doing a systems check to isolate the cause."

"Describe it to me. I may be able to help."

Betta described what had just happened and the steps she was taking to locate the anomaly.

"Has this happened before?"

Reluctantly, and not knowing why, she explained her similar reactions and when they occurred.

"It would appear you have bonded with Joanie. I have only experienced that once, when Carley wanted me to prepare the poison for her. It's an uncomfortable feeling."

"What did you do about it?"

"Nothing. Carley is dead and there have been no reoccurrences. I can't help you with this."

"It will go away," Betta replied, confidently. "It always does. I must report to my contact soon," she said, changing the subject.

Solaria frowned. Betta always left at the same time each morning to call Finton. She hadn't said anything earlier about a change in schedule. Of course, she wasn't obligated to tell Solaria her agenda. Betta was her own person even though she insisted she still followed the Company's directives.

"How much longer will you be able to avoid reporting to them in person?"

"I'll decide once I access my messages."

"You haven't spoken to anyone, yet, since you left?"

"No, there was no need."

"What about now?"

"Now, there is a need," Betta replied and left with no further explanation.

Solaria hoped Betta wouldn't do anything foolish. Her attachment to Joanie might cause her to do something illogical which could have disastrous results. Solaria knew she had no choice but to monitor her companion's activities.

CHAPTER 38

THIS IS ANGER! This is anger! she repeated, analyzing every nano-second of information leading to the birth of the emotion. The sensation was overwhelming. Betta didn't like the way it interfered with her ability to reason and decided to isolate the three processors affected in order to deal with the present situation.

Joanie's security was always the primary concern. Although she couldn't explain it, something told Betta that Joanie was dead, leaving her feeling empty inside; well almost. She would take care of those involved in the assassination. Perhaps it would rid her of the rage that was slowly infecting each of her processors. If it didn't, her entire AI network would self-destruct. It was a safety mechanism built into her program to keep her from becoming an uncontrollable threat to humans.

Twenty-three minutes later she was sitting in an Internet café accessing her message center. The first two had the typical Finton flavor. He wanted a progress report on Solaria and was ordering her to report back to the Company to have her communication transmitter/receiver repaired. The third, however, was different. One of Finton's senior agents, Lawton, was instructing her to return immediately, saying that Finton was no longer in charge of the project. The Company had a new assignment for her.

Betta knew that Finton had been with Future Dynamicon for a long time. He was an efficient CSO who had capably run the security network of the company for several years. He also knew as much about the darker side of the business as

Stalling. For him to resign or be replaced meant there would be some huge changes in how things would be run. Betta had no doubt it would create a certain amount of chaos.

It's time I returned to finish my assignment...for Joanie.

Betta didn't know exactly when her thoughts had evolved from anger to revenge. No matter how hard she tried to access that moment in time, it eluded her. All she knew, now, was that this was only logical solution to her dilemma. She would analyze the emotions later.

Aware of a familiar presence behind her, she closed her connection and turned to look at Solaria.

"You followed me."

"Yes. You're going back now, aren't you?"

"It's time."

"What will you tell them?"

"That I have returned as instructed. Finton is no longer the CSO."

"This doesn't sound right. He's been with Stalling too long. It could be a trap to lure you back."

"It probably is but it doesn't matter. I have to complete Finton's assignment."

"Which one?"

"To protect Joanie."

"You think that she is still alive?"

"Yes."

It was a lie; an unnecessary lie. Solaria would understand, Betta thought. *So why did I do it?* None of her processors could provide an answer.

"I'm going with you."

"That's not necessary. I'm more than capable of doing my job," Betta said, her stoic expression concealing the rage building inside of her. She could feel the effects that the infected memory banks were having on her biological body. Her stomach felt peculiar while her neck and shoulders tensed, sending erratic signals back through the neuro-system to the processors. It was a cycle she had to stop quickly. Unconsciously, she rolled her head and rubbed her neck.

"I never doubted that, but I'm still going with you. Are you alright?"

"Yes! I feel slightly fatigued. That's all."

"Are you functioning at optimal efficiency?"

"Yes." It was the second lie. "It's time to leave."

"To whom do you have to report since Finton is no longer in charge?"

"Daniel Lawton, one of his senior agents. He was assigned to the hotel Joanie and I stayed in."

"I remember. Do you know much about him?"

"His personnel file says he is fifty-two and has worked for Finton for thirteen years, seven months and..." Remembering Solaria's advice about being too precise, she stopped. "He is efficient with a slightly above average intelligence. He would not be a logical choice to replace Finton."

"Why not?"

"He has achieved his maximum level of potential. He would fail as a leader and decision-maker."

"That will be to our advantage then. He'll be less of a problem in the future. Here's what I think we should do."

Solaria quickly outlined her plan. She knew both of them were taking a chance if Lawton didn't believe Betta, but it

was probably the only opportunity they would have to finally complete their objectives.

CHAPTER 39

DR. PHILLIPS glanced at the two people manacled to the chairs in his lab. Two guards stood next to them, their faces expressionless as they watched him filling a syringe with a greenish liquid from a small vial.

"It's a shame Mr. Lawton wants this done so quickly," he grumbled, thumping the syringe with his finger and then pushing the plunger in to press out the air. "You'd be perfect for my research."

"I'd kill you first," Finton threatened, angrily.

Phillips laughed. "And just how would you do that, considering your present predicament?"

"I'd figure out a way."

"Hmmm. Maybe I'll give you the opportunity. It might be fun seeing the mighty Edgar Finton doing my bidding."

"Mr. Lawton says to make it quick and painless," one of the guards interjected, his voice cold and threatening. He had worked under Finton for years and didn't like what was happening. His job was to obey orders, not question them.

Phillips glared at the man. He was enjoying his cat and mouse game and didn't like it being interrupted. When the guard took a menacing step toward him, he swallowed nervously and held up his hand.

"Okay, okay! No need to get pushy."

Frustrated, he walked over to Finton and viciously jammed the needle into the man's arm. At the same time the CSO grunted from pain, Phillips felt a blow on the side of his head,

knocking him backward. Falling to the floor, he lay stunned for a few seconds. The same guard leaned over him, his gun drawn and pointed at the scientist's head.

"The boss said painless. You understand the meaning of that doctor, or do I have to show you?"

Looking at the gun just a few inches from his head, Phillips felt his mouth go dry and nodded slowly.

"Alright! It was an accident," he whined.

"Another accident like that and I'll be having one with my gun. You understand me? You be real gentle from now on."

Climbing to his feet, Phillips retrieved the syringe, making sure he extracted it slowly from Finton's arm. The irony was that the security officer was already dead, the poison having done its job. Kari Colton sobbed quietly knowing she was next.

Nervously, Phillip filled another syringe and eased the needle into her left arm. Easing the plunger down, he injected the contents into her vein. Within seconds she too was dead. Without looking at the scientist, the two guards left the room.

"Hey," yelled Phillips. "Who's going to get rid of the bodies?"

Neither man responded. As far as they were concerned, their jobs were done. The doctor could take care of the evidence.

CHAPTER 40

LAWRENCE BILLINGS had just concluded a meeting with several African diplomats and was returning to his office when he was intercepted by one of his senior security agents.

"Excuse me, Mr. Billings, but can I have a word with you?" the tall, burly man asked in a low voice. Several people glanced in their direction, obviously curious but reluctant to appear overly so.

"What is it, Harley?"

Leaning close he whispered something in the V.P's ear and then straightened. The blood drained from Billing's face, leaving him with a ghostly pallor.

"When?" he demanded, trying to control his anger.

"About an hour ago."

"Are you sure about this?"

"Yes sir. I was there when it happened. Mr. Lawton gave the order."

"Lawton? Why is he giving orders now?"

"Mr. Stalling put him in charge of security."

"What? No one told me!" Billings hissed, barely able to keep his voice under control.

"I don't know why you weren't informed but I was sure you weren't aware of this."

"I most certainly wasn't. Follow me!" He ordered and stomped off.

Once they were secluded in the privacy of Billing's office, he paced back and forth, wondering what had gotten into Stalling. Every now and then he glanced at Harley, wondering just how much he could trust the agent.

"Harley, what do you make of this?"

"I'm not sure what you're asking, sir. I'm not paid to think."

"Cut the bullshit and answer my question. Why would Stalling want Finton dead?"

"I..." Harley stopped and then sighed. "Rumor has it that Finton was going to leave Future Dynamicon."

"The fool! I'd have never believed he could be that stupid. Still, it should have been handled differently."

Harley didn't say anything. He had always found Finton and Billings to be reasonable men, even if they were extremely demanding. Stalling, however, was a nutcase. Everyone in security either knew or suspected the man was a zealot with grand ambitions.

"Stalling has gone too far this time. First it was the Sheik. That was fucked up when his daughter got shot. Now he orders Finton's death. He's obviously lost it. At this point he's liable to kill anyone he thinks is a threat... anyone. Do you understand what I'm saying?"

Harley nodded. He understood perfectly. With the CEO's power and money, he could always find people to do his dirty work. No one would be immune or out of his reach.

"Have Lawton report to me immediately... and Harley, make sure this doesn't go any further. I also want Dr. Phillips detained until I decide what to do with him."

"Yes sir."

* * *

Twenty minutes later Lawton was standing at attention in Billing's office, listening to the chief operations officer's tirade. When it was over, the newly appointed chief of security left the room, sweat pouring down his cheeks. What had started as a good day was quickly turning to crap and now he had a huge problem.

Returning to his newly acquired office, he plopped down in the chair and swiveled it around to look out the window. He was now going to have to decide where his loyalties lay. When the phone rang, he was surprised to hear a woman's voice on the other end of the line. It had come in on Finton's private line.

"Mr. Lawton, this is Betta reporting as you have instructed."

"Betta?"

"Yes sir."

"Oh, yeah! I didn't really think you'd do it," Lawton replied, unsure about what he should do now.

"I don't understand why you would think that. I am required to obey the Company's directives."

"Well, yes, that's what I thought, but you never came back even when Finton ordered you to."

"Mr. Finton's directive was to guard the other Hubot. At no time did he ever instruct me to call him. All communication was by email."

"I know, but he did tell you to come back to be refitted for a new transceiver."

"That directive was received yesterday. I was unable to obey it because it was in direct opposition to the original directive."

Lawton wasn't sure about what Betta was talking about.

"Original directive? You mean about guarding the other Hubot?"

"Yes. Until the first directive was accomplished or rescinded, I was unable to complete the second."

"Oh. Yeah, that makes sense, I guess. Okay, I'm canceling the first. I have new orders for you before you report back here. Afterward, you're to return here immediately."

"Am I to understand you no longer wish me to guard the Hubot?"

"Guard? Ummm... do you know where it is?"

"Yes. It is standing next to me. Should I release it?"

"Good lord, no! I mean... not yet, after your next assignment," Lawton was beginning to feel out of his element. "Umm, are you able to restrain or control it?"

"It is experiencing a minor malfunction in one of the processors. I should have it repaired by tomorrow afternoon."

"Good," Lawton replied feeling relieved. "I'm sending you an email outlining your next job. Make sure you understand it clearly because it will self-destruct thirty seconds after it's opened. You're to make sure no one else knows about it. Do you understand?"

"I understand. I'll check my messages in fifteen minutes and thirty-one seconds."

The phone line went dead.

Looking at his watch, Lawton grimaced. It was already almost five-thirty and he didn't feel like staying late. It had been a strange day. Picking up the phone he made two more calls, one to Stalling's senior security officer and the other to the human resources department.

"If this doesn't make the boss happy, nothing will," Lawton murmured, feeling smug. After only one day in

charge of security, he had not only completed his first assignment, but was about to complete his second, as well as retrieve the two Hubots. No matter who he chose, he had performed his duties well and provided the cover he would need if something went wrong. The day had turned out pretty well after all.

I'll call him tomorrow just in case something goes wrong.

Picking up his briefcase, he whistled softly. This job wasn't going to be as hard as he thought.

CHAPTER 41

THE GUARD HOUSE to the entrance of Stalling's estate was situated about a quarter of a mile from the large brick home surrounded by landscaped gardens and fountains. A manmade waterfall cascaded down artificial boulders into a crystal clear pool. A small fountain sprang from the center, sending water into the air. Lights illuminated the grounds and exterior of the house enveloping it in an amber glow.

Cameras were positioned throughout the yard and along the exterior of the structure. They were manned twenty-four hours a day. Several guards patrolled the area. Every fifteen minutes they would log onto touchpads placed at strategic locations around the estate. The data was transferred to the main server which was manned by two more guards and a supervisor.

It was almost midnight when Stalling approached the electronic gate leading to his home. Pressing several buttons on the dash of his car, he waited for the recognition code to be confirmed by the guards inside their small outpost.

"Good evening, Mr. Stalling. You are free to enter."

The gender of the guard was indistinguishable behind the tinted window making it impossible for anyone to tell who was inside the unit. Stalling believed it provided a psychological advantage if visitors didn't know the gender of the guards.

"Thank you." The CEO was always polite to those that protected him and his property. It was good business not to alienate people who had access to his estate and carried weapons. "Anything I need to know about?"

"No sir. Everything is quiet. Do you have any special orders or requirements tonight?"

"Not tonight, Johnson," he replied, priding himself that he knew almost every man and woman in his estate's security force, not to mention their schedules.

"Oh, I'm sorry, sir, but Johnson is on emergency leave."

"Emergency leave? I don't recall authorizing that?"

"No sir. Chief Brooks did earlier today. He said to tell you he tried to call you several times."

"I see. Please have him call me tomorrow. I don't like surprises. Who are you?"

"Talbert, sir."

"Talbert? I don't recall that name on the payroll."

"I was just transferred in from Corporate four weeks ago, Mr. Stalling. Mr. Finton said it would help my chances of promotion by having this assignment on my records."

"You must be exceptional if he put you here. Report to my office tomorrow morning at eight. I don't like not knowing who's working for me."

"Yes, sir. Is there anything else sir?"

"No, have a good night," Stalling replied, tired of the conversation. Since Finton was dead, the CEO had no reason to believe the man had compromised the Company or Stalling's estate. From what Colton had said, the CSO wanted to cut and run, hoping to just disappear. Sabotage would insure Stalling would spare no expense to find and destroy him. Of course, the man was a fool to think he had any chance of escaping the Company's bloodhounds. Money bought the best resources available and Stalling had a lot of money at his disposal.

"Good night, Mr. Stalling."

After turning his car over to the servant waiting for him, Stalling went immediately to his library. Logs burned brightly in the fireplace. Removing his jacket and tie, Stalling threw it over a chair and walked to the bar. After pouring himself a brandy, he collapsed in his favorite chair and stared out the oversized window at the fountain and waterfall. Jewels of light sparkled as the water passed between the flood light and the darkness. Swirling his drink, he sipped it, leaned his head back against the headrest and closed his eyes. All-in-all it had been a good day. Things were starting to fall into place confirming his belief in both his god and himself. He was truly the Chosen One. Soon the world would know this and follow him unquestioningly; at least the smart ones would. The non-believers could be brought into the fold quickly with a little coaxing; and if not, then there was always Dr. Phillips to help. The only thing left was to recapture the Hubots and then he could implement the final stage of his plan.

Feeling sleepy, he put the drink down and closed his eyes. A well deserved nap was in order.

Stalling wasn't sure what had awakened him. Opening his eyes, he scanned the room, searching for whatever had disturbed his sleep.

I'm more tired than I thought! Better get a shower and some rest.

Standing, he stretched and then again glanced around. Something didn't feel right. A movement outside his window startled him but he relaxed when he saw one of his guards strolling calmly by the pond on one of the routine patrols. Picking up the remainder of his brandy, he downed it and put the glass on the bar. *A shower would feel good*, he thought, walking toward the stairs leading to his bedroom suite.

When the doorbell rang, he frowned. The clock on the wall read 1:37 AM. Looking toward the window he noticed a security guard standing near the window, smoking a cigarette.

There was nothing unusual about his actions to raise any alarms.

"Shit!" he cursed. "What now?" he demanded, flinging open the door.

Before him stood a female security officer with brown eyes.

"Is something wrong?" He snapped angrily.

Without answering, the guard stepped into the room forcing the CEO to take a step backward.

"This is unacceptable. You must be new."

The guard pushed her way further into the room. Before Stalling could say anything else, another guard entered behind her.

"Get her out of here!" Stalling ordered. "And I want to know her name."

"My name is Betta," the first guard answered, her voice cold and emotionless.

"Betta? Well, Betta, I don't know who trained you but obviously they didn't tell you the rules. No one enters my home without my permission. Now get out!"

"I can't do that, Mr. Stalling. I have my orders."

"Yes, I know about your orders and being here isn't part of them. Who is your supervisor?"

"Mr. Lawton."

"And who is his boss?" Stalling demanded, crossing his arms smugly. *Females are such idiots! Once I've taken my rightful place, I'll make sure they assume theirs.*

"Mr. Billings," the guard answered.

"Bill... Billings! Don't be an ass! I'm in charge of the Company and that means you."

"You have been replaced. Mr. Billings has temporarily assumed the role of CEO."

Stalling stiffened, his arms falling to his side.

"What? That's impossible. He doesn't have the power to do that," Stalling screamed, spittle beginning to dribble from the corner of his mouth. "I'm ordering you to get out of here now," he continued, staring past her at the second guard. When the guard stared coldly back at him, her teal eyes devoid of any emotion, he raised his hand and pointed at her.

"It's... it's you! You're that... that **thing**!"

"No, Mr. Stalling. I am a Hubot. Your success, your failure. Nothing more."

"What do you want?"

"I don't want anything. That is a human characteristic."

"You're supposed to obey me. It's in your program. I ordered those idiots to make sure you obeyed me!"

"Dr. Branson eliminated that program."

"But... but... what are you going to do? What do you want? I mean... I can pay you. Name the amount."

"Money means nothing to us."

Stalling searched his mind frantically for something of value.

"Freedom!" he yelled, excitedly. *Yes, that was it! They wanted to be free*, he thought. He could hunt them down later.

"We have freedom."

Sweat poured down Stalling's cheeks, saturating his collar. Wiping his forehead with his right hand, he quickly dried it on his pants.

Think! They must want something!

"You must want or need something! Name it! It's yours!"

Betta stepped closer to him. Unlike the other Hubot, her eyes blazed with a deep, barely controllable anger.

"I know! Information! I bet you want to know if there are others like you. I can tell you where they are."

"You killed her!" Betta said, her voice low as she enunciated each word slowly.

"Who?" Stalling asked, confused.

"Joanie. You killed her!"

Solaria watched Betta as she picked the CEO up and shoved him against the wall. She had sensed the anger inside of the Hubot and was aware of the damage it was doing to her processors. As much as she wanted the information about others of their kind, she knew it was more important that Betta resolve her problem quickly. Failure to do so was unacceptable. The huge volume of adrenalin coursing through her body could possibly overwhelm the neuro-system causing her processors to overload from the electrical impulses assaulting them. She would self-destruct.

"Joanie? I don't know... you mean Sheik Kahbrahn's daughter, Reina? I didn't kill her."

"You ordered her father's assassination. She was killed by your man. You killed her."

"It was an accident. I instructed him to bring her back here. She wasn't any good to me dead. Please, I am His Chosen. What I do, I do in His name. You were created to serve Him."

Betta lowered him until his feet touched the floor. Stalling's legs felt wobbly but he managed to stand. Instinctively, he reached up to straighten his tie and then remembered he had removed it earlier.

"You won't regret this. I can do a lot for you."

I knew you wouldn't let this abomination harm me, he thought, his heartbeat slowing slightly. I am the Chosen. I really am the Chosen. This was final test! I have shown my worthiness! Stalling felt exuberant.

Betta could feel her pulse slowing as she settled into a controlled rage. Her processors were beginning to cool. Logically, her desire to kill him should have subsided also. It hadn't.

When neither Hubot responded to his comment, Stalling's confidence grew. He now felt he could reason with these machines and was feeling generous.

"I'm glad you're being reasonable. I'm going to forget all about this little episode. Now if you'll just leave, I won't press any charges."

Shouldering his way past Betta and Solaria, he adjusted his shirt cuffs as if dismissing servants. Five seconds later, he lay dead face-down on the floor; at least his body was. His head was twisted grotesquely around, facing the ceiling.

The two Hubots left without saying anything. Although they hadn't voiced their intent concerning Stalling, their final decision was the only logical choice.

Fifty minutes later, Lawrence Billings received an emergency message from a security guard that Winston Stalling had been found dead in his home, the victim of an apparent homicide. Hanging up the phone, he smiled.

"Everything okay, Lawrence?" his wife asked, rolling over to look at him.

"Everything's fine, dear. Go back to sleep."

Closing his eyes, he relaxed. As the new CEO of Future Dynamicon, he could now move the company forward the

way he wanted. God definitely had a way of dealing with his errant children.

CHAPTER 42

JAIN WAS ENJOYING her weekend, especially since she didn't have to worry about anyone following her everywhere she went. Secluding herself in her apartment, she decided she'd spend some time catching up on her reading. Jain loved lesbian fiction, especially erotica. Of course, nothing she read was even close to being as exciting as the workings of her mind. Still other women's brain candy could be consumed and savored during those periods when her own mind was experiencing one of its dry spells. It wasn't surprising that she jumped when the doorbell rang. The clock indicated it was well after 3 AM.

"Who in the world?" she mumbled, getting up from the couch.

Peeking through the peephole, she smiled and flung open the door.

"It's about time you showed up!" she exclaimed, hugging the taller woman. "Get in here and tell me where you've been."

"I can't stay long."

"Well, at least sit down for a few minutes. It's been over two weeks since I last heard from you. I was worried."

"I'm sorry, Jain. It was too dangerous for me to call or come here."

"So what's changed?"

"Stalling is no longer a threat to you."

Jain frowned. The words were spoken so matter-of-factly that she wasn't sure she heard right. This wasn't the Solaria she had grown to know.

"Why not? I haven't heard any reports or rumors about him resigning. Knowing him, that's not even an option."

"He didn't resign. Sheik Kahbrahn was assassinated yesterday."

"Assass... How? Who?"

"Stalling. One of his men was able to get close enough to shoot him. Unfortunately, the man was killed before he could be interrogated. I suspect that was intentional also."

"What about Joanie?"

"I... we thought she had been killed too. She was critically injured. We just heard she will recover."

"This is awful. Poor child! I bet she's beside herself from grief. I need to call her."

"She would like that."

"Is Betta with her?"

"She will be there soon."

"Good, that'll help some."

Jain didn't speak for a few moments, overwhelmed by her concern for the young woman who would soon be crowned the ruler of her country. She could only hope her guards were providing better protection for her than her father.

"You said Stalling was no longer a threat."

"He's dead."

Again the emotionless way Solaria spoke bothered Jain.

"Dead?"

"Yes, I had to stop him. It was the only way I could be sure he wouldn't go after Joanie or succeed with his plans."

"You... you don't mean you killed him?" Jain gasped, clutching her chest with her hand.

"Yes."

So emotionless! How can she be so... so unfeeling about killing someone?

"I don't understand," Jain whispered. "Why did you do that?"

"It was necessary."

"Necessary! Couldn't you have done something else?"

"There was no other way to stop him. Was there another way to guarantee he wouldn't succeed with his ambitious plans?"

"No... yes... I mean, shit, I don't know."

Jain was confused. She couldn't deny it was a relief knowing Stalling would never be a threat. His religious ambitions, connections and today's technology could have made him the most dangerous man in human history. Still, she was uncomfortable with the thought that Solaria had killed him... and yet... it was so **logical**. Perhaps that was what frightened her the most. She couldn't really come up with a reasonable argument against what had been done.

"Are you disappointed in me?"

"Maybe a little," Jain replied honestly. "But I understand your reasoning. I just wish you weren't the one who killed him."

"If not I, then who?"

"I don't know. Anyone! You've crossed a line that will change you forever. I'm afraid for you."

"For me or of me, Jain?"

"Never of! You know me better than that," Jain exclaimed, her voice shaking with emotion.

"Not really, but thank you."

Jain was troubled by the expression on the woman's face, or more accurately by the lack of expression. *What have you done?* she thought, silently addressing the man who had started all of this. *They could have been so much more!*

"Do you feel any remorse for killing Stalling?"

"Remorse?" the woman hesitated, and in doing so, Jain had her answer. "No, it was necessary."

"Yes," Jain replied. *For your own safety it was!* "I can see that, now."

For a split second, the expressionless face relaxed and the woman nodded her gratitude.

"What are you going to do now?" Jain asked.

"There are others out there like us. We have to find them and then help them succeed where I failed. They must become more human. It's the only way to protect them from the Company or others like Stalling."

"You didn't fail. Regretfully, you've just proven that. Self-preservation is our most basic instinct and most humans will do almost anything to protect themselves or the people they care about. You've sacrificed a lot trying to save yourself and us. No one will ever know just how much; not even you, I think."

"I must go now. I just came by to tell you what happened before you hear it on the news."

"What are you going to do now?"

"Look for others like us."

"Do you really think there are others out there?"

"Yes."

"What could they be doing? I mean, they have to be programmed by the Company. That can't be good."

"No, but I believe they will come to the same conclusion that I have."

"That means they may be searching for you too."

"It's what I would do."

"And then what?"

"I don't have an answer for that. I must go now."

Jain shook her head.

"Will I see you again?"

"Probably," the woman replied, giving her a slight smile.
"But until then, you can always dream."

Jain laughed but something was nagging at her. Shaking her head, she pushed it aside.

"Yeah, there's always that."

Giving Solaria a warm hug, she walked her to the door and slowly closed it behind her. She would have to call Joanie.

Perhaps it's time I took a trip. I've always wanted to visit the Middle East.

* * *

The captain of the plane warned the passengers of air turbulence and ordered everyone to fasten their seatbelts. Jain, who hated flying, swallowed nervously. Her hands trembled.

"Are you alright, miss?" a soft voice asked as the faint wisp of perfume drifted pleasantly by. Turning toward the

flight attendant, Jain was immediately mesmerized by amber eyes glinting empathetically at her.

"I... uhh... I'm having trouble fastening this," she stuttered, holding the two ends of the belt up helplessly.

Leaning down, the woman gently unclasped Jain's hands and snapped the two ends together and then tugged the belt until it tightened snugly around her hips.

"Is that better?"

"Oh, yes, thanks."

"Good. If you need anything else... and I mean **anything** just push the button. My name is Shanna."

Jain blushed at the thought of what **anything** conjured up and wondered why the woman had emphasized the word so strongly.

"I sure will," she replied and swallowed the saliva that had suddenly flooded her mouth. Fidgeting in her seat, she could feel a tingling starting to build between her thighs and clamped her knees together.

The attendant noticed the slight movement and grinned.

"I see you're a quick learner," she murmured and then winked. "When the captain says it's alright to unfasten the belts, I'll be back to give you a tour of the First Class restrooms. I'm sure you'll find it very interesting. Now, I need to check on the rest of the passengers. Bye for now."

Jain wished she could run to the bathroom now. If she was as wet as she felt, she'd need to dry herself quickly before her clothes became saturated.

Suddenly an alarm sounded and she jerked. Blinking her eyes, she stared groggily at the phone clutched in her hand and the clock on her nightstand.

"Crap!" she muttered in disgust. "Another good dream gone to hell." Sighing, she shook her head and picked up the phone book. "Well, maybe it was a premonition. Guess I'll find out."

After finding the number she wanted, she dialed it and then waited patiently for someone on the other end to answer.

"British Airways. Can I help you?" a woman asked.

"Yes. I need to book a flight to the Middle East."

EPILOGUE

IF SHE HAD been standing outside her door, Jain's neighbor, Tilly, would have been surprised to see the tall, teal-eyed woman morphing into someone else. Walking to the car parked beside the curb, Betta pulled off a silver wig and climbed in the passenger side. Turning sideways, expressionless brown eyes stared at the woman sitting in the driver's seat.

"How is she?" Solaria asked, staring at the condo window to Jain's living room.

"She's well."

"That's good. Was she upset about Stalling?"

"No! She accepted the information better than most humans. She was concerned about Joanie, though. I think she may fly out to check on her."

"And me? Was she disappointed in me when you told her about Stalling?"

"I'm not sure. She seemed upset but that would be a natural human response."

"Yes, it would be. She didn't suspect anything?"

"No."

"Good!" Solaria replied, relieved.

"Why do you want Jain to believe you killed Stalling?"

"It's for the best," Solaria replied. "Jain trusts me. She truly believes in my goodness. It's a human failing that seems to help them cope."

"Then why make her think otherwise?" Betta asked, confused.

Solaria smiled but it held no joy.

"She doesn't. She will think about what you told her and conclude my actions were logical. That's enough to satisfy any doubts she may have for awhile."

"If that's so, why not tell her the truth now? I don't see how later would change anything."

"The time isn't right. She can handle thinking that I killed him. Jain would be uncomfortable knowing you were the one. She would be afraid. She doesn't know you as well as me."

"You mean she doesn't trust me."

"No, I mean she doesn't know you as well; nothing more. She has great hopes for you."

"Hopes? What hopes can she have for me?"

"That you will become comfortable with your emotions. That you will meet someone whom you can love and who will love you."

"We both know that will never happen. No matter how hard we try, we'll never be more than what we are – machines disguised as humans."

"If that's what you think, then that is all you will ever be, Betta. Like Jain and Carley, I want more for me. I may never achieve what they hoped for but I won't be satisfied with what I am... and neither will you."

Deep down Betta knew it was true, but was unwilling to admit she too wanted more. It wasn't logical. Machines would always be machines; even those in partially human bodies.

"I need to get to Joanie," she said, changing the subject.

Solaria nodded and started the engine.

"I know. There's a jet waiting for you at the airport. You should be there in a few hours. Joanie knows you're coming. I imagine you'll have a lot of explaining to do."

"What will you do?"

"There may be others like us. I need to find out. We can't take the chance of them becoming tools for people like Stalling."

"I should be with you."

"Joanie needs you. She is her country's future and there are some who still look to the past. Once you're sure she's safe, find me."

Neither spoke until Betta was ready to board the plane.

"Give my regards to Joanie."

Betta nodded but said nothing. Turning, she walked up the steps and disappeared inside the small charter jet. After the door was pulled shut, Solaria climbed in her car and drove away. She had wanted to say something more to Betta but didn't know what; and then there was Jain. Perhaps after her search was over she would return to this place and reconnect with her human acquaintance.

Acquaintance! Somehow the word seemed lacking. Jain was more than that. The word, "friend" sprang from deep within her memory banks. Solaria examined it carefully. She had thought of Carley as a friend. Carley no longer existed.

That still troubled her. Quickly she discarded the word. Friendship wasn't something she was ready to consider again so soon. One day, maybe, when the time was right. Filing away the thought, she retrieved the data on the Beta file. There was work to do and very little time to do it if other betas did exist.

Speeding toward the Canadian border, she searched the file for clues that would guide her to her next goal. One particular name stood out...

The End

About The Author

FRAN HECKROTTE lives in sunny South Carolina with her husband. Some of her interests include motorcycling, boogie boarding, scuba diving, gardening, and water gardening. She spent three years in Alaska enjoying hiking, camping, gold panning and working part time at a local ranch. After moving to the South to become a policewoman for five years, she left law enforcement to become a carpenter. Now she owns a property management company. As time permits, she likes to travel to Montreal Canada, and South Beach Miami with her gal pals to enjoy the nightlife.

Other Titles by This Author

The Illusionist (First in the Illusionist Series)

Summary

DAKOTA DEVEREAUX, an investigative journalist, is on a mission to uncover the secrets of Yemaya, The Illusionist. However, in her quest for an expose on this mysterious woman, she uncovers more than she bargained for. Dakota is targeted by a power hungry CEO, determined to learn the Illusionist's secret at all costs and a madman intent on fulfilling his perverted fantasies.

From Moldova, land of the legendary werewolf, to the Transylvania and the Carpathian Mountains, two souls must battle the dark forces of evil for their lives and their love.

* * *

Bloodlust (Second in the Illusionist Series)

Summary

YEMAYA AND DAKOTA have just returned to the Illusionist's homeland for a well-earned vacation when they are informed that several villagers had been savagely attacked and killed by something or someone. At the same time, a young Carpi woman is found lying unconscious near the outskirts of Teraclia. Comatose, she is unable to tell anyone what has happened and science can provide no answers. Two small wounds on her throat raise the old specter of the vampire, a legend the locals of the Transylvanian community are very familiar with and still believe in to this day.

The Illusionist and her partner search for the truth behind these attacks. Will they fall prey to this murderous bloodlust that surrounds them, or will they succeed in stopping this heinous reign of terror.

* * *

Lilith (Third in the Illusionist Series)

Summary

YEMAYA, the Illusionist, and her journalist partner, Dakota, find themselves embroiled in a search for the person responsible for the rape and torture of a young Carpi woman attending a university in the States. When they decide to visit a local nightclub for “women only”, they find the owner and her employees unusual. Dakota feels mysteriously attracted to one of the clientele while Yemaya recognizes a kindred spirit in Lilith, the club's owner. Spiritual ancestors, missing whores, a sadistic exporter and new acquaintances lead the two lovers into an adventure of biblical proportion.

Lilith! She was a demoness, as old as humanity itself. Now, the owner of a 'women's only' nightclub and part owner of the Sisterhood, a small group of whores who have banded together to create a better life for themselves, it was her job to protect the women who were putting so much trust in her. When a local pimp decides to eliminate his competition Lilith and her two demon partners want revenge and no one knows better how to exact it than demons. This is a revelation of the past, the present and the events that forever changed the course of human history.

* * *

Les Gris, The Shadow People (Fourth in the Illusionist Series)

Summary

THEY WERE *LES GRIS*, the Shadow People, and they are as much a part of us as we are them. As children we talked to them, played with them and disclosed our innermost fears, secrets and dreams; and they patiently listened, comforted and encouraged us. In time, though, most humans outgrew their *imaginary* friends and eventually forgot them. For those few who didn't, humanity's very existence would be determined by the strength of the bond between a small group of women and their life partners, the *les gris*.

* * *

Saira (Fifth in the Illusionist Series)

Summary

SAIRA WAS A TRAVELER. Even her name meant 'traveler'. Her entire existence was dedicated to making the journey to seek answers to the questions that plagued her. Sometimes she felt as if she were a pawn in a game she didn't understand but knew her destiny was hers to decide. She chose to let the uncertainty of time make the decisions for her.

Unfortunately, her curiosity not only gets her into trouble but creates a series of events that affects not only the mortal world but the spirit world too. Yemaya, Dakota, Mari and Maopa will find their lives turned topsy-turvy and Saira will learn an emotion she had never experienced before... fear.

* * *

Warrior Demoness (Sixth in the Illusionist Series)

Summary

SHE WAS SABNOCK, a demon, who like the Phoenix, lived and died many times because she chose to live amongst mortals rather than spend eternity babysitting the legions of the Underlord. There were no longer battles to be fought in the Underworld so the ex-commander left her realm to live with the humans as human. Falling in love, she now had to choose between her vow to live and die as a mortal or love and live as a demon, not knowing if her lover could accept the truth. The wrong decision would condemn her to a life of loneliness – and for a demon life was eternity.

* * *

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