

# Retribution

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"Get up you piece of shit."

Deke swung his foot at her. She felt a dull pain in her hip. Deke was strung out on Synth. Good thing, otherwise his aim might have been better.

"Help me..."

He kicked her again, harder.

"Get up damn it, or I'll leave you for the scavengers."

*Maybe it would be better.*

"Where were you?"

She struggled to her feet.

"None of your fuckin' business, you piece of shit," he said shoving her toward an alley.

She fell face forward, her knees scraping the permacrete, leaving two moist, pink trails. Lola got up and staggered into the alley, kicking her way through the detritus of the port's transient population. The vermin moved to avoid being stepped on, but otherwise held their ground, challenging the intrusion.

Deke put a hand on her shoulder and spun her around, "You're a fuckin' mess. That's gonna take money to fix, money out'a your ass."

"If you had been there to help..."

"Don't fuckin' talk back to me," he said, punching her.

Lola placed a hand over her breast, a chemically pure tear rolled down her dirty, Silastic cheek.

"Get in here bitch," he said, yanking her deeper into the alley, "Security's checkin' us out."

The driver of the Security hover eyed them before slowly gliding past. When they were out of sight, Deke turned, catching her by surprise. She prepared herself for the blow that was sure to follow.

"Where the fuck's the money? Gi'me it, all of it."

Fumbling in her pockets, she pulled out some dirty credit notes and coins and

handed them too him.

"Is this all? Where's the rest of it?" he demanded, pushing her into the wall of one of the dirty shops that lined the alley.

"They didn't give me any money, they took what they wanted, there were too many of them. If you had been there to help..."

He broke a length of plasteel off a cargo pallet, "You walking pile of scrap, I'm gonna show you."

"No please," she begged, as the first blow landed on her shoulder. She backed away, down the alley toward the street, "please, I'll try to do better."

"C'mere you bitch, I'll kill you if I catch you," he said, following her.

She turned and limped away, just out of reach. She was caught between doing what she had to do and what she wanted to do. When she was against the wall, he caught up to her and started beating her.

"No please, no..."

"Hey you, scum bag, stop," the Security man yelled.

The pimp was in a Synth-induced frenzy and showed no acknowledgment that he had even heard the Security man.

"Synth-head."

Pulling out his night stick, he touched it to the man and pressing the stud on the side. He dropped in a heap, the 50 kj B-pulse rendering him unconscious.

"Restrain him," he said to his partner, as the woman ran off.

"Hey lady, wait, no one's going to hurt you."

"Watch him, I'll get her."

Catching up to her, Jethro grabbed her shoulder, but she turned, rolling out of his grasp and continued moving away as fast as she could.

"C'mon lady, stop, you're okay now, no one's going to hurt you," Jethro said, as he again caught up to her.

She shook her head, mumbling unintelligibly.

As Jethro caught up to her again, she flailed her arms, not letting him get a grip.

"You have to stop."

"No, no more, no more," she said, limping away.

"You don't have a choice, stop... I don't want to do this, lady,"

He came up behind her and touched her with his night stick, pressing the stud.

"Uhhh..."

Jethro caught her as she collapsed.

"I am sorry lady," Jethro muttered, as the hover pulled along side.

He put restraints on her, opened the back gate of the hover and lifted her in, putting her next to the unconscious pimp.

*At least she's not malnourished.*

"When we get to the Slammer, put them in separate cells and activate an isolation field. Keep an eye on them, I want no communication. I'll check on the later."

"Sure thing."

. . .

"How are they doing Lucas?"

"They're both conscious, but the hooker is really screwed up. She's acting real crazy, huddled in a corner, mumbling to herself. The pimp is better but is being a pain in the ass, typical pimp behaviour. Soon the Synth withdrawal will start."

"Okay, I'll go talk to them."

Jethro entered the confinement bay, took a look at the hooker and then at the pimp.

"Hey Marshall..."

"What do you want?"

"About fuckin' time, let me out of here. I don't feel good, I need my medicine... c'mon, let me out'a here."

"What's your name?"

"Fuck you. Let me out'a here, I got rights."

"You're going nowhere; you use her to buy drugs?"

"She buys me drugs," he said, suddenly warily.

"Well, doesn't matter, you're going to be our guest for a while."

"You can't do that, I got rights."

"On this planet, your treatment of the hooker will get you a stretch in the slammer."

Deke grunted, in what Jethro took for a laugh, "You stupid or sumthin?"

"Watch your mouth scumbag."

"She's a fuckin' android... which means you can't keep me here," Deke said laughing.

Josh hesitated a moment.

"You expect me to believe that?"

"Let me talk to her," the pimp said.

"Control, enable coms between the cells."

"Lola," the pimp shouted.

She started shaking and groaned but didn't respond further.

"Tell the Marshall what you are."

She started violently shaking.

"You piece of shit, you tell him what you are or I'll..." the pimp started.

"CyMarL 944, ID Q1FD2W-5GW7V8-PLMC47-K7F9DQ," she stammered.

Jethro knew there were android hookers, but the realistic ones were confined to the high-credit markets, not out here on the frontier working for peanuts. He looked at her; she was all but indistinguishable from real. He thought back to when he lifted her into the hover.

"In that case, I want to see your registration on her."

"She's mine, got her all legal from somebody owed me money."

"Money for what? Drugs? Synth?"

"What the fuck's it to you?"

"Was it for Synth?"

"What the fuck if it was?"

"On Dragoman I can seize anything drug related including drugs, money and equipment. If she's an android then she's equipment and since she's yours, you'll be staying here, until I can get an Adjudicator to decide what to do with her. Looks like you get a free holiday weekend in our fine establishment."

"An Adjudicator!? The weekend? Fuck, you can't do that, I ain't done nuthin'."

"By your own admission, she was used to traffic in drugs, specifically Synth. If she's yours, you'll have to stay here until Monday, when I can get your claim to her countermanded."

Sweat was beading up on the pimp's forehead, a nervous tic making his cheek twitch. He was shaking, entering the early stages of Synth withdrawal. He would never make it to Monday.

"I gotta get out of here."

"If she's yours you're staying until we can see an Adjudicator. On the other hand, if she wasn't yours, there would be no reason to keep you here. I could release you and this would all be over."

"You're fuckin' with me, let me out'a here!"

"I've got work to do, we'll let the Adjudicator decide on Monday."

"Let me out'a here, damnit..."

...

An hour later, Jethro again checked on the pimp, "Lucas, how's he doing?"

"Protesting more, whining more, shaking more, sweating more and he fucking stinks. He's going to be in sad shape in another hour."

"Okay."

"Hey pimp, I'm getting tired of this, I'm going home, unless you have something to tell me."

"Fuck you," he shouted, through teeth clenched tightly to avoid chattering.

"Okay, I'll see you Monday in front of the Adjudicator."

Jethro was halfway through the door.

"No, you can't, I gotta get out'a here."

The pimp was shaking, sweat running down his face, his eyes drifted lazily around, unable to focus.

"Look, I don't want you to do anything you don't want to do. We can wait until Monday when we can see the Adjudicator."

"Ya can't do that, it'll kill me."

"Don't mistake me for someone who gives a shit. Since that android is yours, you're going to have to stay here until we can meet with an Adjudicator. Is she yours?"

"Ahhh..."

"Is she yours or not?"

"You bastard, you fucking no good..."

"Okay, you're here 'til Monday..."

Jethro headed toward the door.

"Okay, damnit, no," Deke mumbled.

"No what?"

"No damnit, she's not mine."

"You have to disavow and relinquish any claim to her. I've got a form to that affect on the data pad, all it needs is your thumb print, but make it quick, before I change my mind."

"You fucker, she's worth a lot," he said, grumbling and shaking.

"The Adjudicator is going to impound her anyway, the difference is that he will do it Monday, where as you can do it now. It looks pretty open-and-shut to me."

The pimp snatched the data pad from Jethro and pressed his thumb to the screen. The data pad signalled its confirmation.

Jethro took the data pad back and looked at it, "Lucas, get ahhh... Deke out of here, I'm sick of listening to him. Put him on the first shuttle up to L1."

. . .

Jethro could hear the pimp's grumbling fade away and turned his attention to the android.

"Hi, I'm Jethro, uh... Lola, isn't it?" he asked.

She was sitting on the floor, her knees pulled up. When Jethro entered her cell, she put her hands on the floor, pushing herself back into the corner, as far away from him as the cell permitted. She was shaking her head from side to side, quivering.

"You're going to be okay. Deke isn't going to bother you anymore. We're not going to hurt you."

As Jethro approached her, she started rocking and pulled her knees tightly to her chest. He reached out and touched her shoulder, "Lola?"

At his touch she recoiled and started shaking violently; all the while, chanting gibberish.

Jethro backed away. Nothing he said or did had any effect on her, other than making her condition worse. She remained sitting on the floor, huddled in the corner, shaking.

Two days later, her condition was unchanged.

"We could take her to the scrappy," Lucas suggested.

"No, not yet, but I am going to need some help. Have you seen Uallas around?"

"Big Uallas or Little Uallas?"

"Josh, he's worked in robotics, maybe he can help."

"I saw him on L-1 a few days ago, but I don't know if he was coming or going."

"Okay, Control, locate Joshua Uallas and connect."

A moment later a voice came over the speaker.

"Hey Jethro, what's up?"

"Josh, I need your help, I have a little problem here, should be right up your alley."

"What is it?"

"I'll show you that, when you get here."

"I haven't said I'm coming yet."

"Let's just say that it requires some advanced robotics expertise. Why don't you meet me here, at the Slammer, say 14:00?"

"Yeah okay, I was wondering what to do with the rest of my leave, see you then."

. . .

When Josh arrived, Jethro led him into the cell block, stopped and turned, facing a cell.

Josh glanced at the cell, but saw nothing, "What am I supposed to see?"

"There, in the corner."

Josh stared. Huddled in the dark, dressed in dirty clothing, was what appeared to be a woman.

"I think you need Social Services, not me."

"Josh, she's not just a hooker, she's an android."

"An android..." Josh repeated, looking at her.

"Let me in there, I want to have a close look."

"Control, permit access, Joshua Uallas."

"Access allowed."

Josh entered the cell and cautiously approached her.

"What's her name?"

"Lola. The pimp called her Lola."

She was still sitting on the floor, in the darkest part of the cell, her arms around her legs, her knees pulled up under her chin, rocking back and forth.

"Do you know what she is?"

"Yeah, she identified herself as a CyMarL 944."

"A 944? You're sure?"

"That's what she said."

"If she is, she's the most advanced piece of android robotics ever designed. She's like a person, just better."

"She's not doing too good right now."

"No, they never do, they're innocent, like a child."

"Lola, I'm Josh, a friend of Jethro's."

No response.

"I know you've had a rough time, but that's going to change."

No response.

"I'm not sure she's even hearing me, maybe she's suffered some real damage."

Are you sure she's fully operational?"

"I sure she is, when I first saw her, she was with her pimp. They were, ahhh... interacting and then later she gave out her ID."

"Lola, we're going to look after you. We're not going to let that happen to you again," Josh said, stepping nearer.

Her rocking became more purposeful and she started chanting.

"She knows I'm here. Lola, I can't help you, if you won't let me."

No response.

"Lola, I'm going to do what I can to help you, but you're going to have to do your part."

"Josh, I've got other things I have to do. I'll catch you later. Call me on Control if you need anything."

"Okay Jethro. Lola, you're a CyMarL 944 aren't you?"

No response.

"I'm going to check the databases and see if I can find the service information. Can you run your diagnostics?"

No response.

"If you can hear me, please run you diagnostics."

No response.

Josh spent the next hour searching the Federation and CyMarL robotics databases. Lola had what was referred to as an Associative Memory Processor Module. It was the same type of intelligence used in Star ships to control their Super-luminary mode of operation. Nothing else had the required processing power. Her mind functioned more like a human brain than that of any other android, as a consequence, mental problems were a possibility.

The more Josh read, the more he was intrigued. He had heard about the 944s but had never seen one. Or maybe he had and didn't know it.

"Lola, how did you come to be on Dragoman, working for a Synth junkie?"

She moved a little, though barely noticeable, but still said nothing.

Josh searched the database a while longer, before announcing triumphantly, "Now we're getting somewhere, I've found your logic diagrams."

"Kii diagrams," Lola corrected.

When she spoke, Josh almost jumped out of his skin, "Christ, don't do that... they're incomplete, some sections are missing, but the mantra is there and appears complete. We'll have to do the best we can. Lola, I want you to concentrate on my words and let your mind be free."

"That's a contradiction," she responded.

Josh was glad she was talking, "You know what I mean. You're safe here; no one is going to hurt you."

Lola looked at him, as though ready to say something, but didn't. It was a good sign that she was talking.

The mantra was an integral part of each android design and would put it into a meditative, introspective state. Each different 944 memory model had its own mantra. The android could then operate on its own mind, resolving conflicts and ambiguities, even deleting selected memories. The process was termed 'garbage collection' after a similar process used on early computers. On an android the 'garbage collection' required the android's cooperation. Josh had no other course of action so he started to read.

As he read, he could hear her 'breathing' slow down and see her relaxing. After almost twenty minutes, he reached the end. He got up and stretched.

"Again," she said.

"Can I come in the cell and continue?"

"No, please don't, not yet," she said, alarmed.

"Okay, okay, calm down, are you running diagnostics?"

Lola nodded.

"I'll be right back Lola."

"Don't leave, read it again..."

"I will, but first I'm going to help you, do you know what your protocols are?"

Lola was trembling, but acknowledged with a nod.

. . .

Josh left the cell block and went into the office area to Jethro's office, "I need her ID, key and an umbilical. I'm going to enable her defensive protocols."

"Are you sure that's a good idea? There's no telling what she'll do."

"She'll be okay, trust me Jethro, she's not violent by nature. All of the documentation highlights the importance of 'free will' and its positive effect on emotional stability. Her mind, is close to a human mind in operation. A 944 or any being that has had its self-determination taken away and has been forced to endure what she has, is going to have problems. She has an advantage over humans in that she can be fixed. And there is a last resort, if we have to, we can initialize her mind."

"Maybe you should."

"No, not yet, the initialization wipes out everything; they are left with a baseline mental model. Owners of androids functioning as hookers routinely initialize them, but I'm not going to do that. She does have problems, but she also has a highly developed personality. I'm going to give her back her free will."

"She'll be hell to control if she's unstable."

"She's talked some, she'll be okay. It's the only way she's going to recover. She knows right from wrong."

"But it's not like she's a human being."

"No, her previous owner, he was human."

"Okay-okay, you win," Jethro said, "how are you going to connect the cable?"

"Not sure, I'll think of something."

"Well, here's a tip from crowd control, use a police baton, works just as good on androids as organics, the fifty KJ will reset the processor of all but the hardened military equipment. It should give you enough time."

"I hate to do that. Do you know what that is going to look like to her?"

. . .

Josh walked back into the cell block and passed through the portal into Lola's cell. Lola shook her head from side to side and shrank back in the corner, as far as possible. But before she could react further, he touched the baton to her foot and pressed the stud. She convulsed and went limp.

Leaning over, Josh picked her up and laid her on the bed. He then undid the dirty jumpsuit, opening it to the waist. He stopped when he saw the wounds on her breasts, the Silastic 'flesh' seeping the fluid component.

Josh forced himself to concentrate. Using two fingers, he spread her navel and inserted the umbilical. Then at the data pad, he hurriedly typed in her ID and key and hit send. He was rewarded with the CyMarL splash screen. Scrolling through the menus, he located the 'defensive' setting and enabled it, then removed the ceiling on 'allowable force', changed the 'beckon' from 'mandatory' to 'signal' and set 'subservience' and 'autonomous' to 'float'.

Josh hesitated, except for the damaged area, she looked real, so real that he fully expected to see blood. He got up and got a Med-kit and sprayed a dressing on each breast. The dressing was dry to the touch, in seconds. Then he applied a protective pad to each. The painkiller in the dressing would have no effect on her, but it and the pad would keep the wound clean and possibly reduce any irritation.

Then he quit the setup process. Lola's eyes popped open. She looked down at the umbilical and glared at Josh. She hesitated a moment, then yanked the cable out and stood up. She picked Josh up and slammed him down on the hard bunk.

"Oooff..."

As Josh gasped for breath, Lola looked into his eyes, what she saw was not what she expected. She stood upright, expecting him to react, but he did nothing. Turning away from him, she pulled the dirty jumpsuit closed and quickly walked through the portal. She rummaged through the med-kit before leaving.

"Uhhh, uhhh, ... Jethro..." Josh finally managed to gasp.

Rolling off the bed onto his feet, he staggered to the portal, but it refused to open. He was locked in the cell.

"Damn it, Jethro, she's changed the access codes. She must have done it,

through the link to the data pad, when she woke up.”

Jethro’s voice came over the com, “She’s changed them all Josh. I’m locked in the office.”

“You can fix it, right?”

“Yeah, but it’ll take a few minutes. Oh, by the way, you’re her keeper now. I transferred her ownership to you.”

“Great! You give my father’s son a rebellious hooker. He’s going to kill you, then me.”

...

Lola was in hiding, watching the bar, when Deke appeared. She silently followed him, keeping at a safe distance. He was drunk, very drunk. When he reached the derelict buildings, she approached him from behind, touched a hypo gun to his butt and squeezed. Quickly, she ducked into a doorway of an abandoned building. She waited until she heard him collapse on the ground and then dragged him into the building. Holding his right hand on her thigh, she hit it a glancing blow, bruising the knuckles and splitting the skin. Then she restrained and gagged him.

...

“Hey Zag, what’s ‘appnin’?”

“Who’s this?”

“It’s me Deke, the video on my Com is fucked. Say, you got any Synth?”

“Shit, you fuckin’ junky, you done all you got last week?”

“I ain’t no Synth-junky, I can handle it, an’ I was shorted last week.”

“Shit, I don’t do that. That kinda talk’ll get ya spaced.”

“I... I uh, oh shit, I didn’t mean anything, jus’ went too quick.”

“Yeah, well you watch your mouth or you gonna be breathin’ space.”

“I need some more, you got any? I want to buy a lot.”

“I got some, how much you talkin’ about.”

"A hunerd tubes."

"A hundred!? Where'd ya get that kinda money? That's gonna cost you that little whore of yours."

Lola hesitated at the mention of herself, but then continued speaking in Deke's broken spacer accent, "Fuck, she pays for this stuff. Don't worry, I got the money. Usual place?"

"Yeah, okay, gimme an hour to get it."

He won't have the money to cover one hundred tubes, so he'll get it on credit from his supplier. The thought made her smile.

. . .

Zag peered around the corner, into the old building, "Deke, you here?"

"In the back Zag," Deke's voice drifted through the open doorway.

Zag cautiously approached the doorway with blaster drawn and peered around the corner. Deke was in the shadows, seated at an old table, a bag in front of him.

"Keep your hands on the table, where I can see them," he said rounding the corner.

Complying, Deke spread his hands on the table, "You bring it Zag?"

"Yeah, got it all, you got the money?"

"Right here Zag," Lola said in Deke's voice, as she set off a Sun grenade. The Sun grenade would blind him, his vision not returning for over an hour.

"You fucker," Zag yelled, firing his blaster in her general direction.

Lola ducked under the table and avoided his blaster, as it cratered the wall above and behind her.

"I'm gonna kill you, you bastard, I can see you... I can see you."

But his random firing told her otherwise. She picked up a crumpled weed packet and tossed it to one side and silently lunged at him. He turned firing at the packet. Lola punched him hard, hard enough to stun him, though not hard

enough to knock him out. Then she kicked his blaster away, pulled the knife and micro-blaster from his boot.

As he came around, she kicked him in the ribs and spoke in Deke's voice, "You ain't rippin' me off anymore, you shit."

She pressed one of the Synth tubes against the wall, discharging its contents into the permacrete, discarded the tube and kicked him again. She could hear his ribs crunch, but she was very careful, she just wanted to hurt him.

"This stuff you're sellin' me is shit, here try some," she said push a tube against his thigh. It injected its contents into his bloodstream.

"One ain't enuff," she said giving him a second, then a third.

"See, you shit, you need three of `em, `fore you feel anything," she said punching him, breaking his nose.

She kicked him in the groin, "Next time get better shit... na, fuck, don't bother, I'll kill you right here and find a new supplier."

"N-No, Deke," Zag managed to spit out, between bleeding lips.

Lola adjusted the blaster and fired into him.

He grunted, convulsed and passed out. She had reduced the power setting to assure he would live. Then she adjusted the blaster back to full power, replaced the power cell with a drained one and threw it down next to him. She picked up the rest of the Synth and left, leaving Zag's limp form on the floor.

. . .

Entering the code to Deke's flat, she braced herself for the onslaught to her senses. The door staggered open and she entered his filthy, personal world. The smell was difficult to ignore, even for an android. Working quickly, she scattered some of the tubes of Synth around his flat, making sure they could be found, but not obviously planted. She emptied a few additional tubes, discarding them on the floor. Then she took Zag's knife and plunged the blade deep into the table.

When she was sure everything was ready, she opened the door and peered out into the dark. Seeing no one, she closed the door behind her and silently went back to where she had left Deke.

From her vantage point, she had a view of the door to Deke's flat and she

waited. It took longer than anticipated, she must have hurt Zag worse than she intended. Then, there he was, Zag and two grunts. Zag looked pretty bad and was limping. Lola watched one grunt go around to the back. He reappeared a minute later, then they punched a code into the door control. They cautiously entered; the lights came on for a few minutes and then were extinguished. Lola waited to make sure they were staying. Then she put the micro-blaster in Deke's pocket, gave him a couple of tubes of Synth and a shot to counteract the hypo. She removed the gag and restraints and quickly hid herself in an adjacent building.

. . .

Lucifer's fading orange light lanced through the broken window, casting a web of shadows across her stained face as she sat motionless on the dirt floor.

She had watched as Deke regained consciousness and pushed himself upright. She watched his wobbly progress as he staggered out the door, in the general direction of his flat. She could see the lights go on. Her sensitive hearing picked up the sound of his struggle, his denial, his pleading and the sound of blaster fire. She watched as Zag and his grunts left.

. . .

The call came on her internal Com link. She knew who it was from, but answered it anyway.

"What do you want?"

"Are you okay? You haven't moved for two days."

"Why do you care? And no, I'm not okay, I killed Deke."

"What are you talking about?"

"I-I set him up so Zag, his Synth supplier killed him."

"He deserved what he got."

"Did he?"

"What are you going to do now?"

She shrugged, "You own me, don't you know?"

"I don't own you by choice, I own you by chance, someone has too. We can

talk it over, we'll think of something."

'We'll think of something,' he said, 'We'll think of something.' No one had ever asked her what she wanted to do.

Lola started when she heard the hover settling outside, but she did nothing, choosing to sit there and wait. A moment later, Joshua shoved through the half open door of the crumbling building.

She was dressed in an old spacer uniform, the outline of the missing insignia still visible, and had pulled a ball-cap over her head, her hair tucked up inside it. She was dirty.

"Come on," Josh said.

Lola stood up, accepting the thermo blanket he wrapped around her shoulders. He led her to the hover and they drove in silence back to his quarters.

Once in his flat, he shoved her into the shower cubicle, "Give me your clothes and take a shower. There's a robe just outside the door."

Lola hesitated, "Joshua, I..."

"Just do it, we can talk later."

She reappeared, twenty minutes later with Josh's robe pulled around her, trailing behind her on the floor.

"I have a CyMarL power supply, if there's anything else you need, I'll get it."

She nodded.

"I can stay somewhere else tonight, if you'd be more comfortable."

"No, don't leave, I need to talk."

"Lola, I didn't help you so I could take advantage of you. I helped you because you needed help. I'm going to make some coffee, would you like anything?"

"A cup of tea, very weak."

She was huddled on the sofa, knees up under her chin, arms around her shins, her body racked by an occasional shiver.

Josh handed her a cup and sat down, sipping his coffee, "Want to tell me what

happened with Deke?"

"I killed him. I wanted to prevent him from doin' to someone else, what he did to me... no, that's not right... see, I really am out of control. I'm tryin' to justify my actions. What I really wanted was revenge. I wanted that bastard to suffer. I was so pissed off that I let my emotions rule my head."

"Lola, that's perfectly natural in your situation, you have been used and abused."

"But I'm an android, I should always be in control. I must be defective, damaged. Programmin' is based on the concept that errors don't happen, any eventuality must be accommodated, even the unimaginable."

"That's too simplistic. You're not a computer running a program. Your 'brain' and memory model make you into a sentient being, a being based on the human model. You're capable of learning, including bad habits, extrapolating data incorrectly and capable of coming to the wrong conclusion. Experience will help you make the correct decision just as it helps humans."

"Hmmp... Why are you helpin' me?"

"Because you need it, because I can give it, because you can be so much more."

"More than what? A prostitute?"

"Well... yes, your potential is so much greater."

"What's wrong with fuckin' for a livin'? I'm programmed to want to do it. What could possibly be more human than being a professional in that most-human of activities?"

"Enjoying ones self is part of human nature, but everything else shouldn't be sacrificed for the pursuit of pleasure."

"If you've studied robotics, you know it would be impossible separatin' my sex drive from the rest of my personality. The only thing that could be done would be complete initialization and re-programmin' with a new memory model," Lola couldn't help shuddering.

"Both you and I know that that would be akin to murder. You would be a different person."

"Anyway, I don't want to change my sex-drive, but both you and I know it's

going to cause problems.”

“Problems? How?”

“If we work together, sooner or later, our lives are going to get intertwined.”

“Not necessarily.”

“Oh yes they will, I’m designed to be irresistible.”

“You underestimate me.”

“No, you overestimate yourself.”

“Even if that did happen and I’m not saying it would, would that be so bad?”

“It would depend on how you felt about competition.”

“You mean you couldn’t be monogamous?”

“I can be, but I’m not designed to be. There will be times when it will be very difficult to be monogamous. Sooner or later, most men I meet will try to have sex with me.”

“Well you can tell me if I’m getting too close, I wouldn’t want to cramp your style.”

Lola looked at him, he was jealous already.

“Why did you ask me to help you? You own me. I’ll even let you change my protocols back and then you can tell me what to do whatever it is you want me to do.”

“No, that would give you the easy way out. If you want to be treated as an equal then you should have to make the same decisions and choices that everyone else has to. I want your actions to happen due to your own free will. I want you to be responsible.”

She had often thought about being free, but it was always such a remote a possibility. Now that it was looming large on the horizon she wasn’t so sure.

“What if I make a mistake?”

“But you will, everyone does, it’s called ‘learning’.”

She thought about it. No one had ever asked her if she wanted to do something. She was always told what to do.

"I'll consider it, but only if you can accept me as I am. I can't change who I am. I don't want to."

"I'm not asking you to, and I'll not ask you to do anything you don't want to do."

"Okay, but on a trial basis... are you sure you really know what you're lettin' yourself in for?"

"I think so."

"Sit next to me Joshua," she said, patting the sofa next to her.

Josh did as she asked, knowing that she had a need for companionship.

After a moment, Lola reached over, picked up the umbilical from the CyMarL power supply and handed it to Josh. Without breaking eye contact, she undid the robe, exposing her belly and leaned back, "Since you've done it before..."

Josh took the cable and touched the warm surface of her skin. It felt so real, that he wanted to kiss it, but instead, he put his hand on her belly and inserted the umbilical. She quivered as the data connection was established.

"Hold me," she said.

As she leaned on his chest, he put his arm around her shoulders. He could feel her warmth, her muscles twitching; he could see her eyes moving behind her closed eyelids.

"Tomorrow, we visit the Doctor," Joshua said.

Lola stirred, a smile creeping onto her sleep slackened expression. She knew he wanted to fuck her, everyone does, but he made no move on her. She found him confusing, she felt safe. He had given her the ability to resist, making her own decisions. She vowed to herself that she was never going to let herself be taken by the likes of Deke again. She will die first.

. . .

"That's the place, Joshua."

Josh and Lola had driven through the Port of Korfyu to the outskirts, on the

western side. The 'place' was a large, rundown building with a hand painted sign out front, 'Bionetics (CML)'.

"This is goin' to be pretty expensive, are you sure you can afford it?"

"No, I'm not sure, but I plan on getting you employed by the Dragoman government. They'll foot the bill, it's no different than medical care. Are you sure that's the place? It doesn't look like much."

"They like to take a low key approach, at least on the outside. See the '(CML)' on their sign? This shop is part of Cyber Mars Limited. They wanted an outlet on the Rim."

The front door opened into a shabby reception area where a balding, older man was talking to an overweight receptionist. The man turned his head when he heard their entry.

"Lola," he yelled, as she ran up to him and jumped onto him, wrapping her arms around his barrel chest.

"Max, I've missed you."

They hugged tightly for a moment, Lola kissed him passionately. Max kissed her back, just as passionately.

Max glanced at Josh, "Where's that bastard, Deke?"

Briefly, Lola looked down, "Ahhh, he was killed in a drug transaction."

"Shame... who's the Boy Scout?" Max asked, indicating Joshua.

"He's my new guardian, Joshua."

"Why did you get another one? I told you I would give you your freedom. Androids deserve recognition, independence. When are organics going to realize that they are just a stepping stone in evolution and not the goal? Androids are the logical next step."

"Max, I want to be legal. I don't think this is the time..."

"Why not? Look at you, you have more intelligence than all of your guardians put together. Compassion? No contest. Humanity? Look at Deke... that's humanity for you."

"Androids need humans, Max. An android is a snapshot, an engineer's

interpretation of what makes up a human bein'. Without human beings we're nothin'."

"That was true Lola, but not with you and other later models."

"Okay, I need human beings, Max. Joshua has already removed my restraints, I am almost free."

"'Almost free' is not 'free'. Androids are too critical to the daily operation of the Federation to be given their independence. You're going to be at the mercy of organics for a long time."

Sensing an argument she could never win, Lola just nodded.

"Okay, okay, sorry. I'm off my soap box now, what can I do for you Lola?"

"Diagnostics and damage, typical 'John' stuff, some of it, anyway."

"Okay, come in the back," he said, holding a door open for her.

Lola turned to Josh, "C'mon, I want you to see what you're gettin' into."

Max glared at Josh, but then followed Lola through, letting the door go behind him.

They walked down a narrow, grimy hall and stepped into a new, well equipped, examining room. Lola removed her clothes and stood, leaning back, onto a large, almost vertical, examining table. Josh looked around; the rundown exterior was just a facade. This facility was cutting-edge, some of the equipment he recognized, but most was totally unfamiliar.

Max snorted when he saw the pads on her chest, "Fuckers... filthy animals, how many times is that, Lola, a dozen? Why shouldn't an android be accorded the same care and respect a human would get?"

Lola nodded, "Maybe I do get the same care and respect, Max."

Max looked at her, not answering, and touched a pad on the console. The examining table tilted over backwards, until Lola was horizontal. Max touched various pads on the console, the screen changing with each touch.

"He's paying, right?" Max asked Lola, indicating Josh with his thumb.

"Yes, 'he' is," Josh said, annoyed.

"Take it easy boy scout," Max said.

"He's not like Deke, Max."

"Why not, he's human isn't he? It's just a matter of degree," Max didn't wait for an answer, "Okay, I'm going to scan you completely. It's been years since you had a complete Mechanical. While that's running, I'll take care of your damage."

Max pulled the pads off her breasts and examined them, "This won't be too bad. Spraying the dressing on and applying the pads was the best thing you could've done. It's protected the damaged area, just a little clean up and they'll be fine."

"Josh did that," Lola responded.

Max grunted as he cleaned the damaged area and trimmed it. Then he touched the console. A moment later two sealed bags dropped into the tray next to it.

One by one Max opened the bags, examined the contents, checked the color match and applying an adhesive, placed them over the damaged area on each breast. As each was applied, Max punched the console, verifying nerve continuity and touched another pad that forced fluid through the ducts. A quick application of the UV lamp and they adhered seamlessly.

"That feels better already Max," she said, as her sub-processes 'relearned' the repaired area.

Max went back to the flashing console, touched it and examined the screen, "Your pelvis is bent, it'll be a major operation to fix it."

"What's your recommendation?"

Max thought for a moment, "Recalibrate and live with it. You're going to have a slight limp, but it's not going to impede you. Fixing it is a very lengthy, complex operation with the potential to cause other problems."

"Okay, just recalibrate."

Max nodded.

"Your knees, right shoulder and back have also suffered some minor damage. The damage is easy to fix, I'll take care of it. Do you want me to run a Mental boy scout?"

"Of course not," Josh said, annoyed that Max would think he would.

Max looked at him, but said nothing.

"We have to get clothes for her," Josh said, as Lola was getting off the examining table.

"I can supply a standard, CyMarL package, custom made for Lola. Nothing will fit better," Max said, entering salesman mode.

"I have noticed, but she needs something to wear in public," Josh responded.

Lola giggled, she was in her element. Max didn't seem to notice his own play on words.

"Lola?"

"Sure, standard tropical package, but not hooker, Max."

"What's in it?" Josh asked.

"Normal things, dresses, slacks, blouses, cloak, jacket, under clothes, shoes..."

"Add two Dragoman military khaki jumpsuits, a hat and boots, anything else, Lola?"

"No, that'll do for now."

"I hope you have good credit Joshua," Max said handing him the data pad.

Josh looked at it and whistled, but thumbed the ID pad, acknowledging the sale.

"I haven't seen Xan for a while," Max casually said, as they were leaving.

Lola's head jerked around, her eyes meeting his. Searching his eyes she could see he was worried. If he was worried, then she should be too.

"I'll do everything I can."

Max nodded.

As Lola and Josh were walking up the dimly lit, dirty hallway, Josh thought he heard a voice.

He turned and looked back down the hall, the way they had come, but it was empty. Then he glanced at Lola, "Did you say something?"

Lola shook her head.

"I could have sworn I heard a voice..."

"What did it say?"

Josh looked at her, but then shook his head, "It doesn't matter."

'You be good to her,' the voice had said, carrying an implied threat if he wasn't. It was as though the thought had been inserted into his mind. Some of Max's playing around Josh assumed.

In the reception area, Josh turned to her and asked, "Who is Xan?" but Lola had already started out the door.

"Lola, wait."

"I have to find Xan."

"You can't go, not yet."

"I must, you're not going to stop me Josh."

"I'll give you a lift, where ever you want..."

"Okay... thanks Josh... I'm just not used to having people want to help me..."

Lola had him stop in the seediest part of Korfyu and she got out. Josh watched her disappear into the crowd and then drove back to his place.