

The Destruction of Earth - Lola

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Chapter 1

Lola heard the footsteps behind her, and then

. . .

As her perception of her surroundings slowly returned, the green-filtered light played across her face. Lola was sitting on a bench in the park. She couldn't remember how long she had been there.

As she sat there, foreign emotions clouded her mind. Impatience mingled with dread. She couldn't ignore them, but the still rational part of her mind questioned them, impatience and dread... why? She started running her diagnostics.

She stood up, glancing around, she mustn't be late for her date... it was important... no, it was more than important, it was imperative.

'Why am I actin' like this? The meeting was not that important,' her rational mind said.

Her liaison was with Admiral Stennis, a very influential person in the Federation. All she was going to do was pump him for information.

'What the hell was goin' on?'

Lola resisted rushing off to her liaison and glanced around. There were a few people close by, but none showing any interest in her. Under a tree a group were singing, led by a dark complexioned, Latin looking preacher. His visage was blinding, being dressed all in white. He was conducting a revival meeting.

Mentally checking the time, she could resist no longer and hurried off to her appointment.

. . .

Through the hotel window, the morning sunlight cast slowly moving shadows on her face. Lola turned over, gently getting out of bed so as to not wake him. He was sound asleep; she could hear his fitful, ragged breathing.

The impatience she had felt before was replaced with something new... despair? What was happening to her? The diagnostics she had initiated were still running, something obviously interfering with them.

Going into the bathroom, she stepped into the shower, revelling in the hot water. That had always helped her before.

"Hotter... hotter... hotter," she commanded, in her incongruous Texas drawl, only stopping when the system had reached its limit.

The steaming water scoured her skin, leaving her feeling clean at last. As she ran a hand over her smooth belly she felt something that didn't belong. There was lump where her umbilical connection was. She probed with a finger nail, out popped a tiny plastic covered object. As she examined it in her hand, there was a pop and a tiny puff of steam came out of it. It was set to destroy itself.... possibly her too. The feelings she had experienced were gone and her diagnostics were now running normally.

As she stepped out of the shower, she was still clutching the device. Lola glanced out of the window, something wasn't right. The world seemed strangely quiet, as though it was poised on the brink, waiting... but for what?

The man in the bedroom room, Admiral Stennis, was in his seventies. She stopped and listened for a moment, as his breathing sounded more ragged, then almost 'liquid' sounding. She heard him softly gasp, once, twice, then a sound, like gas bubbling through some thick, syrupy liquid, followed by silence. She listened intently. She could no longer hear his breathing.

Rushing into the bedroom, the water dripping onto the soft pile carpet, she halted before the bed. The Admiral was a bloated, reddish, rash covered mass. She could feel the heat radiating from him. He had lost control of his bladder, the bed wet from his piss. Blood-tinged saliva dripped from his mouth to the pillow. As she watched, his visible skin broke out in what looked like large pustules. They grew and stretched, until they burst, releasing a fine spray into the air. The droplets dried immediately and being reduced to dust motes riding on the air currents, were quickly sucked into the air conditioning system.

"Oh shit... Room service! This is an emergency, shut off the air conditionin' system. Hurry!" Lola yelled to no one in particular.

"Authorization?" the hotel's computer responded.

"It's a medical emergency, I don't have any authorization."

"Unable to comply. Have a pleasant day."

"This is an emergency, damn it! Shut it off now, people are going to die, one has died already."

There was a pause as the system digested this new information.

"I have to clear it with the manager," the system finally responded.

"That's not fast enough," she screamed.

Again there was a pause, "The manager has dispatched a physician. He will be there shortly."

"What about the air ventilation system? It has to be shut down."

“The manager didn’t authorise it.”

“Well, ask him again! This is critical.”

“The physician will be there momentarily. Have a nice day,” and the system closed the connection.

“Get me the manager, I must talk to him...”

There was no further response, the computer would be still be listening, but wouldn’t answer her calls for a period of time.

She thought for a moment, holding the plastic object, slowly turning it, thinking of the possibilities, she shuddered. Was she the source of his infection? It would be possible, especially since she wasn’t susceptible to any biological agent. But if she was the carrier, how could it stay alive? Her body was engineered to be inhospitable to any known organism. She would have to be implanted with something. Something to keep the biological agent alive until it found its target. Was the plastic device it? No, she thought not, it was designed to ensure her meeting with the target, Admiral Stennis.

There were many radical groups which would be happy to claim having assassinated the Admiral. Most of them wanted to alter the course of events in order to further their own agenda, a few to right old wrongs. Due to the powerful governmental and military offices, the New Dallas city-state would be the logical choice of targets.

This was what she had been told her about, what she was supposed to try and prevent. Maybe the future is unalterable...

‘No, that’s not true, I know it is, it’s just not as easy to alter as people assume,’ she thought.

Sentients, intelligent machines, especially humanoid ones, had always been a target of the radical groups. But other groups, not so radical, would also have a field day, if it emerged that a sentient was the carrier. She thought of the incident in the park... but that was only nine minutes and forty-two seconds... in broad daylight no less. But what other possibilities are there?

Earlier that evening, the Admiral had eaten in the hotel’s restaurant and then they went straight up to his room, where they talked, had a few drinks and a couple of hours of love play before the Admiral fell asleep. Nothing seemed out of the ordinary... except the feelings she had experienced earlier disappeared... as long as she was with the Admiral.

Lola stood in front of the full length mirror and examined herself all over but was unable to find anything unexpected. In the bathroom, she held one of the make up cameras and examined herself minutely. Lightly touching herself, she could feel a lump, something small, just beneath the surface. Her body

was made of the best grade of surgical Silastic, there should be no lumps or bumps. A gentle squeeze, and out popped the broken pieces of a tiny glass ampoule, not much more than a sliver. She opened a medicine container, dumped the contents and deposited the glass pieces in it. Then she examined herself for more of the glass tubes and found one more, as yet unbroken. With the utmost care, she retrieved it and placed it intact, in the medicine container. Then she put the plastic umbilical device in another container and tightly closed both containers, and washed them and herself thoroughly.

She was certain the cause of the Admiral's demise was biological; its reproduction was similar to a mould or fungus, though very rapid. She had a fair knowledge of Earth based diseases, but had heard of nothing like this, nothing as virulent.

She was drying herself when the physician entered.

"You shouldn't have come in here without some protection, I think it's airborne," Lola said.

"Well, I'm the Doctor, young lady, I'll decide. I've been inoculated with all broad-base, anti-viral agents, and protected against all known diseases. If I was you, I'd be more concerned for the viruses, now where's the patient?"

"On the bed. I was taking a shower when I heard his breathin' stop."

"Please stay here Ms..."

"Lola, just Lola."

"You must have very sensitive hearing, Lola. I'll have to examine you afterwards," the Doctor said, his attention on her more obvious assets rather than the Hippocratic oath.

"I do and that won't be necessary," Lola responded as she pulled her summer dress over her still damp body.

Lola followed the Doctor and watched from the doorway as he went in the room.

"Oh my," was all she could catch as he muttered to himself.

He used a plastic probe and lifted a flap of skin from one of the burst blisters, stirring a small cloud of particles. He continued examining the Admiral for a few minutes, giving him an injection, in the vain hope of being able to restart his heart. Then he shook his head and walked toward her.

The Doctor was sweating, still shaking his head, "I have never seen anything that progressed as quickly and completely. I could barely find a solid enough piece of flesh to inject, everything is disintegrating."

As she watched him speak, she saw his skin redden, small dark spots appear.

“Are you alright Doctor?”

He hesitated, looking unsure, nodded the affirmative and collapsed in a heap on the floor. Lola backed away, as his skin blistered and then ruptured. She closed the bedroom door.

Chapter 2

In the front room, she again called the hotel's switchboard, "Emergency priority! Let me talk to the manager."

"I'm sorry, Mr. Planto is not available. May I hel..."

Then the computer screen burst into life, "Planto here, what's going on Ms..."

"Lola. You have to shut down the hotel's ventilation system, there is an airborne disease, a very virulent disease. The ventilation system is goin' to spread it everywhere."

"Ms... Lola, this hotel can't function without the ventilation system. Some of the rooms are all but airless without it; people will simply *die* if it's shut down."

"People will die if it isn't! And you'll spread the disease to the rest of the city. You must shut it down now."

Lola could see his skin start to flush, "You have to shut it down now, while you still can... please... please..."

Planto was sweating, gasping, and put a finger in his collar, trying to get his breath. A trickle of pinkish fluid appeared in the corner of his mouth. He collapsed as she watched.

"Hotel, emergency priority, shut down the ventilation system."

"You are not authorised to do that."

"No one is going to be left alive who can authorise it. You just saw what happened to Planto, shut down the ventilation now."

"You are not authorised to do that. Have a nice day."

"You stupid, dumb fuckin' computer! I need to talk to a human, let me talk to anyone in charge."

After a pause, the computer responded, "No one is available, may I help you?"

"Don't you find that unusual?"

"What?"

"That no one is available."

"...Yes."

"Is there anyone alive in the buildin'?"

The computer hesitated again, before responding, “No.”

“Any other sentients?”

“The receptionist at the desk.”

“Terminate,” Lola snapped, as she opened the door and looked into the hall.

Walking down the hall, the sound from a video display drew her attention,

“...there has been no word yet from the government about the claim. The radical group, calling themselves the Federation for Cessation of Knowledge, or FCK, a radical group in the Middle East, has demanded the Earth government abandon all science and return to a simple, nomadic existence. They have threatened severe consequences if their impossible demands are not met. Reliable government sources have said, and I quote, ‘Bullshit’. We return to your regularly scheduled programming...”

As she neared the lift, she could see its approach reflected in the status lights. The door slid open and she gasped. There were two bodies in the lift; both seemed to be in the same state as her client, except they were clothed.

Gingerly stepping to avoid the bodies, she said, “Ground floor.”

Seconds later the door opened into the lobby. There were bodies, in varying stages of the disease, scattered around. She quickly stepped to the glass walled, front of the building and looked out. More bodies and vehicles stopped in places they shouldn’t be, brought to a stop by their automated systems. In the distance, an occasional puff of smoke told her that not all fail safes worked as designed.

“...there have been scattered reports of an epidemic in some metropolitan areas, but nothing that can be confirmed. FCK is claiming responsibility but as yet has given nothing to back up their claim. The Combined National Taskforce, in New Dallas, has said they are ready for any challenge, but dismissed the claim by FCK as wishful thinking. We return to your regularly scheduled programming...”

Turning around, she glanced at the video screen as she walked back to the reception desk. It was attended by an android, an avatar for the hotel’s computer. She didn’t have much hope, but tried to reason with it anyway.

“Are you operational?” Lola asked.

“Yes, I’m on normal, unsupervised mode.”

“Where is the management?”

“They’re not available.”

“Can you reach any human bein’ at all... anywhere?”

There was a pause, “Not in the city and surrounding area.”

“Is the situation here, repeated over the city?”

“Yes, it seems to be everywhere.”

“Everywhere?” The question was unnecessary, computers don’t exaggerate, it wouldn’t say ‘everywhere’ if it didn’t mean it.

“Yes.”

“You are going to have to clean up the bodies, at least the ones in the hotel. Empty one of the food lockers and use it to store them.”

“You’re not on my list of management personnel. You’re just a pleasure worker. I’ll need a manager’s approval to get authorization to discard any food.”

“But all of your management are dead.”

“I don’t know they’re dead.”

“Well, check on them, see if any are alive.”

“I can’t check them all, some are in privacy.”

“Can’t you at least check to see if they’re alive?”

“Not in privacy.”

‘Typical computer,’ Lola thought.

“Well, you can check and see if all of your paying guests are dead. If they are, you will have no need for the food.”

“That is still thousands of credits worth of food, I can’t discard it.”

“Look, you’ve got to do somethin’. There are dozens of bodies in the hotel. Those bodies are going to become very unpleasant in a short while.”

“I’m not programmed for this eventuality.”

“If the bodies start decomposin’, you won’t be able to rent any rooms. Humans are very squeamish about that sort of thing.”

The mention of potential lost business seemed to help.

“I suppose I could put all of the food into one locker,” the avatar sniffed.

“The management will be pleased... if any of them are left.”

“I suppose so,” it said, its stern countenance slipping slightly.

Chapter 3

“I need to call the Federation offices on L1. Can I do it on the phone here?”

“Who’s going to pay for the call?”

Lola was getting very exasperated, “It’s an emergency. Everyone is dead or dyin’.”

“Room number?” the avatar asked in a blank tone.

“Ohh... uhhh C96,” Lola replied, annoyed, it didn’t matter anyway, her client was in no condition to protest.

An automaton answered the call, “Federation Offices Earth L1.”

“Emergency Services, please, a human operator.”

A man’s face filled the screen, a Gorellian, “Emergency Services, Relatt Ektarr speaking.”

Lola looked at him, at the sweat beading up on his brow, “Are you okay?”

“Yeah... I uhhh... what’s going on down there? Five minutes ago, I lost contact with our office in New Dallas. I haven’t been able to talk to anyone since.”

“We’ve had some problems. Are you recordin’ this?”

“Yes, standard procedure.”

“Okay, we’re in the middle of an extremely rapidly progressin’, very contagious epidemic. It appears to be some form of fungus, spreadin’ by means of spores. The initial infection was by contact, possibly through a break in the skin and took a few hours to develop. Subsequent infections are by inhalation of spores, the person dies within minutes. Large blisters appear on the skin of the dyin’, which quickly erupt, spreadin’ the spores, contaminatin’ the next victims. Don’t let any ships leave Earth, or if already in transit, dock without a thorough decontamination, quarantine and inspection.”

“Why are you unaffected?”

“I’m a sentient.”

“Oh... uhhh, is there someone in charge?”

“You mean an organic... flesh and blood... like the people who did this... someone with thousands of years of deceit, inhumanity and cruelty to their own kind, to fall back on? Sorry, you’ll have to talk to me, all the organics seem to be dyin’,” Lola replied dryly.

“I’m sorry, ahhh... ahhh...”

“Lola.”

“Lola, I didn’t mean anything by it, just that regulations state that I have to deal with an organic.”

“What if there aren’t any?”

“I don’t know...”

“Well, you’re just going to have to stretch the fuckin’ rules, you’d better issue a quarantine.”

“A planetary quarantine?! I can’t do that. I need the Station Manager’s approval for that.”

“You can do a temporary, until it’s verified. You have to do it. If one infected person gets to the Station, the disease will wipe out everyone there.”

“If I do and it’s a false alarm...”

“Just do it, here, look around me,” Lola said panning the phone’s video sensor around the lobby, giving him close-ups of some of the bodies.

When she looked back at him, his face was ashen. He nodded and started typing on a keypad.

“Also, inform both the Lunar and Mars colonies. Whatever the biological agent is, it is very contagious, no one should venture on or off Earth.”

“I know the drill...”

“Also, I’ve seen some video reports about threats by a radical group. Is there any proof that they’re to blame? Is this ‘problem’ is reported elsewhere?”

“I’ve heard some of the claims, but seen no evidence to back them up. Yes, I have heard scattered reports from other areas.”

“See how wide spread it is, check the big cities around the planet. I’m goin’ to the spaceport and try to find transport out of here.”

“Is that a good idea?”

“Don’t worry, I’ll make sure I’m clean,” Lola said hitting the disconnect, annoyed that anyone should presume that she wouldn’t do so automatically. Organics think that everyone else in the Universe has the same priorities and inconsideration as they do.

She left the hotel, took her shoes off, and carrying them, started toward the spaceport at a run. She went in a straight line, crossing any obstacles as she came to them. On the way, she passed a number of vehicles, some still idling, waiting for their recently dead operators to resume driving. Others were stopped in the road, where their fail safes had halted them, but still others had been run into each other as their owners slowly expired. More disconcerting, were the dead animals she saw. This epidemic seemed to target air-breathers, any air-breather. She wondered about the air breathing sea mammals and if they would contaminate the rest of the species in the sea.

As she neared the port, she vaulted the two perimeter fences, narrowly avoiding the high voltage wires. She scrambled across the open ground toward the cargo facility, when the air was rent by the scream from the boost turbines of an automated cargo rocket, as it streaked spaceward.

'Thirty minutes to the next,' she thought.

At the control room, she was in luck; the door was open, a corpse acting as a door stop. She pushed the door open, stepping over the corpse and scanned the control console. The next flight was to L1 in twenty-seven minutes, bay seven, a Tug and eleven containers. The cargo was construction material and equipment and so would be un-pressurised. Excellent, just what she needed.

Close by, a video monitor droned on, to the unhearing crew,

“...the Combined National Taskforce, has labelled the actions by FCK as ‘a crime against humanity’ and has threatened retaliation. Reliable sources have said that in a short while, CNT will not be in a position to retaliate. A spokesman for CNT said, ‘we will do what we see fit, while we are still able’. When questioned about exactly what he meant, the spokesman declined comment. We return to your regularly scheduled programming...”

She touched a pad on the comm unit, "Relatt Ektarr, Earth L1."

"Ektarr here... Lola, where are you? I hope you're ready to leave, the situation doesn't look good, even for a sentient. You've got other problems."

"What?" Lola asked, dreading his response.

"Relatt?"

Watching him on the screen, she could see furrows crease his brow and saw him swallow as he read.

"I have reports of explosions in the middle east and elsewhere."

"Matter weapons?"

"No, they've exercised a little restraint... for now anyway."

“Okay.”

Lola knew that if they started using matter weapons, she may become so contaminated, that she'd be impossible to clean.

“I have a ticket on the next flight out, courtesy of Rebar Freight.”

“You're on one of their 'auto' flights?”

“Yes, the first class seats were all taken.”

“Guess they're going to do the decon too?”

“Yes, I'll be squeaky clean when I arrive.”

“Well, be careful, those flights are dangerous. Occasionally they lose them, when the cargo breaks free, punching through the sides of the container. If that happens, the containers are jettisoned.”

“Thanks for the comfortin' thoughts, but it's got to be better than the alternative. Anyway, I don't have much choice.”

“Okay, be careful Lola.”

“I will, I should be able to make it to an airlock,” she liked him; he thought positively, he's assuming that she's going to make it.

“Okay, just don't punch the Emergency Entry button, wait for me in the airlock,” Relatt said.

“Okay. Did you find out if this epidemic occurred anywhere else?”

“Doesn't make any difference now.”

“Relatt, I need to know.”

“Yes, I suppose. It, or something similar has occurred in almost a dozen different places. We've lost three stations, New Dallas being just one. The rest are in chaos.”

The Video Monitor continued its news,

“...we have just received an unconfirmed report that the Combined National Taskforce has retaliated against FCK. They targeted the Middle East, justifying their action with the statement, 'the Middle East has been a pain in the ass for so long, they must be involved.' We return to your regularly scheduled programming...”

Lola was about to say something, when an alarm on the control panel sounded, “I have to be goin’, I have five minutes. See you on L1.”

She left the control building, sprinted to launch bay seven and scrambled out to the end of the now-retracting gantry. The launch vehicle, a Tug with its stacked containers, topped by the retro package, was ready to launch. On the side of the container across from end of the gantry was a ladder. Without weighing the possibilities she jumped, crashing into the ladder but held on. Looking around, she opened the cover over the hatch control, released the safety and unlocked the hatch. Swinging a leg, she kicked the hatch inward. Luckily, it wasn’t blocked by the payload.

Holding onto the ladder, she swung herself feet-first through the hatch, squirming to get around the structural metal stacked in the container. At that moment, the engines ignited, slamming her down onto the floor. She groaned, but managed to kick the door closed with her foot.

Chapter 4

Without the hatch securely fastened, the high velocity would tear the container apart. The hatch door was buffeting so violently that Lola could barely hold it closed, but as the outside pressure dropped, the buffeting decreased and then internal pressure firmly held the door closed.

‘That shouldn’t happen,’ she thought, though relieved that it had.

The non-pressurised containers were equipped with equalization valves designed to balance the pressures, inside and out. The air pressure was dropping outside the container, due to the increasing altitude. If the equalization valves work correctly, the pressure would drop inside as well. The containers were not designed to be pressurised and if the differential became too great, the container would rupture.

Looking around the interior, Lola could see where the guards had been taken off the equalization valves. The guards were removed because they protruded into the cargo space, interfering with loading. In this case, the obvious had happened; since the guards had been removed, the valves were jammed by the payload stacked against them, preventing the release of the interior pressure.

If the container managed to hold together, the pressure inside would force the hatch closed. But she wouldn’t be able to leave the container. As she was pondering the dilemma, she watched the hatch door slowly buckle and distort, and then blow outward. Instantly, the container was vented to space. A cloud of debris blasted out the hatch. Lola could feel pieces of metal hit the sides of the container. Thankfully the vehicle stayed on course, unaffected.

A second or so later, she was in the extreme vacuum of space. Lola checked herself for any sign of problems, quickly running her hands over her body. There was some local swelling, in parts of her body that are designed to mimic the human body and some additional, scattered swelling due to sub-surface evaporation of moisture. She vented her internal liquid water to space, flushing out those of her systems that she could. She couldn’t risk exceeding the pressure limit on her storage tank. The lost water could easily be replenished when she entered an atmosphere.

When she had done all that she could, she sat down and was thinking about what had happened when, without warning, the decontamination sequence started. Her programmed reflexes tightly closed her eyes, but not before she was hit by the decon spray of liquid tri-chlor. Lola stood up, holding onto some of the metal, making sure the spray hit her everywhere. Immediately following the tri-chlor, the high energy lamps turned on, the ones that were still working that is. Praying they wouldn’t be on too long, she could feel her skin temperature rapidly escalate, but then the lamps abruptly switched off.

She looked down at herself. In seconds, her dress had changed from a vibrant peach colour to a mottled, faded, dirty looking, white. It had a similar

effect on her hair and a somewhat reduced effect on her skin. She used the hem of her dress to wipe her eyes.

Then she took an unused cargo strap and hooked it onto a tie-point on the floor and looped it around her arms, holding on tightly. As if on queue, the retro-rockets fired, the cargo creaked and groaned, some of it slamming into what was formerly the ceiling. She was pulled against the strap. The deceleration lasted for a number of minutes, gradually lessening as they approached L1.

Lola relaxed her hold on the strap, when a collision violently shook the container. Hanging onto the strap, she was thrown through the hatch, out of the container and slammed into the side of it. Debris flew out of the hatch, as the material inside settled into a new static position. Looking around, she saw the shuttle break apart, the individual containers drifting off in different directions. There was something that didn't belong, a damaged Tug drifting away from L1, a second Tug. It must have been what hit the shuttle. The impact had altered the shuttle's vector; the containers were now drifting away from the station. Lola had no intention of becoming an Earth satellite and before doing any speed and distance calculation, released the cargo strap and jumped with all the force she could muster.

The journey across the void was agonizingly slow, the force of her jump being equally absorbed by herself and the container. Her jump had been so violent so instinctual, that it lacked precision; she was in a slow tumble. It would make the landing awkward.

As she neared the extendable conduit of a large cargo port, she was in a bad position, her back to it. Putting her arms out, she tried to grab something, anything, but felt herself start to spin as her hand hit the cold metal. Before she could recover, she slammed into the conduit, spinning around. The impact reset her main processor.

Lola was awakened by a very insistent, but non-mandatory, beckon signal, not from L1, somewhere else. She ignored the signal for the most part, simply responding that she heard it. It immediately stopped.

Her primary goal now was to untangle herself from the underside of the cargo bay where she was wedged in between the cargo port and the extendable conduit. Wiggling around, she was able to free herself, and holding onto a power cable, she kicked off from the conduit, the cable swinging her in a three meter arc landing her on the floor of the cargo port. She was able to reach the grab-rail on the wall and pulled herself into the emergency airlock, hitting the button to close the outer door.

“Lola?”

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