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JOEL SHEPHERD

# CROSSOVER

A CASSANDRA KRESNOV NOVEL



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Inquiries should be addressed to

Pyr

59 John Glenn Drive

Amherst, New York 14228–2197

VOICE: 716–691–0133, ext. 207

FAX: 716–564–2711

WWW.PYRSE.COM

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*To my parents, for making  
everything possible*



Sunlight lay across the bare floor of the hotel room, falling rich and golden upon the smooth white sheets of the single bed, and the exposed pale arm of its occupant. Sun-dappled sheets shifted as she stirred sleepily, pulling smoothly to the pronounced curve of a hip.

Eyes blinked softly open. For a long moment she lay awake, listening to the morning. Distant traffic could be heard drifting up from far below. City sounds. The faint whine of the maglev line distinct above the rest. Then, past the window, the mournful, deep-throated whine of an aircar passing a skylane nearby.

Loose, dark blonde hair lay mussed and untended to her forehead. She brushed it back with a lazy hand. Rolled onto her back, sheet and mattress smooth and pleasant against her naked skin. Turned her head against the pillow to gaze calmly toward the broad, wide windows that counted for the far wall, tinted darkly gold against the deep glare of the rising sun. Another aircar passed with a sound like a throaty sigh. It moved on past the window, sunlight flashing from sleek, angular lines.

“Minder,” she said, her voice thick with sleep.  
“Less

# CHAPTER 1

tinting, please.” The windows lightened, the sunlight grew brighter. “That’s enough.” The sun was painful to look at now, but her eyes adjusted, filtering the glare.

Outside were the city towers, tall, broad and varied. An architect’s delight, they were. An economist’s dream. A technologist’s marvel. The towers stood not so close as to crowd, leaving plenty of open space between, gleaming golden with sunlight on glass. Aircars curved gently between them, banking slowly, unhurried and safely guided by invisible automation.

This was the city of Tanusha in the morning light, viewed from a single hotel room on the sixty-first floor of the Hanaman building, where the Emerald Si’an Hotel made its residence between the fiftieth and seventieth floors. The woman blinked at the view, no longer sleepy. Calm. Her lips pursed slightly in what might have been a smile. The traffic hummed, a gentle cacophony of life, and she listened, searching for nothing in particular, as her eyes took in the view without really looking . . . just drifting. In the comfortable bed with the silky sheets.

The net traffic was increasing, too. She could hear it—or feel it, which was perhaps more accurate—a steady drift and flow of voices and machine-talk across an undulating landscape of static. It increased as she focused, snatches of words, broken, obscuring walls of encryption, action and counter-action on the early morning airwaves. People talking sleepily over breakfast, their bellies full of coffee or tea, a paper on the slate to read in the golden light through the windows, munching a pastry . . . And she let it go, having little interest at this moment, content to feel it as a constant murmur, pressing comfortably at the back of her consciousness.

It was 07:13 local time on the 24-hour clock. She stretched, luxuriously, arching her back, arms overhead, fingertips brushing the wall. And sighed. Pushed the sheets to one side, swung herself easily off the bed and walked naked to the bathroom, fingers combing her hair into some kind of order.

Emerged from the shower at 07:26, having taken more time than she needed. But that was becoming her habit



these days. She stood on the warm bathroom floor, her skin tingling from the drying cycle, small, fine hairs standing pleasantly on end. Ran a palm across her forearm, brushing at the hairs. Curious. Her forearm tingled. And she smiled at her own wanderings, and gave a slight shake of her head. Picked a brush off the bench, and began work on her just dried hair, watching the mirror as she did.

Pale blue eyes stared back. Attractive eyes, she thought. Yes, definitely attractive, as the hair began to fall into place. She put down the brush and leaned forward on the bench rim, gazing closely into those eyes. Ran the tip of her forefinger across an eyebrow, down to the tip of her nose. And trailed further down, pulling at a lip. Tried a smile, and liked how that looked. Content, she walked back out to the main room, still naked, sat down on the softly carpeted floor and began to stretch.

After several minutes, the door chimed. "Room service," called a very real and unautomated male voice. The woman climbed smoothly to her feet, gave her arms one last swing and reached for her white hotel bathrobe.

"Enter," she said, tying the robe loosely about her waist as the door light flicked to green and the door swung open. A smallish man entered, well dressed and with a bow tie beneath his collar, supporting a breakfast tray in one hand.

"Your breakfast, madam," the very unautomated hotel man said. His cart was in the corridor behind him, loaded with other breakfasts.

"Thank you." She smiled at him, and took the tray from his hands. He smiled back.

"I apologise for the slight delay, Ms. Cassidy. As you may appreciate, only the machines are never late." She waved a hand.

"Not at all. I prefer the personal service."

"I'm very glad." The man smiled again, and gave a small bow before retreating. The door shut behind him, and she was alone

again. The woman carried the tray to her bed, placed it

beside it. She ate her breakfast like that, cross-legged on the bed in her bathrobe, watching the airborne traffic weave and sigh amid the tall, strikingly modern and eye-catching buildings of Tanusha, gleaming in the sun.

She washed down a slice of toast with a fragrant mouthful of Chinese tea, for which she had developed a strong liking, and reached for the small, compact unit on the bedside table. Palmed it in her lap and drew from the side a long, slim powercord. Brushed aside the hair at the back of her head and inserted the slim metal connector into the receiver socket with a small yet profound *click!* that she felt rather than heard, deep in her inner ear. Touched a button on the hand-unit and began the interface.

She found her personal records and files, all safely contained within hotel barriers and encryption walls. Darted inside, sorting bits and pieces, checking her traps, records of access, authorised and unauthorised. Found nothing, which pleased her. Her luck was holding. Surrounding traffic was very strong, as she'd become accustomed to in Tanusha. Automateds darted this way and that, countering, interacting, doing whatever their programming instructed them to do, all with that familiar, mindless tenacity. Minds were slower, pondering, thinking. Walls of light and motion, shapes and textures, glowing, impenetrable yet transparent, branches and limbs of consciousness that grew and retracted with intent or otherwise . . .

She flicked through her records one last time, scanning the numbers, the names, the images. April Cassidy. Which was not her name, but it was the name she wore for now, while it suited her. Born 15th of May standard, 2521, on Octavia 3, city of Tillanna. A registered citizen of the Confederacy, subject to its various rules and principles, recipient of its evident benefits. Both parents killed in the war against the League. No brothers or sisters, or close family of any kind. Raised under the legal guardianship of a war orphanage now disbanded, owing to Confederacy cutbacks on repatriation expenditure, now that the war was over. There were other things, too—  
social security number, birth certificate, credit cards,

records of employment and company details . . . she was a cognitive software expert, self-employed—a journeyman, headed wherever work was available. And, of course, she had plenty of money, and generous terms of credit from her bank.

It was an interesting life. She thought about it for a while, disconnecting the hand-unit and letting the coil retract inside. She wondered what such a person would be like, this April Cassidy, with her orphanage past and her software skills. Sometimes she fancied she empathised, particularly over the lack of parents, a home life, a childhood. At other times she thought the deception might well be beyond her, this woman, with her civilian thoughts and peaceful upbringing, no matter how disrupted. She sat cross-legged in the bright pool of sunlight that fell across her bed, thinking about this life she had borrowed, as the city awoke from a light, almost-slumber, and a new day began.

A good life, she thought, finding peace amid the myriad simple, everyday intentions, the people intent on work, and family, and children on their way to school. The priorities were simple here. Life was a tapestry of basic concerns, and basic needs, and people were happy. The war had never touched this place, although Tanusha's technology and its cash had driven the war's progress to no small degree. She could be happy here. And if not here then, well, there were many stars, and many planets, and many cities and places to see. But for now, there was today. And she had an appointment.

It was 08:19 when she was invited in for her first interview. She left the *Street Scene* magazine on the coffee table in the waiting room, followed the secretary down the corridor to the open door, and walked inside.

"Ms. Cassidy?" the small, Vietnamese-looking woman said as she entered, rising from the seat at her broad working desk.

"That's right," April Cassidy said, exchanging smiles as she shook the other woman's hand. "Nice to meet you, Ms. Phung."

“Likewise. Please, take a seat,” indicating the cushioned chair before the desk. She took it, glancing once more out the office windows as Ms. Phung settled back into her chair. This office was not so high up as her hotel room, only the twenty-third floor. The streets were closer, as was the moving traffic, distinct beneath the shading trees.

“Lovely view,” she commented. “Every office in the city seems to have a view like this.”

“Yes, it’s a definite plus to living and working in Tanusha, that is certain. You’ve travelled quite a bit, I’ve noticed, to look at your résumé.” April Cassidy nodded, legs neatly crossed, hands folded comfortably in her lap.

“Yes, I love travelling. And I’ve never really found a place that I feel I could call home. Although this,” and she indicated out of the window, “this feels very nice. I could certainly get used to this.”

Ms. Phung smiled, and examined the datapad on the desk before her. “You graduated with full honours, I see . . . very impressive.” April Cassidy sat patiently, not fidgeting, waiting for the next question. “How would you rate the Batista University? I’ve not encountered anyone from there before.”

“It’s extremely good. They’re not overly theoretical, as a rule, and they have plenty of private sector involvement, so there are lots of practical, hands-on projects to get involved with. Plenty of job opportunities—I got a number of offers on graduating, but remaining on Octavia wasn’t a high priority for me at that point.”

“Hmmm.” Ms. Phung nodded, appearing genuinely interested, eyes continuing to peruse the slate. “I’ve heard that the opportunities on Octavia are quite good.”

“Yes they are, but I’ve always been a little more ambitious. I wanted to travel, and probably to work some place where the environment is a little more cutting edge. Most of the best places on Octavia are already taken, and promotion doesn’t come easily.”

“I see.” More study. “And what drew you to Wardell Systematics?”

“It was one of the medium-sized firms most highly rated for innovative work in Tanusha, with lots of R & D, plus some very interesting long-running contracts—that aroused my interest.”

“You’d choose a medium-sized firm over a larger one?”

“Given the choice, yes, I would. I like the necessity towards creativity wherever possible. That’s the kind of work that most excites me, and it’s what I’m best at, too.”

Ms. Phung nodded to herself. “Well, perhaps you could show me what you can do?”

“Of course.” She reached into her inside pocket and withdrew her small black hand-unit, withdrew the cord, reached the end around behind her head, and jacked herself in. Thumbed the receiver button on the hand-unit, which set itself to the office frequency with a click and rush of data, a visual, sensual wave. Strong setup. But she was getting used to that in Tanusha. “What would you like me to look at?”

“This.” Ms. Phung tapped a few buttons on her desk keypad, and a strong system appeared amid the corporate boundaries . . . solid, intricate construct, a very impressive piece of intelligence programming. “What can you tell me about it, at first glance?”

“Well, it appears to be a level nine cognitive function . . . in fact, I’d say it was a visual sorting function, the way the memory bands are branched with third level backups as they are . . .”

The analysis went on for a while. Ms. Phung gave no overt signs of approval or disapproval, but April Cassidy could tell she was impressed. Which was not surprising. April Cassidy, for her part, was similarly impressed with the level of engineering in Wardell Systematics’ work—much of it was truly cutting edge and very creative, verging on custom design. Which was the one area where the smaller firms had a real edge over the larger ones, who were unable to get big enough returns from the smaller, custom contracts to justify their initial expenditure. And she doubted that this particular construction was the most they were capable of, either—much of that would be classified. Very interesting.

“I’ll have a discussion with the rest of the group,”

Ms. Phung told her when they were finished and rising from their seats. “Obviously I can’t promise you anything in advance, but I must say I’ve been very impressed with what I’ve seen here today.”

“Thank you. You do know where I’m staying?”

“The Emerald Si’an Hotel, yes. I’ve got the room number recorded somewhere. That’s a nice place, the Emerald. Try the Thai restaurant on the top floor, it’s marvellous.” She extended her hand, and April Cassidy took it in a firm, friendly clasp, and smiled.

“I’ll remember that, thank you.”

“You have other interviews today, I suppose?”

“Yes, three more today, and another four tomorrow. I intend to spend the time in between just wandering around.”

Ms. Phung sighed. “Well then, I suppose that if we did decide we could take you on, we’d be lucky to get you, wouldn’t we?”

April Cassidy’s smile broadened. “As you say, I can’t guarantee anything . . . anyway, it was a pleasure to meet you, and I’m sure I’d be very happy to work for your company if that is what eventuates. It all just depends. I’m sure you understand.”

Ms. Phung smiled back. “I do. I understand very well.” She walked to the door and opened it. “Just one thing,” she said, and April Cassidy paused in the doorway. “Your old company on Reta Prime, Boushun Information in Guangban . . . why did you leave them, if you don’t mind my asking?”

“Not at all. Well, I’m . . .” She smiled, and gave a small, self-deprecating shrug. “. . . I’m a fairly restless person. Boushun were very good to me—and I to them, I’d like to think—but I just had a feeling that I could do better elsewhere. And Guangban isn’t nearly as nice a city as Tanusha. I think it’s more sensible to make a move like that when you’re younger and don’t have too many commitments and connections. So here I am.”

“Indeed. I’m very envious.” They both laughed. “Well, have a nice time in Tanusha, and I may be seeing you

again sometime soon.”

“I’d like that. See you later.”

April Cassidy left the offices of Wardell Systematics feeling pleased with herself. Things were going very well. With any luck, within a few days she’d have the pick of the bunch, and a very impressive bunch they were, too. It was highly unlikely that they’d ever find a young technician with quite her degree of ability, although she’d been careful not to show off too much, just as they’d been careful with her. The work would be interesting, the pay would be excellent and she might just make some friends along the way. It was a very agreeable list of positives. Yes, all in all, she was beginning to enjoy Tanusha.

She ate her lunch that day in one of the green parks between the roadways, on a quaint wooden bench-seat under the spreading branches of a leafy tree. The meal was a couple of crisp vegetable rolls with a spicy dip, bought from a parkside vendor—it tasted delicious. The breeze made a pleasant sound through the spreading leaves, mingling with the surrounding traffic noise, though that remained muted even down here at ground level. Some nearby smaller buildings rose unobtrusively above the trees. Near and distant the towers rose, evenly yet randomly spaced, tall and gleaming against the crystal blue sky.

A remarkable exercise in city planning, Tanusha. Social modelling on a massive scale. “A Grade” office towers—or mega-rises—were about 400 metres high, as uniform in height as they were varied in imaginative, inspired design. They stood widely spaced, no two in close proximity, except for the occasional twin-pair, each marking a convergence of traffic and building density. Mid-size buildings clustered around such centralised hubs—business districts, a crisscross of road and rail transportation, fanning outward. Mid-size highrises ranged from 100 to 150 metres and varied greatly, though evidently within zonal limits. Between the hubs lay suburbia, undulating to occasional multi-storey flats penetrating the carpet of lush green trees that lined the many streets, parks, schools, temples, shopping districts and sports stadiums.

She could see the patterns, even down here at ground level, though one had to venture high to truly appreciate the 57 million people-strong scale of it all. High-density pockets amid a varied sea of human residence. Grand convergences, dropping low then rising once more. Computer modelling accounted for traffic flows, for services and the availability of, and distance from, Tanusha's multifarious attractions and necessities. High-cost and low-cost residencies blended together to mutual advantage. There were no bad locations in Tanusha. The planners had obviously seen to that. Such industrious civilianisms impressed her. And more to the point, the place was beautiful, with variation and aesthetic design wherever she looked. And so many trees. She took another bite of her lunch, and felt pleased at her choice of cities in which to start this new life.

Her interviews had gone very well, and she was confident she'd made a good impression. Tanusha's software tech was legend, almost certainly the best in the Federation, but still, she had certain capabilities she knew very well they would rarely have seen before. And she'd kept a lot to herself. An unfair advantage, no question. She'd been relying on it for going on a year now. It kept her comfortable, well paid and secure. Among other things.

A commotion nearby caught her eye—children, perhaps eight or nine years old, running haphazardly across the green lawn between the trees, shouting and laughing. That building must be a school, then. Several of them were kicking balls or throwing frisbees. They made a lot of noise, most of it unnecessary. Several nearby lunchers got to their feet and moved off, looking annoyed or bemused, their peaceful lunch-break now disturbed. April Cassidy sat on, eating the last of her vegetable rolls and watching the children with intense curiosity, like a musician reading from a particularly interesting sheet of music. And smiled at their arguments, at trivial things elevated to such a ground-breaking importance.

She finished her last mouthful and got up, tossing her trash in the bin provided and strolling off toward the



walkway that would take her to a lightrail stop, from where she could get to her next appointment. Not that she was intending to go the short way there. A gridiron ball hit the ground in front of her, a young boy running after it, still some way off. She picked it up with one hand and put her briefcase on the grass. The boy held up his hands expectantly, but she gestured not at him but at the girl he'd been playing with, some thirty metres away now. Eyes wide, she jogged backward, awaiting the throw. April Cassidy threw it not particularly hard, but the ball shot upward through the sunlit air in a huge arc, spinning madly and sailing on to land a good ten metres behind the girl even as she ran madly after it.

The boy made a loud, awestruck sound and grinned at her. April Cassidy grinned back, picked up her briefcase and walked off toward her rail-stop.

It was 18:32 when she got back to her hotel room at the Emerald Si'an, and outside the windows the dimming sky was streaked with shades of pink and orange. She placed her briefcase on the freshly made bed and began to pull off her clothes, folding each item onto a neat pile beside the case. That done, she walked to the shower and stayed there for a while. Then she crossed to the wardrobe to select another outfit from where she'd hung them on her arrival in Tanusha last evening. She pondered for a moment over the tight black dress, before deciding no, not on her first night out. And settled finally on the other dress-suit, which was formal but had flared hems and wide cuffs, flamboyant striping and a low neck that revealed some skin beneath. That plus a black blouse, with a low neckline, and matching stockings.

She dressed with the fastidiousness of an utter egotist, examining herself in the mirror on the addition of every new article, but her expression was more curious than self-obsessed. Then for makeup, which she'd never entirely got the hang of—or the point of, come to that—but no matter. She sat herself in front of the mirror with her small cosmetic box and applied a touch to the lips, and eyelids and lashes, with not inconsiderable artistry

for one so lacking in practice. And then jewellery . . . well, she had precious few items, save the silver chain with the star-shaped emblem that had some significance to one South Asian cultural group or another—she put it on, and it settled comfortably around her neck, the emblem only just visible above the vee of her jacket.

Finally, she gave her hair a quick brush and examined herself one last time in the mirror. She looked . . . formal. Formally attractive. She hesitated to suppose she looked more attractive than usual—they were only clothes, after all. But she thought she looked very nice. And found herself smiling at her own ignorance.

“What would you know?” she asked the woman in the mirror. The woman smiled back calmly. A controlled display of humour, but genuine. She possessed no other kind.

Tanusha had many popular nightlife districts, but the Fern Street district numbered among the ten most well known, a high ranking indeed for a prolific party town like Tanusha. Fern Street ran along the centre of a protruding bulb of land, isolated by a loop in one of many branches of the Shoban River delta snaking back upon itself. April Cassidy could certainly see where the nightlife industry came from, as she ambled along the curve of riverfront, gazing up at the nearest towers that soared above the riverbanks. Light blazed and flickered off the darkened waters, tossed by the wake of a passing cruise ship and several smaller craft.

A choice piece of real estate, it was. Particularly the isolated bulb on the inner side of the river’s bend, where the towers grew especially thick and well lit. Mostly residential and tourist developments, she thought as she strolled, hands thrust deep into her pockets. With river views on all sides, it was hardly surprising that so many people would want to live here. And where people went, entertainments followed. But river views were everywhere in Tanusha—the megatropolis sprawled across the broad basin of the Shoban delta, where the runoff from the northeastern Tuez Ranges

divided into hundreds of spidery arms that snaked across the flat, forested ground. The riverside topography had obviously given the city planners ideas. People-centres sprang up, lining the banks. The original trees had been kept wherever possible, leafy greenery flanking the gleaming waters in a most un-urban fashion. And she wondered again at the priorities of a city whose designers would devote such care and attention to frivolous fancies.

Couples strolled by, arms about each other as they walked, their way lit by muted pedestrian lights. Music echoed through the air from a multitude of random sources. Fragments of conversation drifted across the water from a passing cruise ship as a jazz band played and glasses clinked.

Most of the attractive young women out on that night, April Cassidy noted, were in the company of attractive young men. Several people glanced at her as she passed, and several of the male glances lingered. Possibly she looked a touch unusual, not in that she was well dressed and attractive, but in that she was alone. But then someone had to be alone, she supposed. How did people become couples without first being singles? She'd been reading the signs for nearly a year now, learning on the job, as it were. Sex was easy. Relationships less so. Courtship was downright confusing. And romance eluded her entirely. She preferred her orgasms uncomplicated and frequent. But then, what would she know?

Further on, the peaceful riverside walk changed. The open space and occasional tree gave way to a row of compact old-fashioned brick-and-mortar buildings, four storeys high and with flat, colourfully painted fronts, narrow windows and attractive wooden shutters. All about were tables, crowded with diners and the roar of mingled conversations, music and laughter. She picked her way leisurely among the crowds, watching the waiters with their loaded trays and the people gathered about the tightly packed tables, intent on conversation.

The entire waterfront now was bars and restaurants, with new premises every few steps and signs by the walkway advertising the local specialty. It smelt delicious. Everything

did.

She finally found an empty table right by the riverside, in a slightly quieter section of the row. A well-dressed waiter took her order, which she selected entirely at random, and moved off purposefully. Nearby, a melodious saxophone was playing, unaccompanied and very pleasing to the ear. From further along, a lively techno-rhythm was thumping, dimmed by the waves of conversation.

Her meal, when it arrived, was . . . different. Callayan seafood, from the fish farms along the neighbouring coastline. The waiter, having no other customers to attend to, assured her that it was a local delicacy. April Cassidy wasn't sure—it was certainly rich, and strong, but very, very unusual. By the time she'd finished it, and half of the glass of fruit wine that accompanied it, she'd decided that she liked it. Which was her usual conclusion about unusual things. She ordered dessert and started on the second half of the wine, gazing out across the water.

A man slipped into the seat opposite her. "Do you mind if I sit here?" he asked.

"No, of course not."

He smiled easily.

"I'm Joachim." Extended his hand, and she took it.

"April."

"April. That's a lovely name."

Conversation with Joachim proved interesting, if not spectacular. Obviously he wanted to get her into bed. She looked him over as they talked, surreptitiously, and decided that his chances were pretty good. Thus decided, she enjoyed her fruit ice-cream dessert and a second glass of wine that Joachim bought for her, and enjoyed the company.

"So what do you do for a living, Joachim?"

"I work for a small communications firm, Hsu Communications—you probably won't have heard of them since you're so new in town." She shook her head, sipping her wine. "So, you know, I've got this great view from my office in the Mohan building . . ."

She learned a fair few things about Tanusha from Joachim that evening. Mostly small things, like where the best entertainment arcades were, and who the most famous martial arts star was, and how to get a line of credit when you were seriously overdrawn from too many late-night benders, doubtless with an assortment of single, attractive women of whom she was only the latest. After half an hour, she thought she'd probably have preferred her own company again, but she fancied she was getting a feel for the typical Tanushan resident, which had to be worth something. And besides, she rather had her heart set on sex.

12:37, and April Cassidy stood naked before the broad, clear windows of Joachim's apartment. Tanusha at night was a spectacle to behold. She had never seen so many lights, such variety of light, probing, strobing, finger-like or centred patterns and colours intentional or otherwise . . . she placed a hand to the cool window, palm splayed, and trailed her eyes in a lazy sweep across the never-ending horizon of blazing lights.

The central mega-rise of this region soared up to her left, this one shaped like a sail, glass and metal in a mutually enfolding embrace, ablaze with corporate signage that conformed to the architectural intrigue. About its skirts fanned the middle highrises, an irregular jumble of disparate shapes, crowded and clustered unpredictably above streets ablaze with neon and nose-to-tail late-night traffic. One of Tanusha's hubs. One of hundreds. Beyond, the buildings faded to parks, trees and a vast expanse of forested suburbia broken by the bend of yet another branch of the Shoban, gleaming in the electric night. And beyond them, other mega-rises staked out additional hubs like flags, sometimes grouped close together, sometimes forming corridors along strategic stretches of river or road, sometimes isolated and alone, but always purposeful. Aircars in their hundreds wound between.

A trained and patient eye could discern the invisible skylanes, watching the drifting, bending masses of blinking airborne lights. Like swarms of fireflies in a forest, stretching

away across the vast, urban distance.

Her eyes followed as one of the airborne transports whined mournfully by, a shimmering reflection slipping across its gleaming shell like mercury, running lights blinking. Voices played at the back of her consciousness, a building pressure, then receding with tangible, physical sensation. Machine traffic, people traffic, sharemarkets, transport guidance, personal calls . . . all blended smoothly into one clear presence. Thus the city spoke to itself, and thus to the other cities about the globe, and to the station above, and the planets and the people beyond even that. The net was huge. Vast. And many, many things beyond . . .

She turned to look at Joachim, who lay naked amid the comfortable tangle of sheets, limbs splayed amid the fall of night light from outside. Sighed, softly, and began to pull on her clothes from where they'd fallen 107 minutes before. Joachim did not stir, having had perhaps one glass too many in the evening past. And she had worn him out—107 minutes was apparently much longer than he was accustomed to.

Well, she thought, as she fastened her belt about the waist of her jacket, she had no complaints. It had been a while, that was all. A week, at least. She checked that her wallet was still in her pocket and that her various cash and identification cards were still where they ought to be, and then finger combed her hair back into some kind of order in the gleam of window light before Joachim's bedroom mirror. Her hair was slightly strewn, but she liked the effect and she smiled at herself in the mirror. The mirror smiled back.

And then, because she harboured a secret ambition to one day become a hopeless romantic, she walked to Joachim's bedside and kissed him gently on the lips. Joachim's breathing may have altered slightly, but his eyelids never so much as fluttered. April Cassidy moved softly to the door, opened and closed it silently and walked off down the empty corridor, the soft remnants of a saxophone melody running gentle circles through her mind.

That night, alone in her hotel bed, she dreamed.

She was surrounded by cold, dark metal. Loud, mechanical noises echoed and crashed, and heavy forces crushed her into her seat, then tossed forward against the restraint bar. Her thickly gloved right hand clasped the grip of a rifle, locked into a heavy brace. Her body was encased in armour, lightweight but hard, and a helmet strap pulled tight beneath her chin, visorplate open, systems temporarily offline in the pre-drop.

Other soldiers sat on the benches around her, similarly armed and armoured, secured by their restraints as the forces slammed them this way and that and the engine noise whined in their ears. She knew their names, these soldiers. There was Tran, child-faced and slight. Rachmin, cold-eyed and narrow-jawed. Chu, tongue protruding from a corner of her mouth in nervous habit. Dobrov, dour and grim. Mahud, with barely restrained eagerness. The man sitting opposite regarded her darkly. Sergei. Or Stark, as he was more often called.

“Not long now, Sandy.” She could see the target image on the forward scan uplink, drawing closer. She looked about her. Another sudden lift slammed her hard down into the seat, blurring her vision. Her discomfort grew.

“My name’s not Sandy. I’m April Cassidy now.”

“Wha’s tha’, Cap’n?” asked Chu.

“My name,” she repeated. “I’m not Sandy any more. My name is April Cassidy.” The return stares were blank, uncomprehending. Tran yawned.

“Approaching the target, Captain,” said Stark. His stare was ominous, as always.

“I can’t lead you,” she told him. “I’m not supposed to be here. This is a mistake.” The discomfort grew worse. There wasn’t much time, and she was unprepared, so unprepared. How could she lead them without her plans? Where were her intelligence reports? She always had intelligence briefings before an operation, but she couldn’t remember receiving one.



“Thirty clicks,” said the pilot. She didn’t know the

pilot's name. Or was it Marsh? No, it couldn't be. Marsh had been killed in the Riemus op. She felt a surge of panic.

She had to know the pilot's name. How could she let her people be flown into a firezone by a pilot she wasn't checked out on? No, this was a bad op, she couldn't let this continue . . .

"Abort," she snapped into her mike, "abort mission. This is Captain Cassandra Kresnov ordering an abort of . . ." Good God, she'd forgotten the mission codename. That was impossible. She stared helplessly at Stark, who stared back, offering little comfort.

"What's the matter, Cap'n?" Mahud asked her from further along, grinning. "Cold feet?"

"Twenty clicks," said the pilot, and another thrust of G slammed her helmet against the headrest. Fire ripped past, targeting acquired and Cover replied with violence, tracking and tagging . . .

"I'm not meant to be here!" she shouted at them desperately. "I'm not your captain any more, I'm April Cassidy. I'm a cognitive software technician . . ."

Mahud broke into sneezing laughter.

"You're a what?" Dobrov asked her, mildly interested.

"Target approaching, Sandy," Stark intoned warningly. Oh hell, they were all going to die, in a firezone that she hadn't prepared for, in an op without a proper intelligence briefing, because she didn't have her counterpoints locked in and she hadn't a clue what the primary objective was, let alone the withdrawal procedures, and she was going to have to wing it, which meant that they were all going to die. Just like the last time, they were all going to die . . .

. . . And she awoke in fright, bolt upright in bed, dripping with sweat and gasping for air . . .

For a long, long moment, Cassandra Kresnov sat upright in bed, sweat cooling in the mild room temperature, the sheet fallen to her hips.

Sandy. Her name was Sandy. She'd thought that to change it would be simple, and that would be that. Her official records swore blind that her name was and always had



been April Cassidy, but the official records were fake. Captain Cassandra Kresnov, Dark Star special ops. As if she could ever have escaped it.

Outside the window the sun was rising. It was 6:24, and she'd had slightly less than six hours' sleep, but anything over four hours was an indulgence really. Sleepiness was not a common affliction for April Cassidy. For Sandy.

She screwed her eyes shut in frustration. Cassandra Kresnov. Sandy, to her friends. If friends they really were. Hard to tell with that bunch of two-dimensional personalities for whom "kill or be killed" was not just a survival strategy but an entire moral philosophy. Perhaps she'd been a bit like that herself, once. Perhaps. But they were all dead now. And she got up, not wanting to think about it any more.

Emerging from the shower, dry and somewhat recovered, she sat on the floor, and stretched. Muscles that had not been seriously exercised in over a week creaked and groaned their displeasure. Stretching helped, but she knew she would be well advised to do some more serious exercise soon. Which would be difficult, considering that most exercise in a place like Tanusha was done in public. But she thought she could probably find something that would do her some good while not frightening the locals too much. Or alerting the authorities.

Breakfast was still 17 minutes away when she finished, so she sat cross-legged on the bed and jacked herself into the net. Her files were still very much in order within the hotel's protective confines, although they had been accessed several times, as she'd thought they would be. All four accessors were the companies she'd had interviews with yesterday. She sorted through their various data trails in thoughtless reflex, following leads in about twenty directions at once, seeing where they'd been, and what they'd done with the information. Company names, address numbers, access codes formal and not so formal, encryption, bypass pathways . . . it all went flashing past at high velocity, sorted, scanned and abandoned, each with equal thoroughness. There were a couple of mental question marks, but otherwise, nothing. And her security tripwires, in

case anyone started searching down other, telltale avenues, were still in place.

But there was nothing like that. Just a bunch of interested companies running the standard legal background checks on a prospective employee, like any good company should. They'd find nothing but glowing recommendations too, not least from Boushun Information, for whom she'd done a genuinely excellent job, adding nearly thirty percent to their annual profit figures while she'd been there. But Boushun were upstarts, willing to take a risk on a relative unknown who could possibly have been a security breach for all they'd known, and from what little they could glean from her education files.

She could have been, too, if money had been her motivation—Boushun would have been none the wiser. But she wasn't, and had left Boushun with her bank balance looking very healthy and her much-needed glowing recommendations on file, without which she wouldn't have much chance of getting into one of these Tanushan tech majors. She'd turned down a big pay rise offer on leaving, too, but Boushun couldn't have been too unhappy—she'd left them with a couple of basic design patents that would be raking in at least fifteen percent profit growth per year for the next six or seven years. At least. She felt good about that, too. Boushun had done her a good turn, and she'd done them one in return. It was such a simple thing, this friendly, civilised business of being nice to people. A simple pleasure. She liked it a lot. And besides, there was plenty more where those software patents had come from.

Breakfast was three minutes late again, delivered by the same hotel employee with the bow tie, who again apologised for the slight delay. He seemed friendly even beyond the usual hotel-politeness, and delayed for a few more words, no doubt making the next breakfast even later. Possibly he'd noticed the casually drawn bathrobe and deduced from appearances that she was in the habit of walking naked about her apartment. Probably he wanted to nail her too.

She smiled wryly to herself, shucking off the bathrobe to eat her breakfast sitting naked on the bed, watching

the magnificence of the rising sun among the towers. Screwing room service would certainly not do—he was late enough already. Although he had to get off work sometime. And then there was that man who'd spared a second and a third glance at her in the elevator yesterday morning. He hadn't been bad looking either. She wondered if she'd see him again this morning. Life in Tanusha for a single woman with decidedly pronounced sexual tastes seemed like a pleasant prospect.

"Anything that moves," they'd said in the military, and they hadn't been talking about shooting things.

Sandy, or April Cassidy, or whatever your name is—you are definitely not a one-man woman.

The thought thus composed, she smiled broadly to herself and attacked her breakfast with renewed vigour. All in all, she was feeling much better.

The Tanushan Heritage Gallery was an experience. She wandered slowly across the polished wood floors, interested as much in the setting as the art itself. The walls were long, white and smooth. Small lights illuminated each exhibit from calculated angles, and the ceiling light was soft and muted. People strolled, and stood, and talked in low, considered voices, studying one canvas or another with serious intensity.

Sandy paused before one such, a tall, rectangular frame that covered much of one wall. It was a mess. Paint everywhere. Red paint, blue paint, green paint, splotted and splashed in thin, seemingly random lines. But not random. She looked closer, eyes narrowed in concentration. Looking for the calculation that must surely exist behind a work like this. It was exhibited in one of the major galleries on the planet, after all. But it was difficult to tell.

But maybe, she thought to herself as she pondered, that was the artist's intent. To make you look. And think. Which struck her as very strange—that an artist could be considered such

↳ by challenging the notion of art itself. Possibly even

devaluing it. She wasn't sure that she liked the idea.

And straightened before the painting, looking around her at the other people, all considering other pieces of equally abstract work, and taking it all very seriously. What were they seeing? she wondered. Something she could not see? Merely the differences between individuals, perhaps? Or was it something specifically to do with her?

She looked back to the painting and altered the visual signature upon her retinas. It only looked cold and flat. A piece of dead canvas with some paint on it. Changed spectrums, and the colour mix only became even more chaotic. Back to standard light. Same old painting. And still a mess.

She remained in the gallery for some time, enjoying the hushed, thoughtful atmosphere. People moved slowly, and no one rushed. Her comfortable walking shoes squeaked pleasantly on the polished floorboards, and if she tried, she could almost ignore the gathering, grating stiffness that was accumulating in her muscles from lack of recent exercise or massage.

Four hours later, following a pleasant lunch in one of the gallery's restaurants, Sandy moved on. The morning sun above the city streets had given way to thick cloud and rain, steady and persistent. She walked briskly along the footpath from the five-storey, anciently styled gallery building, an umbrella in hand, her overcoat wrapped firmly around her legs to keep the moisture from her casual jeans. Wind gusted through the roadside trees and traffic hissed by on road-wet tires. But it was hardly unpleasant and she walked happily enough, shoes splashing in the puddles as the rain continued to fall.

Lightning flashed nearby through a gap between the massive towers. Then boomed, a deep, guttural rumbling that echoed strangely off the buildings. Huddled under their umbrellas, people looked up. A couple of teenage girls laughed and chattered, hurrying on to where the pedestrian cover made a sheltered walk, safe from the rain save for the occasional driving gust.

Up ahead, a man and woman hurried from cover to

a waiting aircab, clambering quickly inside as the doors swung closed—then a building whine, clear and loud above the rush and hiss of the road traffic, and the lights along the pedestrian walk flashed red. People stopped behind the yellow lines, watching as the aircab lifted smoothly away from the cross-striped landing zone and into the air. Sandy stopped too, feeling the familiar static charge prickling at her hair, like pins and needles, then fading as the engine note changed and the aircab accelerated up and away, and the pedestrians walked on again. The next cab in line rolled forward, and the next behind it, rain spilling and beading on slanted windscreens.

In the air above, through the water-stained glass of the ped-cover, Sandy could see the next one coming in to land, taking up the final place in the queue, and the lights at that end began to flash yellow. She had a clear sense of the descending aircab's landing frequency, talking simple, directional binary, up and down the scale as she stepped back quickly to clear the next yellow line. An interesting binary, though, she thought as she walked. A different basic notation from most machine languages. It stood out very clearly.

Thunder crackled, high pitched and racing haphazardly across the sky, then plummeting to a deep, booming rumble that shook the air for several long, ponderous seconds. She fancied she could smell it in the air, that warm ozone-smell of a thunderstorm, alive with energy. Behind her, the aircab settled to the ground with a whining thrum of engines.

Again she sensed the binary tone. Reflexively she broke the signal down as she walked, segmenting it into parts. Visualised the odd branches off the third-phase interactive modulators, and the compressed storage segments that they serviced . . . She sidestepped through the oncoming traffic beneath the long ped-cover, seeing her way without really looking, eyes distant and unfocused. Yes, that was a high band, big meg carrier. It had levels that she could not penetrate, as brief as her reception had been. Probably it was the lightning. Interesting.

She sensed it twice more on the lightrail train, a faintly ghosting presence against the background traffic.

The carriages hummed smoothly past rain-wet streets and the occasional flashing light of an intersection. From her seat by the window, she saw several more lightning flashes, gleaming brightly off the tower windows. Above the train's electric whine could be heard the faint, suggestive rumblings of thunder.

It failed to stop the air traffic though, she noted with an upward glance out of the window. Aircars moved in smooth, curving lines among the towers, obscured briefly by a passing flurry of wet greenery, then visible again. Tower glass reflected an overcast grey, grim and silent beneath the darkening sky.

"Not much of a day, is it?" the woman sitting beside her said, peering past into the bleak, grey light. Sandy mentally disconnected herself from the net connections she hadn't even realised she'd been using, and smiled.

"I like the lightning," she said. "It makes a day interesting."

The woman gave her a thoughtful look. "That's one way of putting it." And was silent.

Content that there would be no further conversation for the time being, Sandy re-established her connections. Frequency input involved necessarily less interactivity than a direct linkup, but it served the purposes of a basic search. As before, she went straight to her records. All was in order. No new visitors. She wondered idly how long it would be before one of her interviews resulted in a job offer. And wandered down one of those pathways while the train pulled into its next stop and people began to get up. Found herself at the Wardell Systematics site, which was very solid and professionally intricate, as she expected. The train stopped, doors opened and those disembarking squeezed past those getting on. Umbrellas were folded, and the new, mildly wet passengers moved to empty seats.

Again that binary signal, and Sandy lost her connection to a momentary rush of static, regaining it almost immediately. For a long, long moment, she stared blankly out of

the window, watching as the trees and the roadway and pedestrians began to slide past the windows at an accelerating pace. Her attention was focused instead on the reflection of a man sitting four rows behind her, in a seat by the aisle. He was carrying some kind of communication gear. Its transmissions were somehow linked to that binary signal. That was what had blanked her connections. It was possible, she knew, that it meant nothing. It was even possible, she thought very, very calmly, that it was a total coincidence.

April Cassidy might have had the luxury of believing in coincidences. Cassandra Kresnov did not.

Her eyes roamed the carriage interior, across the broad rows of comfortable seats and the spacious central aisle. A man sat facing her across the space around the carriage doors. He wore a transparent plastic raincoat over his clothes, beaded with moisture. In its distorted reflections of light it held an image of the entire carriage behind her where she could not see without turning her head.

Sandy snap-froze a brief image and stored it. Focused inward on that internal copy, zooming and then scanning. Sections flashed by, faded and blurred. She began sorting, millisecond fast, finding and discarding. Settled on the clearest, and began enhancing it, clarifying the colour fades and reorienting the warped sections. It left her with a final, moderately clear image of a middle-sized Asian man in a dark overcoat, wet about the shoulders and hem. The wet hem caught her attention. It was darkened like puddle-splashes. Like the man had been walking a long way. Most Tanushan business commuters would catch transport. And this man was no tourist.

Sandy pursed her lips gently and exhaled a single, soft breath. Knowing she had no choice but to assume the worst. For now, at least. If she was wrong, well, she would find that out later. A single, panicked thought at the back of her mind wailed despairingly about her dreams of a peaceful life here in Tanusha—all shattered in this brief instant. Blackest despair threatened.

paranoia. She had known that adapting to civilian life would be difficult. This was one of those difficulties—she could not go around assuming the worst at every slight alarm. This might be of little importance. In civilian life many things often were.

So. She resolved to find out.

She climbed to her feet as the train approached its next stop, grasping the overhead handle by the door. Spared the carriage a casual, disinterested glance. The Asian man was reading a magazine. But that meant little.

Out, then, and walked under the pedestrian cover of the small station, by a road intersection. A major tower stood on the street corner opposite. Adjoining that was a large shopping mall, perhaps nine storeys high and sporting external, glass escalators and walkways in a shameless display of architectural ostentation. Sandy jogged towards the mall, the weather giving her an excuse for speed. Leapt quickly up the stairs of the overpass, then walked the covered length above the roadway. A number of people were on the overpass with her, headed in both directions. Scan vision showed them as flowing, multifaceted displays of light, red fading to blue in many subtle shades. Nothing magnetic or electronic, save for the woman with the prosthetic right eye whose neural cordings curled back toward the interface. And the young boy with the headphones, but that signature was slight and inoffensive. Traffic flowed by below. Huge lighted neon proclaimed the superstore chain's name in letters five storeys high. Thunder grumbled, rolling over the traffic and store-music sounds like a wave across a sandy shoreline, and fading gently away.

The mall was enormous. Shops fronted onto open walkways around the central atrium, the full nine storeys high. The transparent roof overhead let in the light. There were glass elevators and escalators by the dozen, all buzzing with people, voices echoing together in their hundreds and thousands, competing with the speaker music.

The red-to-blue flowing shapes now slid past Sandy on all sides. She moved purposefully, her strides even, pro-



cessing data. The crowds were a distraction to her and a cover for her enemies, if they existed. But they offered protection too.

She stopped by a databoard and pressed some icons at random. Directories flashed up but she spared them little attention, scanning instead through her peripheral vision, searching for followers. Nothing but the crowds of shoppers, carrier bags swinging. Somewhere within the open atrium an amusement-ride was operating, an echoing clatter of machinery and the screams of excited children. Her finger found another icon and the floor display changed again.

And felt a faint flicker of recognition at the periphery of her consciousness. Her eyes flicked up, scanning the open atrium. She immediately registered the spectrum disturbance, a faint shading upon her retinas . . . and found the source a moment later, a man standing at the opposite railing, wearing dark sunglasses. Indoors.

Sandy turned and walked on, her stride now a fraction brisker. Her throat was tight. She'd been found. Who or how was not important, she was certain that they intended no good. They never did. She pushed impatiently past a dawdling couple admiring the window displays. Shrieks from the amusement-riders echoing off the high atrium roof. She tucked her folded umbrella into her overcoat pocket, leaving her hands free, and turned right, stepping quickly across the path of oncoming pedestrians and into the adjoining corridor.

Only now realising that something didn't make sense, that if someone had wanted to get her, their best bet would have been at her hotel room when she was asleep. Not in a crowded shopping centre. Unless, of course, they'd only just found out where and who she was. And had decided not to waste another hour. It was possible that they thought her that important. It was very possible.

Her datalinks were running as she walked, sifting through the regional database, through the official traffic flows that hinted of police movements and security alerts . . . and thought, as she pressed briskly through the corridor crowds toward the road overpass, to check back to her hotel records. Found them



barricaded from just beyond the public perimeter, and her presence triggered an alarm . . . she fried the trigger system in a burst of anger, and sent her killer systems speeding out, scanning for electronic target IDs.

Frightened now at the speed things were deteriorating. She knew only too well what was happening. And she knew that moving slowly would gain her nothing—they had her pinged, and no casual pretence would make it otherwise.

She sprinted straight for the overpass opening in the wall ahead. And inside, colliding hard off the railing through the nonexistent gap past some pedestrians, bodies sprawling as she raced onward up the tube, weaving fast through the traffic as yells and shouts broke out around her, ordinary people, startled and angry. She hurdled a small child at nearly thirty kph, and saw through the merging bodies that the narrow exit was blocked by a random convergence of shoppers . . . planted a foot and leapt—astonished, frightened faces ducking for cover as the woman in the long coat went flying low overhead. Collected someone's head with her hip, then hit down on her legs and backside, skidding hard into another two pedestrians in a heavy impact of falling bodies . . . and felt the targeting sight brush her scalp, grabbed the pedestrian for a shield (*don't panic man, they'll never shoot a pedestrian*) then releasing and running backward, darting across to keep the dazed man between herself and the low, crouched figure with the small, black hand weapon . . .

And off up the next hallway, broad and marble, people in suits whom she blew past at inhuman velocity, coat-tails flapping. Skidded into a painful, controlled collision with an adjoining corridor's side wall then flying up the broad stairway eight steps at a time, turning the top corner at speed as a single shot cracked loudly off the side wall.

Stun shot, was the thought that registered in her mind as she sprang up the next flight. They wanted her alive.

Around the next corner, and the next, sending another pedestrian crashing to the ground as she skidded up the steps . . . and registered double movement up ahead,

planted her next foot and leapt hard at them. And hit, grabbing her target right-handed as he dodged, and threw him hard into the back wall while bracing her own legs, slid and hit, then threw herself back at the other man. *Crack!* and her left arm leapt back, Sandy spinning with the shot to collect him with a roundhouse hit to the ribs that smashed him hard into the wall two metres away then sliding limply down the steps up which she'd come.

Running again, checking her linkups to confirm there *was* an aircab stand on this level, and scanning the layout ahead for possible tight points. Her left arm hung limply at her side, numb from the bicep down. She knew from the queasy feeling that it was chemicals. They knew what she was all right. She had to hold the arm as she ran, to stop it from flapping about. It slowed her down.

Past more staring pedestrians, most now alerted to the commotion in the building and standing well back, except for one brave fool who tried to tackle her and bounced off like a rubber ball when she dropped a well-timed shoulder. Then hurtling down another corridor in time to see the safety door sliding to the ground at the far end, cutting her off from the waiting cab rank. She accelerated, was caught five metres short as the door came down, hitting it with full force. Crunch. Rebounded, half stunned, looking around dazedly, trying to regather her linkups and sort herself a new way around. Found there wasn't one—she'd have to retrace her steps or be trapped.

She turned back to the door, wound up her best sidekick and unloaded with an almighty *boom!* that echoed down the corridor and rocked the half-ton alloy door in its tracks. Swivelled and repeated it, twice, and again, and again. The fifth time, and the left side railings broke away with an explosion of sparks and twisted mechanisms. The sixth half-ripped the entire door from its right-side runners. She squeezed quickly through the gap, torn metal clawing at her coat.

And found herself in an empty cab rank, an open space in the wet, gathering wind. Now about seven storeys up, looking back at the shopping complex. But no sign of aircabs—all the ranks were bare, yellow-striped spaces spattered



with rain. Her linkups assured her the rank was still operating—she even had an ID signal from an incoming cab moving about the tower’s far side . . .

She scanned further, cracked the signal coding down with furious determination . . . and found the feeder mechanisms, and the alternate subroutines that made it look so real for someone without the time to check it further.

Doors opened on opposite walls, armed men and women walked out, weapons trained on her. Sandy stood and watched them, shoulders heaving, clutching her dangling left arm with her right hand. Realising all too well that there was nowhere left to run. Her legs felt weak, and she was frightened.

One man in particular caught her attention, walking to the front. His face was young, his dark hair fell loosely about his shoulders and his eyes were hard. The weapon in his right hand was fixed unwaveringly on her breastbone. He stopped four metres in front of her, too far, and she knew it. He knew it too. And grinned at her unpleasantly.

“Let’s see you get out of this one, Skin.”

And he shot her in the chest.