

Xenthi

Part 1: The Secret Life of Holly Xandrel

Thu-chunk

"Holly!"

Thu-chunk, Thu-chunk

"Ms Xandrel!"

Clickclickclickclickclick

The red carpet dissolved in flashes of light, as if a small war were being fought in the air above. A mass of people surged against the rope barriers, jostling for a better position, trying to see all the stars, to get their scoop.

Holly Xandrel swept past the photographers, her dark glasses protecting her from the flash of the cameras, smiling at random people, allowing a choice few to get the photograph they were after.

Her long black hair bounced gently around her shoulders as she walked, catching the light and hurling it back in the most photogenic way possible. The shimmering red dress seemed to work in harmony with it, controlling the light as if it were her own possession to do with as she pleased.

A black limo waited at the end of the row of bodies, its dark, cool leather interior beckoning her onwards. She quickened her pace and turned to the crowd one last time, blowing a theatrical kiss before slipping effortlessly into the sumptuous leather seat to cries of adoration.

She wore the smile until the door shut with a muted click, then let out a sigh and tore her sunglasses off, dropping the \$300 designer items to the floor as if they were distasteful to her.

"That film wasn't very good." she muttered to the woman sitting opposite her as the car pulled away, its powerful engine rumbling quietly as they approached the Freeway.

"Don't let them hear you say that." the woman replied, tapping away at a handheld computer, her face creased with concentration.

"Why the hell did you sign me up for it?" Holly asked petulantly, thrashing around in a mock-tantrum and pulling a face.

The handheld was placed onto the seat with the controlled calmness of one who had dealt with Holly Xandrel many times before.

"Because times are hard, Hol," she snapped, "Right now nobody is promoting a damn thing. Everyone's been scared out of the city by those damn "redpill" lunatics and the spate of killings."

"The killings stopped. And the reds are all over the world. You know that." Holly replied quietly, twisting a strand of hair around the index finger of her right hand. She was playing the innocent schoolgirl routine, but she knew it wouldn't wash.

"Regardless, there's more of them here than anywhere else. This is MegaCity 1, in case you'd forgotten. Everyone looks to us, and everything here is magnified. Just be thankful you got a gig at all."

Annika scowled as she finished her lecture and sat back, arms folded and Holly felt a pang of guilt. Annika had been her friend and manager since she'd started two years ago, had supported her as she shot to fame and fortune, had got her promotion work when the chips were down.

Like now.

They rode in silence until the limo stopped at the apartment complex in South Vauxton, Holly not daring to break the silence and Annika perfectly content to sit in silent indignation and continue working on her handheld.

"I'm sorry Ann. We'll go shopping tomorrow." Holly said gently as she opened the door. Her friend smiled begrudgingly and waved half-heartedly, before firing a parting shot, albeit more gentle.

"Remember, times are hard. I don't know how you can keep spending so much." Holly grimaced as she walked towards the entrance of the up-market apartment complex, it's aluminium and glass construction towering above the surrounding environment.

She'd kill me if she knew what I'm about to do.

Thirty minutes later, a battered, olive coloured Oldsmobile lurched out from the underground carpark of South Vauxton apartments and headed off for Bathary Row. The driver wore a headscarf, sunglasses, and a large-collared coat. It was impossible to guess the gender, let alone the identity. The disguise had worked plenty of times before.

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The car sputtered into the small line of vehicles outside the warehouse, tyres crunching through the rough gravel and discarded rubbish that littered the entire area.

The driver got out, locked the door and entered the building. Inside, industrial heating equipment kept the place warm - important, considering what they did there.

"Ahh there's my little star, Holly Xandrel!" an overweight man bellowed from down the roughly-assembled corridor, "Let's get you into makeup." he said, hugging her tightly and letting his hands rove places that would usually have earned him a swift knee in the particulars.

Holly smiled tightly as he withdrew, "Let's not throw that name around too much here, shall we?"

She involuntarily wrinkled her nose, not that he noticed. He was balding, fat, about five foot six, and permanently carried a light sheen of sweat on his forehead.

He winked conspiratorially and nodded, before ushering her into the makeup room, grabbing a good squeeze of her ass as he did so.

At this work, Holly Xandrel was her own dead ringer; a blonde wig and some clever makeup, and she looked just enough like a lookalike to fool everyone. She had even masterminded a clever court case, effectively trying to sue herself for dragging her name through the mud. She would "settle out of court" of course when the time was right. It was a lot of trouble to go to, but she earned a lot of money doing it, and after all, times were hard.

After a time in makeup, she walked out onto the set in a blood red kimono-style robe. Muscular, naked men stood chatting casually to one another not too far away. One looked over and nodded, then continued the conversation. She avoided acknowledging them, for the time being.

The set she was on was a bedroom. In real life it looked like the walls would fall down if you pushed them - and most of them did, but on camera it looked real enough. Holly gazed around, mentally preparing herself for what was to come.

"Alright, we'll carry on from where we left off yesterday. You all know the script." the director shouted as he walked into the 'room'.

Holly nodded her affirmation and dropped her robe, revealing her naked body beneath. She took up her position on the bed, and suddenly an image of her friend and manager flashed through her mind.

Annika really would kill her if she knew.

She closed her eyes and thought of the money. The director yelled "Action!"

As she was leaving, once more in her garb of coat and headscarf, the director called her back.

"Great work today hun, I just wanted to show you what we got for the cover of the DVD."

Holly squirmed uncomfortably, "That's alright, I've gotta be heading back ..."

She tried to turn back to the exit but the DVD case was whipped in front of her eyes. She smiled weakly at the images staring back at her.

"Good huh?" the director leered. Holly nodded then hurried out to the car, the cover of "Xenthi Banks Does Dallas" imprinted on her mind.

Part 2: Enter Xenthi

Holly parked the car down a sidestreet in Achan, the seedy underbelly of Richland, and made her way up to a small studio flat. She tossed the coat onto the sofa - it joined various other garments, empty takeaway boxes and 'adult literature' magazines - and went into the bathroom.

The flat was sparsely furnished, and very messy. The jumble of assorted crap - as Holly liked to call it - wasn't confined to the sofa, spilling out across the living area, its mucky tendrils reaching into every corner of the room. She reflected on it as a representation of Richland itself, but the truth was she had better things to do in this apartment than vacuum.

A few seconds later hot water was pouring into the bathtub and she returned to the living room and switched on her PC, the only clean and polished item in the entire place.

In between checking on the bath, she opened her email client and IRC, logging on under her usual alias.

Some people who saw the alias thought nothing of it, though most people had seen her 'films'. Some thought she was a girl preying on naive, horny boys. Most others thought she was a guy preying on naive, horny boys. A few thought it was just a coincidence. The hackers knew her as someone of unspecified gender with a wicked sense of humour and some of the best coding skills they'd seen in recent times.

Nobody thought it was really Xenthi.

And nobody thought it was Holly Xandrel.

She set up a suitably offensive and witty auto-away message and took to the bath, turning on the radio to drown out the rest of the noise from within the building; people fighting, watching loud television, and other acts that she just wasn't in the mood to listen to.

The hot water enveloped her like a blanket, she sighed as her muscles relaxed and the muted noise in the rest of the building drifted further away. Closing her eyes, she began to drift off into deep thought.

Holly was a model and a very successful one at that. She advertised products, films, clothes, everything she could; 'everything a body needs', she'd once said. When things were going well, she was just had to stand around and look pretty, in return she was paid handsomely, given expensive things for free, taken to posh, exclusive clubs. When things were going well, life was incredible.

Lately however, things had taken a bit of a nosedive. The recent rise in weird activity in the city had given firms pause for thought. Nobody was investing. Nobody was advertising anything new. Holly was currently 'obsolete'. When her career started, she had been approached by a member of a leading adult entertainment production company, desperate to use her obvious charms to increase revenue. She turned it down.

She wanted to make money in the public eye, not as a sex object, played on televisions and computer screens all over the world by sexually charged individuals. She appreciated pornography, but never wanted to try it out for herself.

But a year ago, work started to dry up, slightly ironic considering the record-breaking rainfall the city experienced. She was approached again. They promised her she could be made up to look like someone else, and suddenly it seemed tempting. She agreed to try out the 'disguise' on the street, and to her surprise it worked. Everybody told her how much she looked like The Lovely Holly Xandrel. Nobody ever guessed it was her.

So the 'Xenthi' line of films was produced; the name was her own creation and the producers liked it.

After the first week after the release of her first film, simply titled "Xenthi", she was at number one in the adult charts. Downloads of it peaked at previously unforeseen levels. Servers crashed everywhere, and the bean counters thought they had tripped over and fallen into heaven.

More were immediately scheduled to be filmed. On reflection - aside from the sleazy directors and occasional pangs of guilt - she rather enjoyed it.

As she soaked in the bath, steam rising from the water causing condensation to form and roll down the walls like scrolling pieces of code, she wondered whether she was more Xenthi than Holly now.

When she was younger, her parents used to tell her how beautiful and clever she was. They were right on both counts of course, but beauty paid more than brains. It paid a lot more.

The ultimate in paradoxes, she had been a beautiful geek at school. Always interested in computers, she quickly mastered the art of coding, and it wasn't long before her mischievous and inquisitive nature led her to start hacking into things. She started with the school roster, causing teachers to wonder for the longest time who the hell 'Hugh Jaas' was and why he had never showed up for

lessons. Quickly, she learnt that knowledge was power, and with power came money. Hacking for friends and associates was particularly lucrative.

She had acolytes online now, after a number of years writing some of the best security-bypass programs ever seen. People worshipped at the Great Altar of Xenthi, none of them having a clue who she really was.

She smiled to herself and got out of the bath, towelling herself off and dropping a bathrobe on. She slammed a pizza into the oven and sat down at the PC.

Definitely more Xenthi, she thought as she opened up her compiler.

Part 3: An Unmitigated Disaster

Three floors below Xenthi, a well-built man sporting an all-black suit and Trea sunglasses paced up and down in the living area. His colleague hurried back and forth with him, trying to manoeuvre him onto the sofa.

"This is a disaster. A fucking disaster." Lucerius cursed, beads of sweat forming on his brow as he walked.

"Calm down, let's think about this rationally!" Mundra protested in a tone of voice that sounded on the very knife-edge of 'calm'.

"CALM DOWN?! Do you have any idea what they'll do to us when they find out?"

Mundra wrung his hands - Lucerius was right. They had made a monumental mistake and as soon as it was discovered, the only penalty would be death.

"We have to go." Lucerius said, suddenly standing still.

"What?"

"We'll escape. Flee into exile where they won't find us."

"Lucerius ... if the worst case scenario hits, there won't be anything to run to! But ... if we're fast, I think .. I think that we can come out of this okay."

Lucerius started pacing again.

"We'll start a trace running," Mundra said quickly, "If we can locate where the data stream is going, maybe we can retrieve it and route it to the right location. Put it back where it belongs."

Lucerius stopped.

"That sounds good. Let's get on it."

"Not right now," Mundra said, "I have to report back to 01. I'll be back in a few hours and we can sort it out. Just lie low for now."

"Can't you just go Downtown?"

Mundra blanched, "No way, they'll read me like a book. I'm splitting off my recent memory segments about this, I'll leave it here with my shell."

He sat down and shut his eyes, a moment later his body became rigid. In the real world, a small crab-like machine detached itself from the hugely-complex base station of one of the Power Plant towers and flew away through the black and stormy perma-night.

Inside the apartment, Lucerius picked up a phone. He wasn't totally convinced of Mundra's plan and was damned if he was going to suffer if it didn't work.

"Hey, it's Luce'." he said as the callee picked up, "I've got a problem. We let something go. Uh-huh. Mundra and I. What was it? Some sort of historic information, dated back to the creation of the First Instance. YES it's a problem. I need to make arrangements, we don't know if we can track this thing. If not, I need to know you can help me disappear. Yeah. Thanks, I'll be waiting for your call."

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Holly slumped back in her chair and yawned. It was 3am and she had just put the finishing touches to a program she was writing. It was designed to seek out specific backdoors in systems of her choice, and break in using sophisticated algorithms and code breaking techniques. It was time to compile. With a tired flourish she hit the shortcut combination and set the program to work. Turning the monitor off, she retired to bed.

Under the cover of darkness provided by her last action, something opened a port on her machine, in one single step bypassing every security measure she had employed - some of them her own design.

The compiler stopped and flashed up a message.

'New Code Added. Do You Wish to Recompile?'

A few seconds passed, then the 'Yes' button mysteriously clicked inwards and the machine began processing its new data.

Part 4: Disturbances

Holly woke early, forced into the stark reality of dawn by her alarm clock. It was important for her to leave and get back to her Downtown apartment before anybody came calling.

She padded into the living area and entered the kitchen, clicking on the kettle and opening the fridge to retrieve the milk. She frowned as the door opened but the light failed to come on.

"Huh, weird. Bulb must be broken." she muttered sleepily to herself, reaching for the milk. It was warm, and upon investigation of the meagre contents of the fridge, she found that it was off.

"Son of a bitch." she yawned, sniffing the milk and finding that it hadn't gone off. The kettle wasn't boiling, so she jiggled it around on its stand and re-flicked the switch before going back through to the living area.

The room was bathed in a dirty, sepia tinted light streaming through the thin curtains. Holly tore them open, staring at the filthy building opposite with all the disgust and contempt she could muster, then turned back to the room.

The lighting hadn't changed.

She frowned and clicked on a lamp, furrowing her brow when it refused to come on, and noticed that the kettle still wasn't boiling.

"Power outage!" she said angrily, kicking a box of two-week old chinese that lay near her.

It took her sleep-addled brain a few more moments to realise that she could still hear a noise, a humming, regular, familiar sound coming from the corner of the room.

Turning slowly, she drank in the sight of the computer, its fans whirring quietly, LEDs flickering intermitently on the fascia.

"How the hell ..." she breathed questioningly, moving towards it, inadvertently creeping.

Holly reached out a tentative finger and powered the monitor on. The light turned orange - it was in sleep mode. Feeling slightly more confident, she placed her hand squarely on the mouse to wake the machine.

There was a loud WHUMP noise that filled the room and Holly was hurled backwards into her bedroom.

A second later the screen blinked on, the "Compiling Job Completed" message seeming to taunt Holly's unconscious body, lying crumpled in the corner of her room.

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Lucerius jumped as the motionless man on the sofa suddenly moved.

"I see you're back then." he said sourly.

"Yes. The debrief went without a hitch. They have no idea that the data stream has been derailed." Mundra replied, cracking his neck and making small circular motions with his shoulders.

"Won't He be getting impatient?" Lucerius asked nervously.

"Yes, I'm sure He will. But we can afford a little time. Is the system ready?"

Lucerius pointed to a laptop on the coffee table, "All ready to go. Just initiate the trace protocols and we can find where that bastard thing got to."

Mundra moved over to the table and began keying in commands with inhuman speed, speaking as he did so, "You know, I've been wondering. What on earth does the Architect want with this historical file anyway?"

Lucerius shrugged miserably, "I don't know, I just archive them. Only He knows why He's interested. It's not as if we don't know how to win a war."

"Perhaps he's just nostalgic," Mundra said with a mischeivous grin, "Now that he's not hunting for The One anymore and threatening to destroy that stinking cave the simian's call a city. He must be bored out of his mind. Aha!"

Lucerius moved to get a better view of the laptop, "Did you find it??"

"Yeah!" Mundra said happily, "The bloody thing travelled the code stream three floors up. Seems to have tried getting into a computer system and its frozen there."

Lucerius clapped his hands together, "Right, so how do we get it?"

"We take out whoever's up there, quarantine whatever it got into, decompile its code and trap the data stream. Then we send it where it's supposed to be going."

"Great," Lucerius grinned, "I'll get my baseball bat."

Part 5: Disturbances (cont.)

"This door doesn't look right," Mundra muttered as they approached Holly's apartment, "Something's wrong."

"Let's just get this over with, shall we?" Lucerius said, raising the bat and swinging it hard at the door. The materials in the building were notoriously paper thin and he fully expected the first blow to break straight through.

It came as a shock to the pair when the bat impacted the door and exploded into shards of wood.

"What the hell ..." Lucerius growled. He reached out and grabbed the door handle, pulling back immediately with a yelp, not of pain, but of surprise, "DAMN that's hot."

Mundra felt the handle, then the wood; his burly colleague was correct. He wrung his hands.

"I think we have a problem."

~ ~

Holly opened her eyes and struggled to her feet. The room was spinning and she felt a huge bump on the back of her head. Tottering into the living room, she looked in confusion at the computer. It was still on, despite there apparently being no power to the rest of the apartment.

She sat at the computer, eyeing it warily as her hand hovered above the mouse after her recent experience. She knew there was no way that a shock like that could have come through a mouse.

"Okay. Freak occurrence." she said flatly, dropping her hand onto it. As soon as she touched it she pulled it away, but that was enough. No shock. More confident, she dismissed the message that her program had been compiled with a click and ran her newest toy.

The second her double-click was completed, everything in the flat switched on; lights, kitchen appliances, her hairdryer in the bedroom, the radio. She looked around frantically then ran to the door, all disguises and alter egos forgotten.

The door refused to open. She ran back, grabbing the phone and plugging it in - it was only there for emergencies - as the cacophony of electrical devices filled the apartment.

Holly fumbled the handset as she took it off the hook, then jammed it to her ear. Her eyes bugged out as she heard what was on the other end, her body going rigid, then she slowly toppled over onto the floor, twitching gently for a few seconds.

The noise in the flat subdued and eventually died away, and Holly's unseeing eyes gently fell closed.

Part 6: The First Vision

Lucerius banged his head against the door in frustration and recoiled. "It's gone cold!" he whooped, kicking the door with a powerful right leg. It splintered and collapsed off its hinges into the apartment and the pair ran in, excited as small schoolboys on the last day of school before the summer holidays began.

Lucerius grabbed the computer and wrenched it clear from the wall, ignoring the cables. Mundra examined the prone figure of Holly on the floor.

"What do you think happened to her? Is she dead?" Lucerius asked casually as he carted the computer to the door.

"No, still alive," Mundra replied, "But let's just get the hell out of here before she wakes up."

The building shook as a jet fighter screamed low overhead and a small dustcloud of plaster fell onto the assembled soldiers. An ugly hole in the south wall was blocked up with pieces of wood, barbed wire, and a beam constructed of high-strength polymers and plastics.

"Alright men, listen up!" shouted Major Kyte as he strode into the room, commanding instant attention from the blue and gray-suited soldiers. The assembled men all belonged to the United Nations Against Machines - or U.N.A.M. - and knew that they were fighting a losing battle. But they still had immense respect for their superiors who probably realised the harsh truth of the situation even more than they did.

"Recon has spotted a small fleet of Sentinels heading toward Sector Omega-Five. Now ordinarily we'd leave them alone, Omega-Five has nothing of value to us at the present time. However, High Command has seen fit that we should apprehend the machines in order to extract any useful information that they may be carrying."

The Major paused and looked at the faces of his men. They all wore stoney expressions, trained with years of hard fighting to banish all emotion from their facades.

"We'll be travelling in an AUC-5 equipped with two standard APUs. Coleman and Bink, you two will do the honours when we go to ground. We'll be leaving at 1500 hours. No need for HAZMAT suits but bring your armour. That's all, gentlemen."

"AH!" Holly yelped as she jerked into consciousness. Taking a moment to get her bearings, she clambered to her feet and looked around. The door had been smashed open and her computer was gone. Now well and truly freaked out, she found her keys and fled the apartment, not caring who saw her.

She left the front door to the building wide open as she exploded out onto the street and hurried to her car. A minute later with a squeal of tyres, she was joining the morning commuters - them in a bid to get to work, her in a bid to get home, back to sanity, to try and figure out what had just happened, and why she had dreamt of something from a war movie she'd never seen or even heard of before.

Part 7: The Second Vision

Holly joined the freeway and pushed the accelerator further down to bring the battered old car up to speed.

"What was that." she muttered to herself, thinking back to the apartment. When she had stood up, the strange sepia tint had gone; how long had she been asleep? Was she even asleep? Was the light anything to do with the light coming into the room, or .. something else?

She jerked out her her reverie just in time to see a suitcase fall off the roof-rack of a car in the middle lane. Stamping on the brakes, she screamed and tried to swerve around the object. The car slewed into the case and snapped around, the back end slamming into the barrier that ran alongside the freeway. The impact hurled the car into the middle lane and Holly let out a piercing howl as she stared out of the passenger side at the oncoming truck.

As the huge vehicle collided, she was hurled hard against her own door, feeling bones in her arm snap and staring in horror as the car began to roll up into the air. The Oldsmobile landed on its passenger side, screeching and groaning as the metal contorted and twisted. Holly's eyes clouded over and she slumped in her seat, every limb going limp and lifeless as the car took to the air once more.

"Mount up, First Battalion!" bellowed First Lieutenant Stokes. His troops hurried out from the bunker towards the AUC-5, dressed in tough protective suits and helmets.

The Armoured Unit Carrier Class Fives were the most widely used troop transport and offensive units in this part of MegaCity 1, carrying up to twenty five personnel and two standard Armoured Patrol Units, or A.P.U.s for short.

The AUC took off precisely one minute and thirty seconds after the command to mount up had been given, rising out of the silo and scudding off towards Sector Omega-Five.

Inside, the pilots navigated using an infra-red camera and holographics mapping system to chart the terrain of destroyed buildings that lurked below in the permanent darkness.

"How ya feelin' Charlie boy?" a trooper asked the guy sitting opposite, slapping him on the knee. Charlie nodded back gloomily and raised a half-smile.

"Not so good Paul. Been three months since Beth left and the bastards won't even let me see her."

"Fuck! Why not?!"

"Say that my 'interaction with the machines' makes me dangerous. They think I've got a damn tracker inside me or something. Bullshit is what it is."

"That's fucked up. I don't trust those Zionist Monks or whatever the fuck they claim to be with the hooded robes and all that stuff. That place should be a military base, end of discussion."

They both turned as another man spoke.

"I heard they've even got cyborgs in there, living with 'em."

"Cyborgs?" Charlie asked with a worried look on his face.

"They used to be plugged in to the Matrix. But now they're free. Walking around with bits of machine in them."

Paul guffawed, "Damn Fischer, you don't half come up with some bull. You can't get out of the Matrix! Remember when they made the first simulation? Tried to put the poor buggers into their own version of Eden. They all rejected it and died. But they said they'd get better and they did. Nope, you can't get out of that thing. If one goes, they all go."

Fischer wrinkled his nose and sat back in his seat, "I'm just telling you what I heard, that's all. I got contacts you know."

"Yeah, sure ya do." Paul said with a grin, patting Charlie's knee again, "Don't worry mate, I'm sure your Beth ain't down there with any damn cyborgs." Charlie grinned weakly, "Yeah, yeah. I'm sure you're right."

They all looked up as the overhead lights clicked off and the blue floorlights came on. A quite klaxon began to sound: they were at Sector Omega-Five.

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Paul Coleman and Larry Bink were lowered from the upper deck into the hold with the APU machines. They were humanoid machines encased in a smooth, bulletproof alloy, standing about 18 feet high. The operator sat inside a cavity in the 'chest' area and could manoeuvre the machines with subtle manipulations of hand controls.

Once the APUs were active, the bottom of the AUC split open and gently deposited them onto the ground.

Behind the breastplate, looking out at the world through a camera screen, Paul grimaced. The APUs were always the first thing the Sentinels went for.

"Alright boys, I'm reading twelve incoming signals bearing North-North-East." said First Lieutenant Stokes over the radio, "Take 'em down as quick as you can, we'll be laying down covering fire. This is a simple mission and we don't want any casualties. If things get out of hand we'll drop an EMP on them and wait for the cavalry."

Paul and Larry strode ahead of the AUC and stood in a clearing, facing North-North-East. Even encased inside the units, they could still hear the rolling thunder and crashes of lightning, an eternal legacy of one of mankind's absolute worst ideas.

"How ya doin' Larry." he said quietly into the APU comm. channel.

"I'm okay Paul. Just hate being exposed like this, you know?"

"Yeah, I know."

Larry Bink's father had been the manager of the main Mega City 2 branch of the World Union bank before the war. His family had been very well off and at the age of five he was already set for life. Then the war hit, and thirty five years later here he was. The man was right to be nervous, everybody was in an APU no matter how many times they'd done it before.

"Hostiles in view!" Paul said into the comm. and the two APUs readied their weapons, the targetting recepticles moving on the camera screen in perfect synchronisation with the 'arms' of the machines.

The metallic, humming sound of the swarm started to penetrate the metal bodys and Paul flinched inadvertantly. The sound meant death and destruction - nothing more, nothing less.

Larry fired first, Paul a microsecond behind him. The thunder of the guns filled their ears and the adrenaline surged as the squid-like killing machines dived down towards them.

The AUC let rip with its more powerful weapons, ripping some of the Sentinels into pieces.

"Keep firing!" Paul shouted as he flung his APU round to dislodge a mechanical tentacle that had gripped onto it.

"Oh hell..." came Stokes' voice over the radio, "It's an ambush. It's a goddamn ambush!"

Paul flicked his eyes to his radar. Approximately seventy hostile signals had suddenly appeared in the area around them. He turned and began to move back to the AUC as quickly as possible, not wanting to be left in the open when the Electro-Magnetic Pulse bomb was detonated.

Sentinels grabbed at his APU and the camera view swung wildly as he crashed to the ground onto his back. A huge black swarm of machines passed over him towards the AUC and he heard frantic activity over the comm channel.

"EMP! Fire the EMP for the love of ... breach! APU bay is breached!"

The sound of rending metal filled the airwaves as the Sentinels began firing their lethally effective laser cutters. Panicked screams could be heard, followed by a sentence dreaded by all troopers, "EMP is offline! Oh god help us ..."

The transmission cut off abruptly.

"Prep the OR! This woman needs surgery immediately!"

Holly's eyes drifted open. Lights whizzed overhead and she could make out faint figures in white coats around her.

"She's awake! Holly! Holly, can you hear me? HOLLY! Dammit get that OR prepped!"

Part 8: The Discovery

The Architect stood up from his black leather chair and took five steps into the centre of the room.

The monitors were all blank, but they should have been flashing with data, a needless representation of the data stream that he should have been assimilating at this very moment.

"They're late." he rumbled, his program immediately activating a progress protocol to follow up on his request to the archivists. The reply was instantaneous. The Architect knew that the data stream was in the Matrix. The fact it had not yet been delivered meant that something was wrong.

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A short, blond-haired woman stood in front of the cracked and grimy mirror of the ladies public toilet in Mara West. She opened her handbag, then doubled over in pain, grasping the edge of the basin as she fell to her knees.

"Oh ... my ..." she gasped, the open handbag falling to the floor and spilling its contents everywhere.

Agent Pace stepped out of the toilet and stode purposefully in the direction of the main road.

A direct order from the Architect was so rare as to be practically unheard of. This was clearly something important. She knew where the targets were located - the Architect saw everything, and two machines were not hard to spot amongst a sea of human minds.

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"Why isn't it here??" Mundra said in a high-pitched desperate cry as he finished analysing the computer's code.

"It must be in the girl," Lucerius muttered, nervously playing with his phone,

"Somehow it got into her, maybe that's why she was unconscious."

"That's crazy, she'd be dead!" Mundra retorted.

"Then where else did it go, genius?" Lucerius snapped, dialling a number.

"What are you doing?"

"It's my insurance policy. Hey, good, you're there. You have my position? Put it into action."

Mundra stared at him with confusion, "You made a deal with the exiles?!"

"I have contacts. I'm not being sent back to the Source. They'll be here in a few minutes."

Lucerius strode to the door and flashed a lopsided grin at Mundra, swinging the door open as he did so.

His head snapped back as the bullet from Agent Pace's gun ripped through the digital flesh and bone, his body slumping to the floor a moment later.

Mundra yelled out and ran towards the window, but another bullet from the Desert Eagle hit him in the leg and he sprawled onto the floor.

Pace walked over to him, her gun aimed at his head.

"Sentinels are standing by to take care of you, your programming will be returned to the Source or you will be destroyed." she said in a steely voice.

"Please! This is a mistake ..."

"This is not a mistake. I have been ordered by the Architect to retrieve the data stream. You will tell me where it is."

"I don't have it!"

The hammer clicked on the gun.

"REALLY! We lost it. The containment was damaged and the disk landed in a patch of corrupted code. It ate through the wrapper and we lost the information."

Pace ran the information around her mind. Everything in the Matrix was code, but some was pure code, invisible to the naked eye, used only by machines and other programs. The disk was a 'wrapper', a coded prison that allowed the data stream to be transported by RSIs and shells.

"You didn't try to trace it?" she asked suspiciously.

"Yes of course! We traced it to that computer over there. But by the time we got to it it must have migrated. We think it's in the woman that was in the apartment."

Pace narrowed her eyes.

"You think it's in a human mind?"

Mundra gulped and nodded. Pace pulled the trigger and the bullet crashed into his skull. Raising a finger to her earpiece she said, "Deploy the Sentinels. Analyse his memory circuits and download the data to me as soon as possible."

Part 9: The Breaking Point (The Third Vision)

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"Captain Oakes, you have hostiles inbound to your location! Approximately sixty five sentinels at present." squawked the radio.

"Yes sir Major Kyte!" Oakes replied, "We can see them on holographics sir. Artillery is ready for them."

"They'd better damn well be. They just took out first battalion of Fox Company and they're still lookin' for blood."

"We'll give em hell, sir. Oakes out."

Oakes ran over to the Intelligence Officer who had been trying to get his attention.

"What is it Booth?"

"Gunships sir! Two of them heading from the East."

"What?! I thought they only used them to guard Zero One's perimeter."

"So did I. They must be sleeper units, they just appeared out of nowhere. We've got runners coming at us from the South too."

Oakes ran a hand around his chiseled jawline, rough as sandpaper after almost a week without bathroom facilities. He went back to the comm. station, trying to suppress all emotion from his face. He'd heard the stories from those that survived gunship attacks, and he knew that he and his men would likely all die from the impending onslaught.

"Artillery! Are you ready?"

"Yes sir! Squiddies are almost in range."

"Good, give 'em hell. Listen to me carefully, we have two gunships heading our way from the East. Once the squids are down, if you want to get as far away as you can I'll understand."

There was a moment's silence on the airwaves.

"That's a negative captain. We fight to the last."

Oakes repeated his message to all areas of the defence team, and all met with the same response. His men all knew that they were fighting a losing battle, but every man and woman left on earth felt that they owed it to their species to fight to the bitter end.

*

The Sentinels raced through the blackened sky towards the outpost, their internal sensors knowing exactly what was ahead. Human technology was slow to evolve and adapt. By contrast, machines developed at a lightning-fast rate. They registered the first salvo before the projectiles had even left the barrels of the guns.

The swarm scattered immediately, ducking into bombed-out buildings, hiding behind walls, or gaining altitude to go over the onslaught.

"They've scattered! Recalibrate and fire!" bellowed Lieutenant Stetz in the artillery bunker.

"INCOMING!" screamed a trooper. The sentinels were picking up debris and slinging it at the bunker with accuracy that could only be achieved by a machine brain.

"Keep firing god dammit!" Stetz reiterated, one eye on the holographic display. The gunships were getting closer.

*

The runners came at the infantry like cheetah's chasing a prey, the fact that this prey had guns didn't phase them.

With spindly legs and a small lightweight body they could run at up to 120mph and were often used to outrun convoys and hold them up until the big guns arrived.

They leapt in amongst the troopers, unfolding arms so thin as to inspire confidence amongst men seeing them for the first time. Confidence misplaced. The runners grabbed out at the troopers, snagging arms, legs, torsos and heads, and hurling them mercilessly at the concrete bunker behind them. Sporadic gunfire interspersed with bloodcurdling screams eventually died down to silence. One runner had fallen to twelve men.

The machines gave a glance to their fallen comrade and stepped over the mound of bloody bodies, but their progress was halted. The bunker had been sealed.

*

"Lieutenant Stetz! Stetz are you there?" Oakes shouted into the comm., meeting silence.

"Dammit soldier, is anybody there alive?!"

The sound of laboured breathing suddenly filled the room, followed by a rasping, dying whisper.

"Dead. All dead. Broke through the defences. Bloodbath. Gunships ... coming. N-n-n-no! NO!"

The chilling noise of a sentinel came through the radio, followed by a wet crunching sound that was unmistakably bone.

The ground was vibrating now as the gunships drew closer, the drone of their enormous engines could be heard through the thick concrete walls and ceiling of the outpost.

"Sir, they're opening up." said Booth at holographics. Oakes hurried over to see the massive machines splitting open to reveal gun turrets.

"They don't look small enough ... are they going to shell us?" Oakes muttered.

Outside there was a thunderclap. Then another. Then five more. Ten more. It was the sound of the gunships firing, and Oakes got his answer.

"They look like bombs, sir. Flying bombs." Booth replied, "Hundreds of them."

*

The runners turned as one as the first bomb was launched, and began to run, the sentinels following close behind. They didn't look back, as the event meant nothing to them.

If they had, they would have witnessed the complete annihilation of the last outpost in Sector Alpha One. The gunships bombarded it with such ferocity that the resulting crater was five times larger than the entire installation.

It was to mark the beginning of the end for human resistance to machine rule. A huge offensive wiped the surface clean of all remaining life - those who saw what was coming fled unground to the city of Zion, those who refused to go perished as cities were razed to the ground.

--

Holly screamed, her eyes snapping open, arms shooting straight out, grabbing at the air.

"Holly! Holly! It's me, calm down! You were in an accident." Annika said soothingly, trying to settle her back down.

"It's not real! It's not real!" she gasped, tearing at the sensors and needles attached to her body.

"What? Holly, what isn't real?"

"THIS!" she screamed, "Sentinels! Killing machines! The Matrix!"

Annika hit the alarm to summon the nurses.

"What? Sentinels? Holly what are you talking about? What is the Matrix?"

Holly lunged off the bed and staggered, she had somehow survived with no broken legs. She swung around to face Annika, but instead there stood a woman in a black suit.

And she held a gun.

"Ms Xandrel, my name is Agent Pace. Please calm down, I need to ask you a few questions."

"YOU'RE NOT REAL!" she thundered, pushing the hospital bed hard at Pace with newfound strength and running towards the door.

A bullet smashed her left heel into pieces and Holly tumbled into the wall with a scream of agony, hitting her head as she did so.

Pace walked slowly over to her quivering body and pointed the gun at her head. "I'm afraid you are no longer authorised to be here, Holly Xandrel."

Two seconds after the second shot had rung out across the ward, nurses and security guards burst in to find Annika motionless, staring at the body of her friend lying on the floor with a bloody hole through her skull.

Part 10: The Real

Holly let out a muffled scream as her eyes snapped open and the pink goo of her pod obscured her vision. Like thousands of humans before her, she shot out her arms and pulled herself up into clear air, driven by the most basic urge that governs the behaviour of mankind - the urge to survive.

She yanked the breathing and feeding tube from her oesophagus, throwing up what little there was in her stomach as she did so. The cool air felt good and she drank it in, steadying herself with weak shaky arms as she gazed out at the towers of pods surrounding her.

"Yes .." she whispered, "I knew it."
Then she began to laugh.

*

"Sir, there are no extractions scheduled for today are there?"

Captain Syn looked at his young operator questioningly.

"No, why?"

"Because I'm reading movement on one of the towers, and I think it's human."

Syn became alert, moving to his operator's station. Since the truce and increase in freed minds, some hovercrafts had adapted their technology to read the movement on the Power Plant more carefully.

"Sure enough, there it is. Maintenance will be on it soon enough to get it out of the pod. There are no other ships around so I guess this one's ours. God only knows how it's still alive without a red pill though."

Syn ran over to the ladder that would take him to the flight deck.

"I'm looking forward to the explanation!"

*

"Hey!" Holly shouted at the pod next to her, "Hey! Wake up you idiot! Wake up! It's all a lie, it's not real!"

A loud whining noise and rush of air caused her to spin round, bringing her face to face with a crab-like airborne robot.

"What the fuck?!" she squawked, recoiling and slipping back into her pod.

Arms unfolded from the robot and grabbed her by the neck, hauling her into the air as it removed her neural jack. As soon as the job was done it dumped her unceremoniously back into the pod and flew away.

"What ... aah! What the ... aah Jesus Christ!"

The jacks connected to her body popped away painfully and as she sagged forwards there was a dull whump noise behind her. The liquid in the pod flooded out of the hole that had just opened, sucking Holly with it.

*

The pads of the Zion Hovercraft Ignatius buzzed gently as they waited in the waste tunnel, watching the progress of the human life sign.

"Now!" Syn said into the intercom. Immediately some cargo doors snapped open on the underbelly of the craft and a grappling arm raced downwards, plunging into the icy waters.

"Got her!" came the reply over the comm.

"Okay, retract the arm, I'm coming down."

Syn slid down the ladders to the medical bay of his ship and hurried over to where his crew was gathered around a small human form wrapped in a blanket.

"Welcome to the real world, miss." he said gently.

"I knew it," she whispered, "I knew it wasn't real."

"Get her over to the bed," he directed his crew, "What's your name?"

"Ho ..." she paused, "Xenthi. My name is Xenthi."

Fin.