

# **FUTURE IMPERFECT**

**SHARON VANDER MEER**

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EPISODE ONE  
FOUND

**D**ata access controlled servers tended the woman's every need. The table upon which she lay was the only item of furniture in the stark white cubicle.

She stirred.

In less time than it took to draw breath the table reconfigured into a chair. DACS attachments retracted from beneath her gown and snaked out of her intimate and secret places. Delicate air and feeder tubes slipped from her nostrils, out of her throat and from around her wrists. She came fully awake unaware of the silent retrieval of all that had invaded her body. Unseen monitors registered mounting confusion and spiking panic.

She should be dead. *Dead!* But the image didn't show a dead woman; it showed a woman slowly gaining control. The watcher's hands clinched into fists as the woman breathed in and closed her eyes. After a moment, her eyes opened; her gaze scanned the room. She clutched the chair's arm tightly with one hand, with the other she stroked the flowing, iridescent gown she wore. And then her hair. And then her face. Questing fingers exploring unfamiliar territory.

The woman stood, took tentative steps, arms flung wide for balance.

The video blanked out.

The watcher removed the disk from the reader and absently rubbed a

thumb across its surface. Awake, and from the look of her, not for the first time. Claude had been lying. He was too caught up in her, too caught up by far. Like always, thinking only of himself – his wants, his needs.

Fool!

The watcher swallowed the bile of fury. Perhaps this bit of knowledge could be turned to advantage, but first the woman must be removed from the Inquiry and Development Sector, away from Claude, but carefully.

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Squad Commander Stone Walker strode through the main corridor, his attention divided between activity around him and a woman he had brought into Claude Stiller's IDS more than a year ago. To his knowledge she remained unresponsive to every test Stiller had given her, if Stiller was to be believed.

Stone's jaw flexed. His hatred of the man who ran IDS was best contained. Stiller knew well how to play on Controller Anadra's sense of obligation. As her half-brother he used her influence to tweak systems to fit his plans, whatever they were. Stiller was a ruthless opportunist. Anadra was unable, or perhaps unwilling, to see that. Stone kept his own council. No need to draw attention. He and his troop were already targets of investigations that had no merit. The rumor mill spit out suspicion faster than spore could spread. Guardians who should be investigated got a pat on the back while those who did their jobs were challenged or ridiculed. More than one qualified and loyal Guardian had left the force and Habitat III because of it.

Stone nodded in response to a woman who greeted him as she passed by, his anger and frustration concealed behind a carefully controlled public face. All was well, at least for the moment. There were no clogged filters, air supply systems hummed efficiently, no infiltrations had been reported, nobody had died. And no births. He didn't dwell on the latter, a mystery he was ordered to ignore. The matter was under advisement, according to Stiller. Whatever the council wished to go away was placed under advisement, like the murder of Stone's father.

As a Guardian and liaison between Controller Anadra and Habitat III Council, Emilio Walker had been a man of many secrets. Stone was sure one

of those secrets had led to his death. He could no more believe his father had accidentally fallen from the observation ramp in Power Central than he believed he could fly from the self-same spot.

There was a connection between his father's murder and the woman, there had to be. Why had Stiller insisted she be found on the very day of the suspicious accident that resulted in his father's death? What was her value to Stiller? He cared about no one, yet he had demanded she be found and returned to Habitat III without official authorization. Stone's emotional turmoil over the death of his father combined with the certainty his father would have gone to find her, sent him topside in search of the missing woman. The strained relationship between father and son, and Stone's refusal to make amends wore on him still. Now there would be no opportunity.

Stone had found the woman within hours. Vines had already begun to grow over and into the tattered blanket that covered her. She was unconscious and at the mercy of the invasive vegetation. It was a wonder she had survived.

It went against Stone's training not to report the incident, but Stiller held a position of authority second only to Controller Anadra. What he had not anticipated was how the young woman's image would haunt him. Too often he found himself wondering what had happened to her. His efforts to get information led to inadequate glimpses of her inside an isolation unit where she lay unconscious.

A Guardian out of uniform with a dazer tucked into an over-the-shoulder sling holster, scuttled into a side corridor, but not before Stone saw him and mentally noted his name. He also saw a Guardian in uniform wearing a decorative mask, several citizens carrying dazers, Friends being shunned despite wearing clearance medallions indicating they had followed entry procedures, and the most likely to create trouble, Isolationists holding an open rally without a posted permit.

"Only regulations can save us!" a man shouted, unaware of Stone's approach. "We are clean. We are protected. Every time another exception is made and another one of them," he pointed to a Friend who had stopped to listen, "comes into our habitat, that's another chance for you to get the plague!"

Muttered agreement rippled through the growing crowd. The Friend darted

a nervous look at those around him and hurried away.

“Chaucer Mapes knows what’s good...”

“Citizen.” Stone’s voice cut short the man’s speech. People scattered as he walked into their midst leaving only a few behind.

“Ah, one of our own! Welcome, welcome!” Corbin Anders inclined his head in respectful acknowledgment of Stone’s position. The sneer on his lips revealed his true opinion. Those who remained in the circle of listeners looked on with malicious curiosity.

“Good day to you, Councilman. You failed to post your public gathering sign. As a member of Council and one who advocates for regulations, I’m sure it was an oversight.”

The sneer faded. “Yes, of course, I must have left it in my apartment. We will resume our gathering later, once I have the permit in my possession.”

The permit didn’t exist, of that Stone was certain. This was an illegal campaign rally.

“Councilman.”

“Commander.”

Anders sauntered away followed by his bevy of believers. Stone continued on, his attention more keenly on the area he was passing through. There had been increasing numbers of thefts and muggings. Domicile invasions were on the rise. For all the threats from nature gone wild, it was the human threats that gave Stone sleepless nights.

Minor rule-breakers crept into dark corners as he passed by. Most regarded him with scarcely concealed contempt. They, like Anders, knew he would offer little in the way of challenge. Confrontations too frequently led to an offender complaining to a councilor, who would take it to Controller Anadra. She had enough to deal with. Petty complaints weren’t worth the trouble they caused.

NormStats – citizens who held the normal status health rating – treated Guardians like glorified maintenance people, bodyguards, and handy escorts. Many Guardians preferred escort duty, which often meant substantial gratuities for services well rendered. Services ranged from acting as a guide through the corridors or in GreenSpace, to providing more intimate services.

Stone’s communicator vibrated below his ear.

“Walker.”

“I need to see you.”

Cecile Greve’s voice jolted him. Bad judgment, libido, temporary insanity, grief over his father’s death, maybe a combination of all these factors had led him into a relationship with the former Guardian now in service to the Habitat III Council. She was his father’s replacement on Controller Anadra’s staff. Their brief affair ended badly. He didn’t want to deal with her on any level.

“This is not a good time.”

There was a brief hesitation at his curt tone. Her voice turned clipped and cool when she responded.

“I want to talk to you about an unidentified female in IDS. I prefer to discuss this in person.”

Two people bumped into Stone when he stopped abruptly. How did Cecile know about the woman? Stiller would not share information with someone whose duty required full disclosure to the council and Controller Anadra.

“This could jeopardize Controller Anadra’s campaign. I know you support her bid for senator.”

She was right. Many saw reestablishing governmental systems as a sign life could get back to normal. Stone wasn’t so sure, but he wanted someone he could trust in a position of influence. So, yes, he wanted to see Controller Anadra elected to the reinstated legislature.

“Security Central, ten minutes.”

“No. I would prefer the recreation area. It is perhaps better if we are not seen together.” With that she disconnected.

When Stone arrived, Cecile greeted him from astride a rocket-shaped swing. The rec space was devoid of life, haunted by the children who didn’t play there anymore, a reminder of dramatic changes NormStats wanted to ignore, like the absence of anyone under the age of twenty-five living inside the habitat.

Stone approached Cecile with caution. Why had he ever become involved with her? For the months following Emilio Walker’s death, he had lived a monkish life, only going out when he was forced to fill the role of escort, something that happened rarely because he was smart enough to schedule duty hours when social events were going on. There were so bloody many it was impossible to avoid them all. When Cecile asked Controller Anadra to assign him to her as an official escort he was grateful to be out of the on-call pool.

Before long their ceremonial pairing became something more. For a while Stone lost himself in the demands of Cecile's body, grateful for those times when he could be free of nagging questions, persistent guilt and the haunting image of a woman he knew nothing about.

It wasn't until Cecile began to talk about moving in together that he'd come to his senses and ended it. She now watched him approach, arching her back in a provocative move that gave her slender form a voluptuous look.

"What's this about?" His eyes scanned the deserted area with distaste.

Cecile let his abrupt manner pass without comment. She shifted her weight forward and gracefully dismounted the swing.

"The woman I spoke of has been a guest," she lifted a cynical eyebrow, "in IDS for months. I checked her DNA against registered NormStats and can find no match."

Stone leaned against the swing's frame and crossed his arms. "This sounds like a discussion you should be having with the director of IDS."

Cecile made a derisive sound in her throat. "And have him ask me questions I don't want to answer? Like how I found out about the woman and how I got a sample of her DNA for testing? I don't think so."

She stroked the curved nose of the rocket.

"It seems she has been unconscious since you brought her into the habitat. She is now awake."

Stone didn't react, but his mind raced. Bringing the woman into the habitat could cause him problems; he could deal with that. Of greater concern was what would happen to her. Why he should care was a mystery. She was nothing to him.

"I was surprised to learn of your involvement, considering your position. What you did is highly irregular. Illegal, in fact."

"Your concern is commendable. Take it up with Controller Anadra, or with Stiller. The two of you are friendly, so I hear."

"Ah, so you do keep up with me. How interesting."

Stone wasn't so much interested in Cecile as in keeping track of alliances that could cause problems within Habitat III.

"What do you want from me?"

Cecile's chin came up and the cool gray eyes turned smoky. Stone

recognized it as displeasure. She didn't like to give up control of any situation. By cutting to the heart of why she had contacted him he was pushing her in a direction she wasn't ready to go. To his surprise, instead of sticking to her agenda she answered his direct question with a direct answer.

"I want Controller Anadra notified, but if I tell her she will demand to know who told me or she will go straight to Claude. I don't want to risk losing my contact nor do I want Claude to know I..."

She hesitated and looked over her shoulder into the dim reaches of the corridor.

"Have a spy in place?" So, Stiller was vulnerable. That alone was worth the encounter with Cecile. "Your informant better watch his back. Stiller doesn't deal kindly with treachery."

Cecile shrugged. "That is my informant's problem, not mine." She pushed the rocket swing. The resulting dry screech made them both jump. Cecile stopped the movement and the sound ceased.

"If word gets out this woman is inside without council knowledge there could be a problem. I don't want this to come back on Controller Anadra."

Stone shifted his stance and studied the toes of his polished boots waiting for her to get to the point.

"This is a critical time in the campaign. Her election could be in peril if blame falls at her door for an illegal being inside. Because of your position, it is logical for you to notify her of the situation, and by doing so keep my name out of it."

So, that was it. She wanted to prevent a campaign disaster without becoming directly involved. If the Controller were elected Cecile's star would rise as well. Cecile was ambitious and predictable. He couldn't cave too quickly. She was suspicious of anything that came easy.

"Why not leave well enough alone? As long as nobody knows of your mystery woman's presence in IDS, what harm can it do for her to remain there?"

Cecile's lips curled. "Are you saying you want her left with Claude? That you think this should be kept from Controller Anadra? I'm surprised at you, Commander Walker. The self-appointed conscience of us all, and you want this kept quiet?"

Stone didn't rise to the bait.

"The thing is, if I found out about her so can others. I want the problem disposed of before word gets out."

"Talking to the Controller might not be that easy," Stone said, hiding his uneasiness at her choice of words. "She is busy with the campaign in addition to keeping up with her other duties. And I am not anxious to have my part in this made public. Stiller will lay blame at my door for any trouble that comes his way, and be glad to do it."

She paced, frowning in thought. "You have a point. What if I," she smiled slyly, "anonymously send you the information that I have gathered. You would have no choice but to pass it along to Controller Anadra, right?"

Stone nodded. "Of course. I would have to notify Stiller of this anonymous message as well."

"Covering your ass, as it were." When she didn't respond, she waved a dismissive hand. "Whatever it takes, as long as some scheming candidate rep doesn't stumble onto this information and use it against Controller Anadara. It would be devastating to her campaign."

Stone was more curious about the woman in IDS than he was willing to reveal, and Cecile was right about the impact on Anadra's campaign if the mystery woman's presence inside the habitat were to be discovered by an opponent. It wouldn't matter that Anadra was unaware of Claude's actions.

"Send me what you have and I'll decide how to handle it."

Cecile hesitated as if to say something more then turned and walked away.

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She shivered. Not from cold. Panic trickled across her skin like insects swarming a carcass.

She remembered nothing. Not who she was, where she was or how she came to be in this blindingly white space.

She ran her hands up and down walls, along the floor, into the corners. No windows. No door.

She turned in a circle, her legs wobbly, arms and hands trembling. She could not bring herself to return to the chair and instead sat on the smooth floor

with her back against the smooth wall.

Time had no meaning. Had she been awake an hour? A day? Bile eddied in her belly and surged into her throat. Tears spilled over and ran down her cheeks.

She startled awake sometime later. She was no longer on the floor. She was seated in the chair. She stood carefully and backed away, one hand to her throat, the other groping for the wall to keep from falling. Someone had been in the room. An icy finger of fear trailed through her belly.

How?

Images flashed through her head. A man, leaning over a table, writing; a smiling woman standing with folded arms watching him; a cold, sterile room where someone lay inside a cylinder.

Her heart raced as she began another slow prow, barely keeping terror at bay.

The chair was the only object in the room. There was no food service unit, toilet facilities, or bed, yet her body made no demands for food or elimination or sleep. She was clean and physically rested. This was not reassuring. The room was the enemy. Unwilling to give in to the power of nothingness, she paced the cell's perimeter counting her steps to be sure nothing had changed, that the room wasn't shrinking. Her skin prickled and the chill that had started in her belly, crept over her. She was being watched.

After a moment she resumed the inspection of her claustrophobic surroundings and tried to ignore the cold itch between her shoulders. It didn't work. Everything was closing in. The gown clung like a too-tight second skin.

*It's in my head. This is fear, nothing more.*

Clammy sweat beaded her forehead and her heart thumped. Her throat swelled shut. The neckline of the gown tightened.

Her fingers clutched the neckline and ripped open the seam down the front. Relief was instantaneous. She gulped air and shimmied out of the gown. It fell in an untidy puddle at her feet. She was left clad in a thin garment that scarcely covered her. Reflexively she placed one arm across her breasts and shielded her feminine center with splayed fingers. She stood that way for a moment feeling angry and foolish, and then dropped her arms. No doubt whoever was out there watching had seen her buck-naked more than once. At least the

chemise gave some cover. In a perverse moment of audacity she spread her arms and bowed to the audience she knew must be there, beyond the walls, and immediately felt ridiculous. She sank to the floor, drew her legs up to her chest and rested her cheek on her knees.

She had no yesterdays and no idea about today or tomorrow. *Control.* She had to stay in control. She squeezed her eyes shut. *Remember.*

*“Where are Judith and Jason?”*

*A man stood across the room from her obscured in shadow, his back to her.*

*“They are being cared for.”*

*“You said we would be together after the tests.”*

*“And so you shall. Right now you need rest. Lie down.”*

The images blanked out to be replaced by others.

A different man’s voice, warm and reassuring.

*“A thinking person will do what is best for all, and freedom is best, don’t ever let anyone tell you different. What imprisons us is not the disciplinary arm of the law. Too often we give up our freedom to those who say they know what is best. Don’t believe it. Freedom is what defines who we are and what we can achieve. Control your own destiny.”*

Another image took shape.

*“Come girl, you’ve got to help me! Your life’s not worth spit if you don’t get up!”*

*She rolled off the cot and stood on wobbly legs.*

*“Who are you?” She couldn’t be sure if she said the words aloud or if they were inside her head. So much that wasn’t real went on inside her head.*

*“For both our sakes I’m not going to tell you. Come on! We have to move!”*

She awoke with a jerk. Sweat jellied across her skin, thick and hot. Three men, shadowed forms with no faces, the last man in the series of images trying to – what? Help? Get her from some place to some other place? Who was he? A second man who knew something about Judith and Jason, where they were, who they were. A third man whose essence was as familiar as the sound of her

own heartbeat but whose face she could not bring into focus.

She shifted and two thoughts flashed inside her head: *I'm on the floor I need to pee.*

She had wondered about her body's lack of normal response. Now she was aware of her full bladder and growing hunger. She rolled into a fetal ball, face hidden behind the curtain of her silken hair, all thought suspended. The increasing pressure in her bladder became impossible to ignore.

"Please, whoever you are. I, I have to relieve myself. Please ..."

The small effort sapped her remaining self-control and a warm puddle spread beneath her. She pulled the discarded gown to her and dragged herself to a corner. She huddled there, wrapped in the shining cloth, silent tears sliding down her cheeks.



The Controller was not available. Administrative duties would keep her away until late, after which she had personal time set aside. No use trying to see her then. Eirene Anadra's time of seclusion was sacrosanct. Stone wondered if Cecile knew about Anadra's secret? Somehow he didn't think so.

His eyes shifted to the corridor monitors. The NormStats weren't in a hurry. Why should they be? Their world was limited. Trades people who ran shops in the central mall were already in their modules tending to business. Legalists and medics who existed on the paranoia of Citizens, were in their office cubicles awaiting another chance to legally rob some fool of markers on trumped up charges of property infringement or a hypochondriacal ailment requiring lengthy treatment, but no cure. If only they would concentrate on the real threats that surrounded them on every front.

There were plenty who would call Stone a fool, that although the habitat way of life wasn't perfect it had proven to be an effective solution to the Plague War and the spread of the plague. He would be reminded that Security Guard duties were at the discretion of the Council, duties limited to escort services, keeping vines from getting in, and making sure no one came into the habitat who shouldn't be there. Many of the newly recruited guardians found this to be quite acceptable. They saw the position of guardian as an easy way to earn

markers and gain access to the elite. Those who repeatedly inveigled their way into extra escort assignments were among the wealthiest residents in the sector. More difficult to ignore was the line developing between one faction of the Guard and another. Isolationist commanders and their ranking officers dressed in elaborate uniforms borrowed from the pages of history, flamboyant costumes unsuited for use in the field. They garnered habitat assignments for themselves and those under their command. Favoritism shown to Isolationist Guardians was one of many factors splitting the corps.

Loyalist squad commanders worked to police inside and topside as well. Isolationist commanders were confident the habitat was in no danger and needed no more than cursory protection. In theory the elected Controllers in habitats represented Security Guard leadership; in reality it didn't work that way. They were politicians, not protectors. To return discipline and effectiveness to the corps, Loyalist guardians had recommended having a commander general in each sector to oversee what area commanders were doing with troops. If Stone's experience was typical the idea fell on deaf ears. "If we learned nothing else, Commander Walker," Controller Anadra had said when Stone brought the idea before her, "let us hope we learned to never put the future of Citizens in the hands of generals and scientists."

The legacy of the Plague War. Stone had studied the history under his father's tutelage. During the war the military imperative had been to kill off the vine introduced into the botanical order by scientist David Nolan. Nothing worked. The sickness caused by the spores and nettles of the vine combined with increasing levels of G-fog cut into the population like a scythe, wiping out entire cities. As more soldiers became ill and died, military protection turned into fear and then into fatalism and fury. Civilian law enforcement was put to the test when its ranks were faced with protecting the populace from presumed protectors.

The house where David Nolan was believed to be hiding was torched and burned to the ground. It was assumed everyone in the house died. Rage spread to anyone remotely associated with distributing or planting one of the inoculated seedlings. The terror bred a social plague that spread throughout the world. It was mind boggling in its consequence. Those not yet infected moved into basements of abandoned buildings where they set up armed camps

in an attempt to find protection against increasing levels of spore-infested G-fog and deadly vines. The war began to wind down. In latter days, fighting amounted to no more than skirmishes, destruction for its own sake; battle that seemed to have no other purpose than to sustain a dwindling military. Ten long years of fighting against an unbeatable enemy didn't end decisively, it faded away. Over time the basements became sealed heavily defended havens for those with enough markers or influence to bribe their way in, provided they had normal status health ratings.

Gradually a warren of regional subterranean habitats developed where those who feared the topside hazards could hide away. First the Americas succumbed, then Canada, Asia, Europe. There were recurring rumors that some areas of the world had escaped davnol infestation. Stone had yet to meet anyone who could vouch for that.

Technology suffered in the aftermath. Because few wanted to work in an environment where death could come from simply breathing unfiltered air, rebuilding the infrastructure was sporadic making reconstruction a slow and dangerous process.

Intellectually Stone understood the need for the habitat way of life, but habitats were in danger of collapse. A strong, disciplined security force was essential, yet there was little support for that from leaders. Society was at a stalemate brought about by politics, expediency and fear.

He should focus on changing that by winning Anadra over to his position, but the woman in IDS haunted him. Instinctively he knew if she was awake it wasn't the first time. Stiller ignored his requests for information. After a while he'd quit asking. His feeling that she was somehow connected to the events surrounding his father's death returned, urging him to action. Cecile had her reasons for getting the woman away from Stiller. Stone had his.

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She was back in the chair, dressed in the white gown, feeling rested and refreshed. She saw no evidence of her earlier loss of control, and she had been moved again.

Her scream rebounded off the white walls. She stopped abruptly, throat

burning and raw.

*“Have faith, Hana. Believe in your God-given abilities. Never give up your freedom.”*

The voice inside her head was stern but kind. It brought warmth and comfort. The name Hana echoed in her mind. She said it aloud once, listening to the sound of it, and then again. Hana. It could be anybody’s name. She squeezed her eyes shut and scoured her memory. Evans! Her name was Hana Evans. She hugged herself in celebration, but when no other memories followed, elation drained away.

She paced the perimeter of her tiny prison and began to make a mental list of remembered experiences since waking.

Figures wandered past her mind’s eye, just beyond recognition, like a half-remembered dream. She thought they might be her family, a decidedly comforting feeling overshadowed immediately by the unsettled emptiness of loss. Every thought battered against the dark void of her unremembered past and tied her in knots. The one certainty was that if she fell asleep on the floor, she would awake seated in the chair. If someone could enter, she should be able to find a way out.