

— Book One—

First Steps:
The Story of Astra Wright

by Larry Rosenthal

Chapter 1

“Light on...verbal record only...”

“I killed today...” She spoke out loud directing her voice at the machine. The device, now alive, hovered closer to her as she spoke.

“This is harder than I thought...” she mumbled, the device blinked brighter to catch her words.

“Where do I begin?” she thought. Astra never felt talking was her best gift, and telling stories?...she always had preferred to play them, more than create them. But that was the “Astra” of the past she thought, not who she was today, not the person she had become.

“I guess it’s really been a long year.” She said out loud with a small smile. Maybe that would be a good place to start. Maybe if she went through memories of the last year, or what had happened—it might make sense to them, and make sense to her as well.

Astra had sworn off full VR recording earlier that year. It was one of the many things she changed in her life. Her thoughts, her memories, could all be recorded into that blinking silent orb floating about three feet from her head. In the past, she used to have the latest top of the line consumer version of the device that always followed her and her friends around school, her home and town. This AV Recorder wasn’t as pretty as her favorite, which was designed to look like a rainbow colored swallow. That small “bird,” she thought used to flutter around her and her friends like the tail of a happy puppy. It never collided

with her friends’ AV Buddies™. Astra always thought that was amazing considering Aki’s Avabot was a six foot flying snake and Dawn’s was a three foot tall kangaroo-like creature named Hoppi that would constantly bounce along coming close but never quite colliding with Mala, her Avabuddy™ bird.

Mala was state of the art, constantly being upgraded due to the fact that Astra’s mother worked for the MSB Corporation, the makers of the Avabuddy™ series. Astra had her AI system months before they were marketed for mass consumer sales because employees were able to acquire them through the company store. She remembered Aki and Dawn were always envious of her Avabots. Their parents were not company/consumers at an Avabot manufacturer like Astra’s mother was, so they would have to wait a few months before their Avabuddies™ could be upgraded. Dawn’s parents lived and worked at NARACO, so she always had the latest VR clothes, while Aki’s mother was a doctor at HealthMO. Aki never got the best clothes or VR tech first, but as her mother would always say “at least she had her health.”

The three friends were inseparable in elementary school and junior high, even though their families lived in different biodomes and worked for different corporations. They would hang out together in VR school and get together almost every weekend in “real” life in one or



Hoppi, Dawn’s Avabuddy™

(Note: Hoppi may be viewed in 3D at <http://www.starbase3.com/avbuddies/avaroo1.html>)

the other's biodome cities. In the travel tubes, the trip from LA to Phoenix or to Seattle is only 45 minutes each way. Since the AvaBuddies™ kept their parents aware of their constant whereabouts, children could travel alone at age 8 or so. Astra always felt she was a courageous little kid, since she was allowed to travel alone at six. But she knew she was never really alone, her AV buddy™ Mala would always be there, flying just ahead of her. Connected via the world net to her mother or father who were always just a “VR glance to the left or right,” Astra could always call out to either parent. Besides, who would risk messing with her and risk an attack from a Vrbuddy™. For as long as she could remember, all kids knew of their parents' story about the “pervert” who tried to snatch a kid and was pummeled into a coma by the kid's VRBuddy™, a flying dolphin named Skipper.

Astra never saw violence out on the streets of the biodomes. Later on, when she was a bit older, she would spend hours “living” in VR stories and worlds where violence was part comic relief and part lively action in the corporate manufactured VR worlds and games. They were so much fun she thought—being the “hero” in *Old World Hong Kong*, spying on people and flirting with Kim, her “boyfriend” in the VR stories. They would both rescue the last pandas from Dr. Xo's lair and return them to the Panda Island™. She'd always win, the panda's would always be saved, and Kim would always give her a kiss that ended the program. It was so simple, living in those VR fantasies she thought, or maybe it was being twelve. Astra didn't know, but Dr. Xo would always be reset and ready to threaten more animals in the next story upgrade, no matter what his fate. That wasn't true of the crew of the USC3 Baddam...

Astra awoke and recalled where she was. She had not enabled the VR recorder to start saving a record.

That was childhood she thought, I'm a big girl now. No more flying rainbow birds for me, not for any of us. If anything, the last year's

events had showed her that you couldn't always be protected by your AVBuddy™, no matter how large its talons were. She hoped the rest of the world would realize that as well. They have to she thought, too much had happened since 2150, so much had changed. She changed. Maybe a full VR recording could show that to them, maybe to herself as well. She would think about last year, starting in the spring of 2150, when it began. The VR games, the mysterious avatars, the changing VR worlds, the revelations, the Aelori.

“Recorder, begin full VR recording mode.”

Astra then closed her eyes as the blue light from the recorder enveloped her head. She was tired, she had a tough day, but she didn't want to sleep, she didn't want to dream. She wanted to clearly remember the last year.

to be continued...

In the meantime, check 3D webisodes, games and discuss this chapter in 3D chat on www.starbasec3.com