

Archangel Down

The Archangel Project. Book One.

C. Gockel

In the year 2432, humans think they are alone in the universe. They're wrong.

Commander Noa Sato plans a peaceful leave on her home planet Luddeccea ... but winds up interrogated and imprisoned for her involvement in the Archangel Project. A project she knows nothing about.

Professor James Sinclair wakes in the snow, not remembering the past twenty four hours, or knowing why he is being pursued. The only thing he knows is that he has to find Commander Sato, a woman he's never met.

A military officer from the colonies and a civilian from Old Earth, they couldn't have less in common. But they have to work together to save the lives of millions—and their own.

Every step of the way they are haunted by the final words of a secret transmission:

The archangel is down.

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Thank you again!

To my dad, Jim Evans. Thanks for getting me hooked on sci-fi, fantasy, and comic books. I miss you.

Chapter 1

“We know you are a part of the Archangel Project.”

Commander Noa Sato of the Galactic Fleet glared across the table. Two men wearing the dark green uniforms of planet Luddeccea’s Local Guard glared back at her. Her arms were shackled behind her back to the cold metal chair she sat on. The room was chilly—she could smell the cold of it, along with the odors of various bodily fluids. Her back ached, her mouth was as dry as lizard skin, and she thought the bright lights of the interrogation room might leave her permanently blind.

“I told you, I don’t know what you’re talking about,” she spat.

“Then why are you here?”

“I’m on leave,” she explained for the hundredth time. “I thought I’d spend my vacation visiting my brother on the planet where I grew up. Is that so difficult to understand?” Agitated, she spun her engagement and wedding rings around on her finger. Closing her eyes, she thought of her brother, Kenji, and inwardly begged his forgiveness. When they’d picked her up, she’d assumed this was all a misunderstanding. She hadn’t meant to pull him into this.

“I’ve had enough!” said one of her inquisitors. A pair of sharp, pointed pliers emerged in his hand, and suddenly he was on Noa’s side of the table. “Do you understand what I can do with these?”

Noa tried to keep from screaming ... and woke up in the darkness, her whole body shaking, her breathing so fast and ragged her ribs hurt, cold air stinging her lungs. The darkness smelled like cold and various bodily fluids, an unhappy constant with the nightmare. She rubbed her eyes. But the rest had been just a dream. They hadn’t used those pliers except to scare her during the interrogation. When she hadn’t told them what they wanted to hear, they’d brought her to this camp.

She blinked. Was it unusually bright in the barracks? Stifling a groan, she sat up. Her vision immediately went black. She tried to access the reason why—and for the millionth time remembered her neural interface had been deactivated since she’d arrived

here. Sucking in a sharp breath, she clutched her head, fingers drifting to the smooth, cool surface of the neural interface in her left temple. The guards were fond of parroting, “Freedom from information streams is the path to real wisdom,” but it was torture, not freedom.

Noa’s body swayed. Why was she dizzy? It couldn’t be Luddeccea’s gravity—the planet’s gravity was the same as Earth’s and standard starship grav. Was it malnutrition, or something more sinister? She bit her lip to stifle a bitter laugh. She was being slowly starved to death. How much more sinister could it get?

The spell finally passed, and she surveyed the barracks. All around her were rough wooden bunks four platforms tall. The beds were narrower than the single bunks on a starship, but each was shared by up to three women packed chest to back beneath thin blankets and without pillows. She could make out their faces—just barely—but it was definitely lighter in the barracks. Noa looked down at her bedmate, Ashley. Noa’s skin was dark as straight Earth coffee. Ashley’s was what Tim’s people would call “peaches and cream.” It made Ashley’s delicate features easy to see, even in low light. As she slept, clutching her crutch like a pillow, her face looked peaceful and her breathing was gentle. Not wanting to wake her, Noa gently folded her side of the blanket over Ashley’s sleeping form. Slipping down the slats at the end of the bed, she padded to the window.

Peering through the dirty glass, she caught her breath. Sure enough, thick white flakes of snow drifted from the sky, sparkling in the camp’s harsh spotlights. Their barracks was close to the barbed-wire fence that enclosed them, and she could just make out snow catching on the Luddeccean pines in the surrounding forest. Noa pressed a hand to the window. The snow on the dense foliage would throw off heat-seeking scanners, and the thick branches would throw off radar, but it wasn’t bitterly cold—yet. If they were going to escape, now was the time. Her brow furrowed, and she touched her interface. She squinted at the clouds as though she could will herself to see through them. Somewhere above their heads, the satellite that was Time Gate 8 floated just outside the atmosphere above Luddeccea’s equator. The gate allowed instantaneous travel to any other system that had a gate of its own. It also sent and received data. Time Gate 8 and the other satellites that orbited around Luddeccea’s equator acted as relay stations for the vast data traffic of the ethernet. And, she thought more darkly, if her neural interface

couldn't be activated, the satellites would serve as useful landmarks for navigation ... if the snow let up.

Dropping her hand to her side, she balled it into a fist and bowed her head. As a pilot of the Galactic Republic Fleet she'd been given POW training. She was taught to stay put, to obey orders, and not to make foolish escape plans. She closed her eyes. But there was no war going on, and she wasn't the captive of some pirate clan. She was in a concentration camp on her home world, Luddeccea, which hadn't declared independence from the Republic. Opening her eyes, she looked down at her wrist. A black 'H' and a number had been tattooed there, barely visible against her dark skin. She'd been captured, interrogated, and interned without a trial for being, in the guard's words, a "heretic." Not an admissible crime in the Republic. If the Fleet had known she was here, she'd have been rescued by now. Her hands formed fists at her sides. Kenji should have reported her missing. If he hadn't reported her missing, it had to mean he'd been interned, too ... spinning on her heels, she went back to her bunk.

A few moments later, she was leaning over her bedmate, gently shaking her shoulder. "Ashley, Ashley, wake up, it's time to leave."

Ashley rolled over onto her back. Her eyes opened—visibly blue in the snow-brightness. She stared at Noa dumbly.

"Today is the day," Noa whispered. "It's snowing."

Ashley put a hand to her head and ran it through her sparse hair; they'd all been shaved when they arrived. A tattooed 'A' for "augment" stood out on her wrist like a black scar. Ashley's fingers went longingly to her neural interface just as Noa's had. About three centimeters in diameter, the interfaces were made of copper with titanium and polyfiber exteriors. At the center of each was a circular port that could be hardwired directly to external computer systems via cable, but it was more common to use the internal wireless transmitters. Around the central port, tiny drives, the width and breadth of fingernails, were arranged. When functioning, they could be used for app insertion. Normally, Noa thought neural interfaces looked like flowers—the tiny drives surrounding the central ports like petals. But like every prisoner in the camp, Ashley had a large, ugly, black polyfiber screw jammed into her interface port. The screw disrupted the flow of electrons between neurons and nanos and completely jammed their wireless transmitters.

It was a primitive but very effective way to keep inmates from accessing their neural interfaces and the wider universe with their minds.

“We have to get ready before the others get up,” Noa whispered.

Ashley stared at her a beat too long, but then sat up and quietly handed Noa her crutch. Noa slid off the bed and down the ladder, crutch in hand, and waited for Ashley. When Ashley had first arrived at the camp, she had a cybernetic limb, her ‘augment,’ having lost her left leg to an accident as a teenager. The guards had ripped the leg off on Ashley’s arrival—no anesthesia, of course. Noa scowled in the darkness, anger bubbling in her gut on Ashley’s behalf. Noa’s thumb went to the stumps of the fingers on her left hand—her ring finger and pinky had been removed for different reasons than Ashley’s leg, but at least Noa’s “surgery” had been quick.

Ashley stumbled over the side of the bed, and Noa helped her down the ladder. Instead of giving Ashley her noisy wooden crutch, Noa swung Ashley’s arm over her shoulder. Together they went to the corner of the room. There was a waste bin there reeking of vomit. As they drew close, a few scrawny rats scrambled out over the edge. Ashley gasped, and Noa put a finger to her lip for silence as the filthy creatures darted into the shadows.

Holding back her bile, Noa gave Ashley her crutch, released her, and then rolled the waste bin to the side. Ashley immediately went to her good knee and lifted a small piece of floorboard. She pulled out a sack and carefully unwrapped it.

Inside were a few pieces of bread they’d painstakingly saved over the last two weeks. There were also a few tools in the bundle. Ashley was a cybernetics engineer. Noa wondered if it was her engineering ability, as much as her cybernetic leg, that had gotten her thrown in the camp. Noa’s hand fluttered up to her interface; almost everyone but the most strident fundamentalist Luddecceans were augmented in some way or another in this day and age.

“It’s all here,” Ashley whispered, snapping Noa back to the present.

Noa’s bunk mate had created the tools in the bundle from bits of glass, scavenged wire, and castaway cybernetic parts. Along with a precious pair of pliers to remove the bolt, there was also, miracles of miracles, a shattered com chip that Ashley had cemented together with nail polish she’d stolen from a guard. The size of a fingernail, the com chip

glittered in the low light. Slipping the chip into a neural drive would give Ashley or Noa the ability to listen to the restricted frequencies the Luddecceans were using.

“Well done, Ashley,” Noa whispered, patting the woman’s shoulder. She couldn’t help but notice that Ashley was trembling. Outside, she heard guards talking to one another, debating who would wake up which barracks. “Tie it up, and be ready,” Noa said. “As soon as people start waking, we offer to take corpse patrol.” No one wanted corpse patrol—it meant being last in the breakfast line—among other things.

Visibly shaking, Ashley replaced the board. Noa quickly rolled the waste bin back over it, and helped Ashley up.

Outside, she heard the guards laughing and their footsteps approaching. Any moment they’d come in.

Trembling beside her, Ashley said, “Noa, I can’t go with you.”

Noa looked at her sharply, uncertain of what she’d just heard. “What?”

Not meeting her eyes, clutching the tiny bundle to her stomach, Ashley said, “I’ll slow you down.”

“No,” Noa lied. “You won’t.” Noa was taller by at least four inches. Leaning down, she put her hands on Ashley’s shoulders. There was a tear running down Ashley’s cheek. Noa wiped it away without thinking. She felt her gut constrict. Ashley didn’t look well; she was paler than even Tim had been—and he’d been blonde, blue-eyed, and genuine Aryan purist stock.

Ashley and Noa had bonded over their skin coloring when they first met. They were both throwbacks to an era people considered less enlightened, when humans had been many races instead of one. People like Noa and Ashley were reminders of that time; it made people nervous and, ironically, prejudiced. It had been a superficial reason to bond, and it could have backfired spectacularly when Noa had first voiced her escape ideas. But Noa had sensed bravery and mettle in Ashley and knew she wouldn’t betray her. “I need you, Ashley,” she whispered. She didn’t want to carry out their escape plans alone.

Hunching her shoulders, Ashley looked at the floor.

Trying to ease her fears with a laugh, Noa said, “If you don’t come, who will listen to all my crazy schemes and tell me they won’t work? Who will tell me to shut up when I’m whining? Who will kick me when I snore?”

Ashley’s eyes lifted.

Noa tilted her head and gave Ashley what Tim used to call her best “cornball grin.” Although Noa had some acquaintance with corn, she wasn’t sure what a cornball was—probably some Aryan-Europa purist isolationist thing Tim’s people did—some sort of weird ball sport? Whatever it was, the grin had always worked on Tim and usually worked with her friend.

Instead, Ashley whimpered, “Don’t make this worse! You don’t need me, Noa. I showed you how to remove the bolt and turn your neural interface back on. You can move more quickly without me.”

Noa squeezed her shoulder. “Ashley, Starmen do not leave Starmen behind.”

“I’m not a Starman,” Ashley protested, wiping her eyes.

“I can’t leave you here,” Noa whispered back. There was a part of her that wanted to, that was afraid of having to half-carry Ashley through the snow and wilderness. Starmen didn’t give into fear.

Ashley closed her eyes. “Yes, you can, and you have to. You have to tell people about this place—if you tell them, they’ll come for us and the nightmare will end.”

“You could be dead before that happens,” Noa whispered, the reek of the vomit in the bin creeping into her consciousness. People died here all the time—of illness, injuries, and starvation.

“I won’t die,” Ashley whispered.

Every muscle in Noa’s body tensed. Ashley was too smart to believe that.

Putting her hand on Noa’s arm, Ashley whispered, “And you have to go rescue your brother. From what you told me, he’s in much worse danger than I am.”

Noa swallowed. Most of her family had left Luddeccea—complaining that it was becoming more fundamentalist. But Noa’s brother Kenji had left and then come back. Considering what Kenji was, that was especially crazy. Oh, nebulae, what would they do to Kenji? If they permanently deactivated his neural interface and deep neural implants—

The door to the barracks opened, and one of the guard women strode in. The guard was new and wore fresh Luddeccean Green—layers and layers of it. She looked so warm, Noa hugged herself instinctively. The guard had the amalgamation of East Asian-East Indian features that were most common: East Asian eyes, straight nose, full lips, tan skin, and black hair. She was very tall, and Noa noted enviously, well-fed. The woman bellowed, “Up, all of you!”

Around them, women cried and rose from their bunks.

Leaning to Ashley’s ear, Noa whispered, “Do you want to wait until another day?” Her fingers twitched at her sides. The longer they stayed here, the weaker they became. But maybe Ashley’s pallor was due to illness? Sometimes people here recovered from minor illnesses. Sometimes.

Ashley pushed the bundle at Noa’s chest. Noa quickly tucked it in the waistband of the secondhand rags that served as pants. Her own clothes had been confiscated.

Ashley whispered, “If you don’t go, I’ll tell them you are planning to escape.”

Rocking back on her feet, Noa’s eyes went wide. The women in the barracks began stumbling into the line that went to the mess hall. Grabbing her crutch, Ashley hobbled quickly toward them. Noa chased her, feeling anger and dismay welling in her chest. “Ashley, wait ...”

Ashley turned back. Wavering on her crutch, she hissed, “I’ll scream, I swear it.”

Noa stopped in her tracks.

“Why aren’t you getting in line?” the guard bellowed at Ashley.

“I don’t want to sleep with this woman anymore,” Ashley said, shaking her crutch in Noa’s direction. She curled up her lip and stammered, “Filthy African!”

Noa’s jaw fell. It was the language of the European purists—a group to which Ashley didn’t belong. She was like Noa—a random winner of a genetic lottery who looked like one of the old races. There were sharp chuckles from the women in line, maybe enjoying the irony of one perceived purist insulting another.

If the guard hadn’t been new, she would have smelled the lie. Ashley and Noa had been friends since their arrival. But the guard was fooled. Huffing, she said, “Stupid Europa, get in line. And you—” She pointed at Noa.

Noa threw up her hands and moved to the line, but then her eyes slid to Ashley. The other woman was mouthing the words, “Go, Go, Go.”

Noa’s lip curled in despair and fury. Her eyes blurred—stupid, selfless, brave, Ashley. Noa was going to curse her name for years, she already knew it. Sucking in a sharp breath, she said to the guard, “I’m on corpse duty.”

* * *

Noa watched the other women go to the mess, their shapes blurred by the snow and the dawn twilight. She could just make out Ashley hobbling on her crutch.

Noa looked heavenward. The snow-bearing clouds seemed to go on forever. There was no hope that she’d be able to navigate by Time Gate 8. She touched her interface, and her fingers slipped to the bolt blocking her data port. As soon as the bolt was removed and her neural interface was activated, she’d be able to find her way. She stroked the edges of the port, and her hand shook with hunger and weariness—or perhaps just yearning for connection. She’d be able to contact the Fleet, her family, everyone ... she shook her head. Maybe not right away, not until she put some distance between herself and this place. Otherwise her signal might be targeted, and she’d be dust. But she’d be able to receive signals. Her heart clenched, thinking of her mother’s voice. Her mother would have left a message as soon as Noa missed her weekly call. It had to be up there, suspended in the ether; Noa could receive it if she could just access the ethernet. The cold polyfiber of her interface burned her fingers, and Noa realized she’d been standing there, staring blankly at the clouds for much too long.

Exhaling and dropping her hand, she looked down the row of barracks. The snow was falling so thickly she couldn’t see to the end. There was a large, open wagon two barracks away. The wagon looked like a thing out of the twenty-first century. It was made of rusty metal, with actual wheels. The source of locomotion, by contrast, looked prehistoric. The wagon was attached to a lizzar, a herbivorous animal native to Luddeccea that was lizard-like in appearance. It was as large as a cow. Instead of scales, fur, or feathers, it was covered by thick gray hide plates, as wide as a hand. It stood on four squat legs, had a short heavy tail, and a beak-like snout for ripping bark from trees. Noa had grown up in Luddeccean farm country surrounded by imported Earth livestock; lizzar made cows and even chickens look like geniuses. She watched as women from

other barracks on corpse patrol threw bodies into the wagon. The smell of death didn't bother the lizzar a bit. It stood licking at the falling snowflakes. The smell of death didn't seem to bother the driver either. He sat unmoving at the front of the wagon, a barbed whip in his hand. Noa let out a breath in trepidation. There were no dead in her barracks. She had no corpse and no excuse to be near the vehicle. It was a sickening thing not to be relieved by the absence of death. What was she becoming?

Her skin heated despite the cold and her thumb found its way to the stumps of her fingers. Her fingers had been swollen when she first arrived; to steal her rings, the guards had cut off the last two digits. The memory of the pain didn't compare to the loss of those simple bands. After years as a widow, they were the only reminders of Timothy she kept on her person, and these people—animals—had stolen them. For a moment, she was so angry her vision went white as the snow. As her vision cleared, she spotted a barrel with a fire burning in it near the wagon. Two female guards were standing beside it warming their hands. Yelling for the driver's attention, the guards motioned for the man to get off the wagon. He perked up, hopped off, and followed them into a guard house. Noa's lip curled. For her husband's memory alone, she should take the barrel into one of the barracks, tip it over, and set this whole camp on fire.

Her feet started moving as though they had a will of their own. She pictured the flames rising up above the roof of the barracks, and it made welcome heat flare in her chest. And then she remembered Ashley's plea, "Tell people about this place," and swore. She heard her husband Tim's voice in her head, "Revenge isn't rational if it is suicidal, and it doesn't help anyone." She shook her head. Timothy was always so damned logical. "Damn you to Hell for being in my head all this time," she muttered. Her face crumpled, and she held back tears.

She drew to a stop and stood between the flaming barrel and the wagon. It was the first time she'd ever seen a corpse wagon unguarded and without a driver. In the guard house, she heard the guards and the driver; it sounded as though the guards were flirting with him. She snarled in frustration; how dare they laugh? She imagined picking up the barrel and hurling it through the building's window. Her hands balled helplessly at her sides. Or maybe she'd just burn herself. She looked at the wagon loaded with bodies, heard one of the female guards say, "We get so lonely sometimes," and bit her lip to keep

from screaming. They deserved to die in flames. She heard the crunch of boots in snow, and looked frantically between the wagon and the fire.

* * *

“I should have set the whole damn place on fire,” Noa projected the thought into her mental log as the wagon hit an exceptionally large pothole. She was shivering, colder than she’d ever been, and sick of it.

“Ehh ... Lizzy, did you hear that?” the driver asked. Her neural interface was dead, and she had spoken aloud instead. Quietly sucking in a breath, she said a prayer—silently this time—but her mind still reached for her neural interface, though it had been disabled for weeks.

“Must be going crazy,” said the driver. Noa could barely hear him over the sound of Lizzy the lizzar’s feet and the creak of the wagon wheels.

Noa’s lips curled, even as her heart rate picked up in fear. She longed to get up and shout, “You despicable blob of blue-green algae! You have been to the camp. You are a monster to allow such horror.” But then she’d have to kill him before he killed her, and he wouldn’t show up to his destination on time. She needed to get out just before he reached his destination—whatever that was—and quietly escape without anyone being the wiser.

But she was so hungry ... and so alone. She longed to open up her bundle, not just for the food, but to activate her neural interface and have the collective consciousness of humanity piped blissfully into her brain.

No, Noa, don’t go down that road, she thought. You’ll get out of this.

She bit her lip. She’d been in plenty of dire straits in the Galactic Fleet, but she’d never been in a situation this bad. Even the Asteroid War in System 6 ... she took a breath. At least, in that hell she’d had her crew mates.

Her one small relief now was that her fellows lay still and silent in the wagon. She had heard horror stories of barely-alive prisoners being thrown out with the dead.

She scrunched her eyes shut and took another breath, counting to ten as she did. Shutting her eyes was a mistake. Unable to see the meager light filtering through the blanket draped over her like a shroud, she focused on the feeling of the bodies around her. Where they should have been warm and soft, they were frozen and hard. She

pictured their cold, graying eyes. She opened her mouth, about to say, “Get a grip, Noa, Captain Kim escaped a hostage situation with this same ploy ...” Catching herself, she restrained a shudder. After his cadaver-escaping-hostage experience, Kim had become a haunted man.

Her hand drifted to the bundle. The rational part of her brain warned her that extracting the bolt was bound to be a noisy business ... but the emotional part of her brain was screaming that if she went insane with loneliness, survival wouldn’t be worth it. Her hands tightened around the bundle. She almost pulled it out, but then jerked her hand away. Closing her eyes, she tried to focus on happy thoughts, the kittens on her starship, her last lover—not Tim—she could never think of Timothy. He wasn’t a happy thought. But, of course, telling herself not to think of her husband made her think of him, and made her thumb seek the stump of her ring finger. She could picture his dark blonde hair, slightly sunburnt cheeks, pale skin and ice-blue eyes. What would he say right now? “Don’t think of me, woman, think of something happy.” She bit back a smile and the hard edge of old grief. Think of something happy. She closed her eyes, and thought of her little brother Kenji ...

* * *

The sunlight sliding through the window onto Kenji’s bed seemed to have physical shape. It put his sleeping ten-year-old form in a natural spotlight. The spotlight effect was amplified by the midnight black walls of Kenji’s room. Over the black paint he had put a map of the universe as it would appear from the core of Luddeccea. He longed to leave Luddeccea and explore the greater universe as much as Noa did, but for different reasons. Noa wanted excitement, adventure, and freedom. In Noa’s mother’s words, Kenji’s fascination was much more “scientific.” He’d agonized for months over how to make a cuboid-shaped room simulate a 360-degree spherical view. In the end, he’d made his bed the core and painted the constellations on the walls in a way that created an optical illusion of a sphere. Without an active neural interface, he’d tediously calculated the exact distortion he’d need to make the constellations appear realistic by entering formulas verbally into a computational device. Perhaps it hadn’t been tedious; to Kenji, math was never tedious.

Kenji's eyelashes fluttered. Noa's fourteen-year-old self sat down beside him on the bed.

"Noa?" he whispered, rubbing the bandages over his data port.

Leaning forward, Noa took his other hand. His skin was tan, unlike hers, and instead of her fine tight coils, his hair hung in smooth black ringlets.

"I'm here, Kenny," she said. "How do you feel? Are you in pain?" Everyone received a neural interface in the soft spot at the left side of their skulls when they were just infants. The interfaces weren't activated until they were ten, when nanoparticles were injected into the central port. The nanos spread out over the surface of the brain in a net and could receive and send electrical pulses. Through the electrical pulses, sights, sounds, words, and even shadows of emotions could be received and sent. Secondary applications made arithmetic and memory tasks easier, too. Noa's "awakening" hadn't been a painful process; joining with the greater collective conscious had been, and still was, wonderful. As her neural interface had been gradually activated, she had been able to explore larger and larger parts of the universe with only her thoughts. But Kenji's "awakening" was different. Among other peculiarities, Kenji lacked the ability to read facial expressions. So doctors had sent some of the nanoparticles into deep structures of his brain to stimulate the regions that were at work when humans saw a smile, a frown, or a flinch.

Kenji's eyelids ceased their fluttering, and his hazel eyes finally opened; in the bright sunlight they looked almost gold.

"No, I don't hurt," said Kenji, his voice and expression flat.

Noa smiled, not sure if the extra nanos had helped, but glad that he didn't hurt. A lot of the Satos' neighbors had disapproved of the family's decision to add the extra nanos, and she'd been worried about it herself. Her mom said it was the "Luddeccean influence" affecting Noa's reasoning. Her family was part of the fourth wave of settlers to Luddeccea, the "fourth families." They weren't part of the hard-core Luddeccean "first families" and "second families" that had migrated here to escape the coming Cyber Apocalypse and Alien Wars. It had been over four centuries since the first, primitive neural interfaces were designed and humans had begun exploring deep space. Neither of those conflicts had come to pass. Now, only the most fundamentalist

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