



CYBORGS ON MARS

# CYBORG RIDER

# HONEY PHILLIPS

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## CHAPTER ONE

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Dr. Sadie Tucker turned on the video feed from the outside of the ship and watched in fascination as they began to descend through the Martian atmosphere. The fact that Mars even had an atmosphere was something of a miracle, but after the deployment of the Green Magnetic Dipole Shield to protect the surface from solar winds and radiation, Earth Government had begun a successful attempt to terraform the planet. It was not yet complete, of course—that was why she was here—but an astonishing amount of progress had been made.

“What do you think, Eggie?” she murmured to the small creature perched on her shoulder.

Eggie chirped enthusiastically, and Sadie laughed.

“Does that mean you’re ready to go to work?”

Eglantine was a bioengineered mole, a prototype specifically designed to handle the conditions on Mars, including the low levels of oxygen and the subzero evening temperatures. Sadie was bringing her, along with hundreds of embryos, to Mars for the final stage of her project.

As the ship settled on the surface, Eggie chirped again and hopped down onto the small desk, nudging the box containing her goggles towards Sadie.

“Do you want your goggles?”

She still wasn’t quite sure why Eggie was so fond of her goggles. Her eyesight was already far superior to that of the mole species who had

provided the original biological material. The goggles could be used to issue simple commands, but their primary purpose was to record and transmit information back to a central receiving station so the resulting data could be collected and studied.

Picking up the goggles, she fitted them gently over Eggie's nose, locking them into the implants on either side of her face. Eggie chirped happily before climbing back up Sadie's arm to her favorite perch on her shoulder, and Sadie smiled.

"I guess that means you're ready to go. I suppose I am too."

She picked up the small bag she had packed earlier that day and did a quick check of the cabin to make sure she hadn't left anything behind. It didn't take long. She had brought very little—she'd had very little to bring. She'd gone directly from a cramped college dorm to the only slightly larger rooms provided for the scientists working at the GenCon lab.

Her salary had been large enough to afford her own place, even in Earth's extremely competitive and expensive housing market, but since all of her waking hours were spent at the lab, she'd never seen the point. Her lack of material possessions wasn't important. What was important was the small creature sitting on her shoulder and the thousands of embryos carefully stored in the cargo hold of the ship.

"Let's go make sure that your sisters have arrived safely."

Eggie chirped an agreement and they joined the flow of people leaving the ship. Although there were other scientists on board, the majority of passengers were homesteaders, eager to leave an overcrowded Earth behind and create a new life for themselves on Mars despite the risks. Most of them were male, but a surprising number of females were also on board. Some of them were with their husbands, but others were ready to take on the challenge by themselves.

In addition, there were several mail order brides coming to meet their future husbands. Sadie couldn't imagine traveling all this distance to marry a man she'd never met, but then again, she'd never had any desire to get married. As far as she could tell, marriage was only a source of pain. Her mother's unhappy face flashed before her eyes. A small paw patted her neck as Eggie



responded to Sadie's sadness.

*She would have been so excited to know I was on Mars, she thought wistfully. Her mother had always been so proud of her accomplishments. But then if her mother had still been alive, she would never have considered leaving Earth.*

Shaking off the unhappy memory, she slung her bag over her shoulder and followed the other passengers down the landing ramp. The ship had settled inside a huge dome covered with orange dust, and rather disappointingly there was no view of the surface she'd seen during their descent. People were being directed towards various exit doors, but she ignored them and walked around the ship to where the contents of the cargo hold were being unloaded.

"You shouldn't be back here, missy." The grizzled older man overseeing the unloading process frowned at her.

"I'm Dr. Tucker. I was just checking on my shipment."

He consulted the tablet he was holding, then nodded and pointed at a stack of white containers. "Over there with the other scientific supplies. Says here to put it in the GenCon holding area," he added doubtfully.

"Yes, that's right."

One of the largest corporations on Earth, GenCon had worked closely with Earth Government on the original terraforming and settlement of Mars, contributing both financial and scientific resources. Unfortunately, their motives had not been entirely honest. When their plans were revealed, the part of the company on Earth had been placed under strict government control. But thanks in no small part to Serena Gatling, the woman she was here to see, the Martian arm of the company had maintained a working relationship with the newly organized government of Mars.

"I work for GenCon," she said calmly, even though she knew many of the Martians still regarded the company with suspicion.

The overseer looked even more doubtful but after studying her face, he nodded again. "I'll make sure it's delivered safely. You'll have to go out through the hangar. Door B."

She hesitated, not quite willing to let the precious containers out of her sight, and Eggie chirped. The old man gave her a curious look and Eggie looked back, her head tilted to one side. He suddenly smiled, his face lightening.

“And who’s this?”

“This is Eglantine.”

“Pleased to meet ya, Miss Eglantine. Name’s Cyrus.”

Eggie chirped, and Sadie laughed. “I think she’s pleased to meet you too. Her sisters are in those containers.”

“I promise I’ll take good care of your family, Miss Eglantine,” he said solemnly. “Now you go on, missy. I expect there’s someone waiting for you.”

He was right. A very officious young man was holding up a card with her name when she followed the signs to Door B.

“You’re Dr. Tucker?” he asked disbelievingly when she identified herself.

She was used to the reaction—she knew she didn’t look like most people’s idea of a scientist—but that didn’t make it any less annoying. Her genetics might have given her a gift for science, but they had also given her a youthful face and a short, curvy body.

“That’s correct,” she said coolly. “I believe I am supposed to meet with Serena Gatling.”

As soon as she mentioned the woman’s name, the look of disbelief vanished as he tapped nervously at his tablet.

“That’s right. And she doesn’t like to be kept waiting.”

“Then I suggest you take me to her immediately.”

He led her to a small two-person vehicle that looked rather like a golf cart with oversized wheels. When she climbed in next to him, he gave Eggie an appalled glance, but didn’t say anything. The vehicle trundled down a long tunnel carved out of rock before emerging at the back of a gleaming white metal building. It looked as if it should have been on Earth, rather than

perched next to the wall of red rock that formed one side of the city.

Before she had more than a quick glance around, the young man hurried her into the building and up a set of wide stairs to a reception area. There was no one sitting at the desk, and he gave it a despairing glance before knocking tentatively on the inner doors.

“Come in,” a low female voice responded.

The young man’s hands actually shook as he pushed open the double doors to reveal a spacious, pristine office with a cool, attractive blonde behind an enormous desk.

“This is Dr. Tucker, Ms. Gatling. I’m sorry for the delay, but she was late getting off the ship.”

Sadie frowned at him. “No, I wasn’t. I was checking on the shipment.”

“As a reasonable person would expect.” Serena’s voice was cold and slightly mocking. “You may go now, Kevin.”

The young man muttered something unintelligible and slipped out of the office with an audible sigh of relief, leaving the two women to study each other.

## CHAPTER TWO

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Sadie tried not to feel intimidated as she looked at the woman behind the big desk. She was wearing her usual coverall, neat and practical for working, but she suddenly felt like an unkempt schoolgirl. Serena was the picture of icy perfection in a well-tailored navy pantsuit. Her silvery blonde hair was pulled back in a stylish chignon, not a hair out of place. The only thing marring her perfection was a faint white smear on her left shoulder, but she ignored it so completely, Sadie didn't have the courage to mention it.

"You are the Managing Director for GenCon Martian Operations?" she asked tentatively.

"I am. You will be reporting to me, Dr. Tucker."

Sadie waited for Serena to make some comment about her youthful appearance, but the other woman only gave her a cool smile.

"I trust your journey was without incident?"

"It seemed like a long trip," she admitted. "But I used the time to study the planet as well as work on some additional protocols. I believe that if we increase the size of the grid —"

Serena held up a hand. "Please spare me the details. I trust the people who work for me to know what they are doing—and to produce results."

Was there the hint of a threat in those last words? Sadie raised her chin.

"I certainly hope to do so, but scientific studies do not come with a fixed time

table, or a guarantee.”

“Of course.” Serena inclined her head, looking amused rather than annoyed.  
“I —”

Before she could continue, the door opened and a huge man walked in carrying a baby. Sadie couldn’t help gawking at the tiny infant cradled against the broad chest. He looked equally surprised to see Sadie and gave Serena an apologetic smile.

“I’m sorry. Stanley wasn’t at his desk, and I didn’t realize you weren’t alone.”

Serena looked like a different woman as she smiled warmly at the big man.  
“That’s quite all right. This is Dr. Sadie Tucker. She is here to conduct those soil experiments I told you about. Sadie, this is my husband, John.”

*Husband?* This huge intimidating man? *No, not a man*, she realized. A flicker of light beneath the skin of his arm revealed his true nature.

“But he’s a cyborg.”

“Why, yes. I had noticed.”

Her cheeks flamed. “I’m sure you did. It’s just that on Earth...”

Cyborgs were prohibited from marrying. Her words died out as she realized there was no tactful way to complete the sentence.

Serena raised an eyebrow. “Earth Government has encouraged certain... prejudices. I hope you don’t share them?”

“Oh, no. I wasn’t trying to be rude—I was just surprised.”

Earth Government had realized in the early days of the terraforming project that they needed a physical presence on Mars, preferably one unhampered by the need for environmental protection. Fatally wounded members of the military had been transformed into cyborgs and sent to Mars to perform the necessary tasks. As far as the government was concerned, they were no longer men, but Sadie had never believed that—and her own experiments had given her no reason to change her mind.

“I am glad to hear that,” Serena said coolly, turning back to her husband. “Did you need me, John?”

“It’s not important. I just wanted to let you know that Ren is getting his first tooth.”

“That’s wonderful.”

Serena joined her husband, cooing softly at the baby, and Sadie felt an unexpected pang of jealousy. She had long ago decided that marriage and children were not for her, but the three seemed very happy.

“I’ll join you in a few minutes,” Serena said, pressing a kiss to the baby’s head and giving her husband another smile.

“We’ll be waiting.”

He returned the smile and left, moving with remarkable silence for such a big man. Serena turned back to her, as composed as if there had been no interruption.

“Do you wish to rest before traveling to the lab?”

“No, thank you. I’m eager to get started.”

“Good.” Serena activated a communication panel. “Please ask Z-384 to join us.”

*Another cyborg?* Her confusion must have shown on her face because Serena explained.

“He is one of the cyborg rangers. He will act as your escort to the lab.”

“But...”

Before she could finish her objection, the door opened again and another huge man entered.

“Sadie, this is Zeb —”

“Z-384,” he said.

“Very well. Z-384. This is Dr. Sadie Tucker. You will be escorting her to the

experimental lab on the high desert plateau.”

He turned and frowned at her as she stared at him in shock. He seemed even bigger than Serena’s husband, with wide shoulders and a massive chest. His arms were thick with muscle, as were his legs—no, leg. Only one leg rippled with muscle beneath his faded black pants. The lines of his other leg were different.

“It’s a cybernetic leg,” he said, his voice a harsh growl that sent a shiver down her spine. Her eyes flew to his face. Not a handsome face—his angular features were far too harsh for that—but an oddly compelling one. Even his mouth was compressed into a thin line. He had grey eyes, striking against his tanned complexion and darkening now with some unknown emotion.

“I’m sorry if it offends you,” he continued, but he didn’t sound apologetic—he sounded angry.

“Why would it offend me? Serena said you were a cyborg, and I would expect you to have cybernetic parts. And Eggie uses cyber technology as well,” she added.

His face grew even harsher.

“You are comparing me to that... rodent?”

“She’s not a rodent,” she said indignantly. “Well, I mean, she is, but she’s so much more than that. I’m sure you are too.”

He continued to scowl at her—and it was a very forbidding scowl—but she refused to be intimidated. She lifted her chin and glared back. Neither one of them looked away until Serena broke the standoff.

“Yes, I can see this is going to work out very well,” Serena said calmly.

“Perhaps it would be best —”

“I’m sure I don’t need —”

Both of them spoke at the same time, but Serena ignored them both.

“Yes, Dr. Tucker, you do need an escort. Your knowledge of Mars is only theoretical. And Z-384, you are quite capable of fulfilling this assignment.”

“Of course I’m capable,” he growled. “But she is not suited for such a journey. She is so... small.”

There was an odd hesitation before he said small, but she was too annoyed to pay any attention. How many times over the years had people, usually men, ignored or patronized her because of her size? She crossed her arms over her chest and glared at him.

“I may be small, but I’m perfectly capable.”

His eyes flicked down towards her chest for the briefest instant. The expression on his face didn’t change, but she was sure he had noticed her annoyingly large breasts. Still, the fact that he didn’t stare was a point in his favor. Or maybe he wasn’t capable of being interested. His cybernetic leg had begun high on his thigh. Was it the only part he had lost?

Unable to help herself, she snuck another look. *Oh my*. There was definitely a bulge between his legs—a very large bulge.

Serena cleared her throat, and Sadie snatched her eyes away from the evidence of Z-384’s manhood, sure that she was blushing. The other woman looked amused, and Sadie was quite sure she had noticed the direction of her gaze, but thankfully she didn’t say anything.

“You’ll see Cyrus at the supply depot. He will provide you with what you need for the trip.”

“I don’t need anything.” Z-384’s voice sounded oddly defiant, and Serena sighed.

“I doubt that’s true, but Dr. Tucker will require supplies. Unless you’re just going to carry her the entire way?”

Despite the mockery in Serena’s voice, Sadie had a sudden vision of being cradled against that massive chest. To her dismay, her body actually responded to the idea.

*Don’t be ridiculous*, she scolded herself. *He’s a condescending jerk, just like all the others*. But all the same, she knew she was blushing again. He growled an assent, then picked up her bag and opened the office door, gesturing impatiently for her to precede him. She couldn’t look at him as she moved



past, but she was overwhelmingly conscious of the heat emanating from his body and a faint tantalizing scent of leather and spice.

“I am sure you will find the journey most... interesting,” Serena said, her voice lightly mocking. “And I look forward to hearing your results.”

“Yes, ma’am,” she managed, still feeling off balance at the sudden rush of desire, but then she straightened her shoulders. She had a mission and no one was going to interfere with that mission—especially not an overly large, overly arrogant cyborg.

## CHAPTER THREE

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Z -384 swore to himself as he led the way to the supply depot. Why had he agreed to this assignment? Perhaps it wasn't too late. Sadie—*Dr. Tucker*—clearly needed an escort, but there were other cyborgs in town. Surely one of them would be more suitable. But as he started running through the list of other rangers on duty, he found issues with each of them—G-721 was too young and F-438 too impulsive. T-269 was far too flirtatious. No, he would have to take care of her himself.

“Can you slow down a little?”

He looked down to find Sadie's face pink with exertion from trying to keep up with him, and he was immediately filled with guilt. He had not taken her shorter legs into account. He scowled to cover his regret.

“I said you are not suited for this environment.”

She glared up at him, her face turning even pinker and her blue eyes sparkling with indignation. If she'd had fur, it would have fluffed out around her, and he found his annoyance replaced by amusement—and desire. The same desire that had washed over him when he walked into Serena's office and saw her for the first time. He'd known that he was to escort a scientist to a lab on the upper plain, but he had expected a male scientist. He hadn't expected a tiny female with an innocent face, huge blue eyes, and a mop of short dark curls.

Despite that innocent face, she had a body made for sin. The practical coverall she was wearing couldn't disguise her lush breasts and generous

hips. The fact that the top of her head barely reached his chest didn't stop the unexpected bolt of lust that made his cock stir for the first time in years. The unwelcome sensation had only added to his annoyance when Serena used his given name.

“Zeb—”

“Z-384,” he interrupted. He had no patience with the current trend for cyborgs to revert to their human names. He was no longer human, and it would be foolish to pretend that he was.

“Very well. Z-384.”

Had that been mockery in Serena's voice? No matter—her opinion meant nothing to him. Neither did that of the small woman glaring up at him now as she crossed her arms over her chest. Didn't she realize that doing so thrust her already generous breasts into even greater prominence? Once again, he tried to force his cock under control.

“This has nothing to do with the Martian atmosphere,” she said. “I can't help it if your legs are twice as long as mine.”

“Are you saying I'm going to have to carry you after all?”

He knew he was being provocative, but he couldn't help himself. Her eyes widened before they dropped to his chest, and he caught the unmistakable sweetness of her arousal. *Fuck*. Determined to ignore her response as well as his own, he focused on the animal riding on her shoulder and scanning their surroundings.

“Is the rodent coming too?”

“I told you. She is not a rodent. Her name is Eglantine, and she's a very valuable prototype.”

The little creature chirped at the sound of her name, and Sadie laughed, her expression softening as she stroked her under her chin.

He was suddenly, astonishingly jealous. How long had it been since anyone had touched him, let alone touched him in such an affectionate way? He wanted to snatch those soft little fingers away from the animal and place

them on his own skin.

“We need to get moving,” he snapped, annoyed at his reaction. He took two long strides before he remembered to slow his pace to accommodate her. They walked in silence for a few minutes, and he could see her looking around as eagerly as her creature. He followed her gaze, trying to look at the city as if he were seeing it for the first time.

New Arcadia had been built between the walls of a narrow canyon, then covered with an artificial dome to contain the atmosphere and help regulate the temperature. As the city expanded, additional domes had been added at each side. But despite the fact that the city was continuing to grow, it still retained much of the original frontier appearance. Most of the buildings were cobbled together from a mixture of prefabricated panels, discarded parts, and blocks of the Martian regolith.

Only a few buildings were formally designed—the GenCon headquarters, of course, and the new building for the independent Martian government. The rest of the city was a ragtag assortment of homes and shops and saloons. And people—far too many people. The city was much too crowded for his taste, but it had been his turn to return to the city for duty. He already longed to return to the open expanses of the Martian desert. At least this mission would get him out of the city.

“How long will it take to get to the lab?” she asked.

“I could do it in two days. It will undoubtedly take twice as long with you accompanying me.”

She came to an abrupt halt.

“Look, I’m not sure why you’re being a jerk, but you don’t have to come with me. I’m quite capable of following directions and finding the lab on my own.”

This tiny female at the mercy of the harsh Martian environment, let alone the possibility of human predators? He barely suppressed a shudder.

“No.”

“What do you mean, no?”

“No, you’re not going alone.”

“Who’s going to stop me?”

He bent down until his face was an inch away from hers. “I will. I was assigned to escort you and I never fail to carry out my assignments.”

Her breath caught, and then a small tongue flicked out to moisten those perfect pink lips. *Fuck*. He immediately realized that he’d made a tactical mistake. He didn’t want to intimidate her—he wanted to kiss her.

He could have sworn she started to lean towards him, but then her rodent chirped loudly and rubbed against Sadie’s neck. She jumped, then immediately stepped back, looking anywhere but at him.

“Fine. You can come with me. But try being a little nicer.”

“I’m not sure that’s possible.”

He intended the words as a warning, but perhaps she recognized the truth in them because she gave him an unexpectedly sympathetic look.

“Sure you can. I’m not that bad once you get to know me.”

Since he was quite sure she didn’t mean exploring every inch of that delectable little body, he confined his response to an unconvinced grunt. She laughed and they set off again.

“Why did you say it would only take you two days?” she asked a moment later.

“My horse can maintain a high rate of speed for an extended period of time, and I do not need to stop.”

Her face lit up. “You have one of the cybernetic horses? The work Dr. Abbott did with them inspired some of my own work.”

“Your rodent is a cyborg?”

“Would you stop calling her that?” The adorable scowl crossed her face again. “Her name is Eglantine.”

“That’s a very large name for a very small animal. And you didn’t answer my

question.”

“No, she’s not a cyborg. She’s bioengineered, but her goggles use cybertechnology. Does it matter?”

“I just wondered since you compared me to her—I mean, *it*.”

He was deliberately provoking her, but this time she didn’t rise to the bait.

“You know good and well I did no such thing. Are you always this sensitive?”

“I am not sensitive,” he growled. His emotions had been lost along with his humanity.

She gave him a clearly skeptical look but didn’t respond and for some reason, that only annoyed him even more.

“Cyborgs do not have feelings.”

“Of course they do. Eggie certainly does.”

She slanted him a teasing look, her face full of mischief, and he actually found himself on the verge of smiling. Before he could make such a mistake, her attention was diverted by their arrival at the supply depot.

“Oh, is that your horse? What’s his name?”

“He doesn’t have a name. He’s a machine,” he said stubbornly, but he felt an unexpected pang of guilt.

The horses were machines—robotic creations designed to withstand the harsh Martian environment and provide quick and versatile transportation. Yet he had spent more time with his horse than he had with any other being. They had been together through raging sandstorms and frozen nights, and there was a bond between them, even if he could not put a name to it.

She gave him an exasperated look. “You really are the most annoying man —”

“Cyborg,” he corrected, but she ignored him, already running her hands over the horse’s sleek metal sides and once again he found himself unreasonably jealous that she was touching another.

“He’s beautiful,” she murmured. “How could you not give him a name? You’d like a name, wouldn’t you, boy?”

To his utter astonishment, his horse nudged Sadie’s shoulder with his head. She laughed with delight.

“You see? Now what would be a good name... Maybe something to do with his color. Blackie or Midnight or —”

“Soldier.” The name emerged from his mouth without a conscious decision on his part, but he immediately knew it was the right one.

She looked up at him with those innocent blue eyes and nodded.

“Yes, I think it suits him.”

*Fuck.* What the hell was wrong with him? Naming a machine?

“I still don’t think he needs a name,” he growled, and stalked off to find the supply master.

## CHAPTER FOUR

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“**W**hat a grouch,” Sadie whispered to Soldier, her head pressed against his neck.

“A grouch with exceptional hearing,” Z-384 said before he disappeared into the depot.

Heat rushed to her cheeks but she refused to let him discourage her. At some point on their walk here, she had decided he was more bark than bite. Heck, who was she kidding? She knew exactly when her feelings had changed—when he bent down to lecture her. Their faces were only inches apart and she’d suddenly realized that she wanted to kiss him.

*Not that I’m going to do any such thing*, she assured herself, but that moment of weakness had given her a new perspective. She didn’t think he was angry at her—he was angry at the world. Given the rumors she’d heard about what the cyborgs had gone through, she couldn’t blame him, but maybe she could help him remember that he was also human. Starting with his name.

What had Serena called him? *Zeb*. Yes, she liked that much better than Z-384. She gave Soldier a final pat and followed Zeb into the supply depot.

He was talking to an older man who she immediately recognized as the one overseeing the unloading of the ship. He peered at her from under bushy white brows.

“Hello again, missy. Is Miss Eglantine worried about her family?”

She heard Zeb grunt, but she ignored him, smiling at Cyrus.



“She was quite sure they were safe with you, but it’s time to take them to their permanent home.”

“Aye, that’s what this one was telling me.” He jerked a thumb at Zeb. “Understand you want a rover.”

“I do?” She frowned at Zeb. “I thought we were taking Soldier.”

“I will be riding Soldier,” he said stiffly. “You will be in a rover.”

“But didn’t you say Soldier was faster?”

“Yes, but he is not... suitable. A rover will provide oxygen and heat—and more room for your equipment.”

The last argument convinced her. It wouldn’t be fair to expect the horse to carry everything. She sighed and nodded.

“All right, Zeb.” She saw his face freeze, but she ignored him and turned to Cyrus. “Do you have a rover I can use?”

The old man chuckled. “Sure do. Already fitted up with survival equipment.”

Survival equipment? Even though she knew that Mars was still dangerous to human settlers, the term sounded rather daunting. *Think of it as camping equipment*, she told herself, then glanced over at Zeb. He was still staring at her, an expression she couldn’t read on his face, but the sight of that big, strong body reassured her. He might be a grouch, but he was a very capable grouch and she had no doubt that he would protect her.

“That works out perfectly then. At least... we’re not taking it from anyone, are we?”

“Nah. GenCon keeps a stock of rovers for company use.”

He led her over to the rover. About the size of a large pickup truck, it had an open storage area already loaded with supplies behind the enclosed cab.

“Do I really need all that?” she asked doubtfully.

He shrugged. “Probably not. Never hurts to be prepared. I’ll move some of this stuff around and put your equipment on the bottom since you won’t need it until you arrive.”

“That sounds like a good idea. I’ll help you.”

“You’ll do no such thing,” Zeb growled from behind her, and she jumped. How could such a big man move so quietly? “Sit down and stay out of the way.”

She didn’t appreciate the bossy tone, but when he effortlessly lifted one of her heavy containers, she had to admit that he was much better equipped than she was for the task. Only a few minutes passed before everything was rearranged. Once it was done, he looked at her and frowned again.

“Do you know how to drive one of these?”

“Isn’t it a little late to be asking that? If I say no, will you let me ride Soldier instead?”

“No,” he said shortly, but she was sure she caught a flicker of amusement in his eyes.

“Then you’re in luck. I do know how to drive one.”

*Theoretically.* Her knowledge came from the virtual simulation on the ship. He didn’t appear convinced, but he retrieved one of the small breathing masks from the rover and handed it to her.

“Put this on.”

“But the cab is enclosed.”

“Accidents happen,” he said grimly. “You should wear a mask anytime you’re outside a dome.”

She sighed, but fitted it over her nose. The atmosphere had stabilized to the point where pressure suits were not required, but humans still needed supplemental oxygen. Unlike the cyborgs. Or Eggie.

At least it was one of the small masks that left her mouth and eyes free. Once the mask was in place, she went to the door of the rover and immediately realized she had a problem. Due to the oversized tires, the door was far too high for her to reach.

“I thought you had experience,” Zeb grumbled as he came up beside her and

pushed a button to lower a set of steps.

“I do.” *But I didn’t have to climb into the simulator.*

The bottom step was still a long way up, and as she struggled to reach it, he sighed and lifted her effortlessly into the cab. His big hands spanned her waist, and she could feel the heat of them even through her coverall. They lingered for just a moment and her mouth went dry. Even when he released her and stepped back, she could still feel them against her skin.

“Thank you, Zeb,” she whispered, then closed the door to the cab.

When he simply nodded and walked away, she counted it as a victory. She looked over to find Cyrus grinning at her. He gave her a surreptitious thumbs up before he turned to follow Zeb. They had a quick conversation, and Zeb took the pack the older man handed him, despite his obvious reluctance. He disappeared through the big doors and returned a moment later astride Soldier.

*Oh my.* The huge man dressed all in black atop the big black horse took her breath away. Fantasies she hadn’t even known she had started spinning through her head. She was so distracted that it took her several seconds to realize he was gesturing for her to get moving.

Taking a deep breath, she ran through the safety check, then started the engine. To her delight, it worked exactly the same way it had in the simulation. The engine rumbled quietly as she put it in gear and she slowly followed Zeb towards the airlock. Cyrus grinned at her again as he closed the inner doors behind them. Then the outer doors opened and the surface of Mars was in front of her.

She’d seen the images, of course, studied them both as part of her work and because of her personal curiosity, but they had not prepared her for the reality. A vast plain of orange and red sand stretched out towards the horizon, interrupted by oddly-shaped rock formations. Craggy mountains stretched along each side like wrinkled claws.

This close to the city they were surrounded by homesteads, but they looked small and insignificant beneath the infinite orange sky.

“Mars. We finally made it, Eggie.”

Eggie chirped, then climbed down off her shoulder and onto the dashboard, her nose pressed eagerly against the glass. She looked like a miniature version of the figurehead on one of the old sailing ships. Sadie smiled and stroked her thick, soft fur.

“My little trailblazer. Now let’s go explore our new home.”

She set the rover in gear and trundled towards Zeb. He’d been waiting with surprising patience, but as soon as she came up behind him, he set Soldier in motion and led the way down into the valley.

As they passed next to the homesteads, she gave them a quick, professional appraisal. The government had required that each settler plant lichen as the first step in building a new ecosystem, and it was clearly thriving. All of the homesteads had greenhouses, but she could also see the first signs of larger vegetation planted directly in the soil. If her experiments were successful, they would become even more prevalent.

The claims quickly became more scattered, and it wasn’t long until it seemed as if they were alone on Mars. The only sign of life was the big man on the black horse riding steadily across the plain in front of her, but that wasn’t the only reason her eyes kept going to him. He fascinated her, and not just because she’d had such a sudden and unexpected physical response to him. She wanted to know more about him—to know what had happened to make him lock himself away behind that fierce facade.

“And now I have four days to find out,” she told Eggie, and smiled.

## CHAPTER FIVE

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Z-384 rode across the plain, his ears tuned to the quiet rumble of the rover following him. He refused to turn around, refused to look at the beautiful—*annoying*—female driving it.

“Why did I let her call me Zeb?” he muttered to Soldier. “For that matter, why did I let her give you a name?”

One of the horse’s ears flicked back towards him, but of course he didn’t answer.

He sighed. And now he was talking to his horse. To be fair, it wasn’t the first time. They spent most of their time on patrol alone, just the two of them out on the high desert or climbing through the mountains, and occasionally a man—a *cyborg*—liked to hear the sound of his own voice.

He’d been one of the first cyborgs sent to Mars to begin building the enormous power plants tapping into the polar ice caps. Long years of cold and dark that had finally ended when the first human settlers began to arrive and the cyborgs were given the opportunity to become rangers, the only law and order on the frontier planet. He had almost refused, but the part of him that had once hoped to improve the world by joining the military still lurked somewhere inside him. He had taken the job, and Soldier had come with it.

They were a good team, but that didn’t mean that the horse was anything other than a machine. Just as he had become a machine.

“I’m not going to forget that,” he said defiantly and Soldier’s ears flicked

again.

The sooner they reached her lab, the better. He didn't need—didn't want—the feelings that Sadie was creating in him. He would take her to the lab, and that would be the end of the matter. He'd probably never even see her again. His chest suddenly ached, and he rubbed it absently. Were his nanites out of balance? That was probably her fault as well.

He would just have to make sure and keep a distance between them. Determined to put her out of his mind, he tried to concentrate on the path ahead. Instead, his thoughts were filled with the memory of her soft flesh beneath his hands, the sound of her voice calling him Zeb, and the way her eyes sparkled with indignation. He was so busy trying not to think about her that the sun was beginning to set when he finally called a halt to their journey.

He shouldn't have let her travel for so long on her first day. Guilt swept over him as he dismounted and went to the rover. He expected to find her tired and drooping. Instead, she smiled at him, her face bright with enthusiasm.

“This is so amazing. I can't believe I'm finally here.”

“You are not tired?”

“Not at all. I've been trying to identify landmarks and tie them back to the images I studied. Do we really need to stop?”

He almost smiled at her eagerness, but he managed to catch it in time.

“The sun is setting and I need to set up camp.”

“I suppose you're right. I'll help.” She started to climb out of the rover, then hesitated. “Will you help me down, Zeb?”

No. His mind told him it was not a good idea, but his hands were already reaching for her. She leaned down and put her hands on his shoulders as he grasped her waist and swung her down to the ground. Fuck, she was soft. Her hands lingered on his shoulders for a moment even after her feet touched the ground, and her sweet scent filled his head.

She smiled up at him. “Sorry. Sometimes it's a curse being so short. I wish I

was taller.”

“You’re just fine the way you are,” he said gruffly, then forced himself to let go of her waist and start unloading the supplies.

Of course, she immediately came to join him, her rodent scampering along behind her.

“What can I do to help?”

“Nothing.”

Her face fell, and he instantly regretted his refusal.

“There are ration bars in Soldier’s—in the horse’s saddlebags. You could feed him a few of them while I work on the dome.”

“If you’re sure I can’t help you, I’d be happy to feed *Soldier*,” she said, emphasizing the horse’s name.

“I’ve got this.”

“All right, Zeb. If that’s what you want.”

“And it’s Z-384,” he called after her.

She waved a hand in his direction, but he suspected it was acknowledgment rather than agreement. *She’s more stubborn than I am*, he thought, then turned his head so she wouldn’t see him smile.

The entire time he worked on the camp—setting up the small habitat, starting the portable heater and the oxygen generator, and assembling the ingredients for a meal—he was aware of her petting Soldier. Once again her hands were on someone other than him, and he found himself resenting his own horse. She was talking to him as well, but she kept her voice so low that even his enhanced hearing couldn’t make out most of the words, although he did catch his name.

Perhaps as a result of his curiosity—or his jealousy—he had the camp set up in record time.

“The dome is ready for you,” he said as he rejoined her. “I’ll prepare the food out here and bring it to you.”

She and Soldier seemed to give him the same skeptical look.

“You want me to go and sit in there by myself? I’d rather stay out here with you.”

“It will get colder as the sun goes down,” he warned, trying to suppress the flare of pleasure at her words.

“I have a thermal coat in my bag. I’ll be fine.”

Before he could argue, she retrieved the coat, then sat down next to the stove as he started on the meal. Eggie climbed up on her lap and watched him.

“Why is the rodent wearing goggles?”

“Because *Eglantine* likes them, don’t you, sweetheart?” She looked up and laughed at his expression, her eyes sparkling. “I’m sure you’re about to tell me that she isn’t capable of expressing a preference, but she knows where they’re stored and she’ll push the box at me when she wants them.”

“What are they for?”

“Primarily to record information about the area beneath the surface, but I think she picks up on some of that additional input.”

He added the dried rations to his pot and stirred them around.

“You said she was a prototype?”

“Exactly. You probably know that there are a number of problems with farming on Mars. The lack of water and the temperature swings are two of them, but both of those are fairly easy to solve. The soil density and the lack of nutrients are harder problems. Eggie is designed to travel through the soil, loosening it and leaving traces of organic material to enrich the soil. If it works, it will move up the timetable for producing directly from the soil by several years.”

He looked around at the desert, shadowy and mysterious in the last rays of the sun.

“I think I would miss this if Mars became a farm planet.”

“I understand—it has its own kind of beauty, doesn’t it?” Her gaze followed



his. “But don’t worry, that wouldn’t happen for multiple generations. My project is more about allowing the settlers to be self-sufficient and not dependent on Earth. You should never have to rely on others.”

There was the faintest hint of bitterness in her voice, but before he could decide whether or not to ask her about it, she changed the subject.

“What are you making for dinner?” She gave him a rueful smile. “I’m not much of a cook.”

“I enjoy it,” he admitted, then immediately regretted the admission. He turned the subject back to her experiment.

She was quite happy to talk about it and chatted cheerfully while they ate. He noticed that she never mentioned her life on Earth and he finally asked her about it.

“Why did you decide to come to Mars?”

“To oversee the final stage of the project.”

“Even knowing that you could never return to Earth?”

A shadow crossed her face. “There was nothing there for me. Why did you volunteer to become a cyborg?”

He hesitated. “It is part of a standard military contract, in the event of a fatal injury.”

“I’m so sorry, Zeb.”

She put a sympathetic hand on his arm, and for the first time he realized how close they were sitting. He wanted to demand that she leave her hand there, that she stroke him the way she stroked Soldier and Eggie. Instead, he rose and gathered their plates.

“You should go into the dome before it gets any colder.”

She shook her head. “I’ll wait for you.”

He gripped the plate so tightly he felt the metal bend. “What do you mean?”

“I’ll wait until you’re ready for bed too.”

She wanted to share her bed with him? Visions of those soft curves pressed against him danced through his head, and all the blood in his body raced straight to his cock. *No*, he told himself. *I have to keep my distance.*

“I do not plan on entering the dome,” he said stiffly.

“Why ever not?”

“It is for you. I do not need the protection.”

“Don’t be silly. You may not need it, but you can’t tell me you’d rather sit out here in the cold and dark by yourself.”

*Fuck no.* He’d rather be in the dome with her warm little body tucked against his. But it wouldn’t last, and it would make it so much harder to go back to being alone.

He managed to shrug. “I’m used to it.”

“Well, you shouldn’t be.” She crossed her arms over her chest and gave him a defiant look. “And if you aren’t going to use the dome, neither am I.”

Despite his best intentions, his eyes dropped to where her breasts swelled over her crossed arms. His cock was so hard it ached.

“You cannot stay out here.”

“Then you’d better come in the dome with me.” She leaned towards him. “Please, Zeb. I don’t want to be by myself.”

“Very well,” he finally agreed. *I’ll wait until she goes to sleep and then leave.*

Her smile lit up her face, radiantly beautiful in the flickering glow from the stove.

“Thank you. You’ll see—it will be just fine.”

He suspected it would be more like torture, but he nodded anyway.

## CHAPTER SIX

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**D**etermined not to let Zeb back out of their agreement, Sadie waited while he scrubbed their plates with sand and put away the cooking equipment. She did her best not to shiver, even though it was growing colder by the moment, but she wasn't entirely successful. He looked at her and growled.

"Stop being foolish and get in the dome."

"Not without you," she said, trying not to let her teeth chatter.

"I said I would join you."

"Then let's go."

She held out her hand to him. He stared at it, and she was about to let it drop when he wrapped his much larger hand around hers, then swore.

"Your hands are like ice. Inside. Now."

Since he was still holding her hand, she let him pull her up and tug her over to the dome. Eggie had fallen asleep on her lap, and she squeaked a protest when Sadie picked her up.

"You can go back to sleep in just a minute," she promised as they entered the small airlock.

The space was tiny enough that she was almost pressed against Zeb's body, and she breathed in his rich, masculine scent. *Mmm*. Her nipples tingled, and the ache between her legs was back.

Did he realize he was still holding her hand?

The inner door opened, and he finally released her as a welcome wave of warmth swept over them. She shrugged out of her thermal coat, folded it into a neat bundle, and then gently placed Eggie on top. Eggie turned around a few times, then nestled into the coat with a contented chirp.

The inside of the dome was extremely compact. The portable heater and oxygen generator were tucked into a niche next to the airlock, with a small sanitary facility on the other side. A single sleeping pad topped with a thermal blanket was the only furnishing. Not exactly what she had in mind when she'd asked Zeb to share the shelter.

"I will rest on the ground," he said gruffly, following her glance.

"That won't be very comfortable," she protested.

"Comfort does not matter."

His words made her chest ache. What had happened to him that he no longer seemed to feel as if he even deserved to be comfortable?

"You'd rest better if you were comfortable."

He shrugged. "Cyborgs need little sleep."

She wanted to argue with him, but she suspected it wouldn't do any good. *Besides*, she thought, looking at the narrow strip of floor between her sleeping pad and the wall of the dome, *he's not going to be very far away*. She made herself shrug, then started pulling down the fastener on her coverall.

"What are you doing?"

He actually sounded alarmed, and she hid a smile as she pushed the garment down over her shoulders.

"I'm not going to sleep in my clothes if I don't have to, and it's warm enough in here that I don't need them."

It sounded as if he groaned, but she didn't look in his direction as she let the coverall slip down over her hips, then bent over to unfasten her boots. After

all, it wasn't as if she was naked under the coverall—she was wearing a bra, covered by a thin tank, and a pair of boy-cut panties, all in her favorite shade of pale blue. They weren't fancy, but they were soft and silky and felt good against her skin.

*His hands wouldn't be soft and silky*, she thought, sneaking a glance at him out of the corner of her eye, but she suspected they would feel even better if he touched her. She didn't need to look down to know that her nipples had hardened beneath the thin cloth at the thought. Still ignoring him, she folded her clothes neatly, then sat down on the sleeping pad. He was still standing by the airlock entrance as if he had frozen in place, and she gave him an encouraging smile as she patted the ground next to her pad.

“Are you going to sit down? Or are you going to stand there looming over me all night?”

“I should leave,” he said, his voice strained, and she sighed.

“We already had this discussion. If you leave, I'm going to get dressed and follow you back out—but I'd really rather not. Please sit down. I promise I won't bite,” she added.

His gaze dropped her mouth, and for an instant a hungry look crossed his face. She supposed she should be nervous. She was alone in a small tent with a man who was probably twice her size, but she wasn't the least bit afraid. She was quite sure that he would never touch her unless she asked him—and possibly not even then, she thought sadly.

“Please, Zeb. Sit down. You may not need to rest, but I do.”

She could see the tension in his muscles, but he finally lowered himself to the ground. As she'd suspected, he ended up right next to her, even though he tried to keep some distance between them. His cybernetic leg extended at an odd angle, and she gave it a curious glance.

“Does your leg bother you?”

“No.” He hesitated, then added, “I was one of the earliest models. At that point, Earth Government was deliberately making our cybernetic parts visible so no one would mistake us for human.”

He shrugged. “It’s functional, and that’s all that matters.”

“I suppose so.”

She settled back on the sleeping pad and threw the blanket over her legs. He followed every move, his eyes traveling from the blanket up across her waist to her breasts, lingering there for longer than he had ever looked before, and once again she hid a smile. She yawned and stretched, knowing that it emphasized her breasts. She’d always found them more of an annoyance than an asset before, but with Zeb’s eyes on her, she felt sexy and attractive.

“Good night, Zeb. I hope you sleep—I mean rest—well.”

She deliberately closed her eyes and then held her breath, waiting to see what he would do. She had a sneaking suspicion that he would try to make a run for it as soon as he thought she was asleep, but he didn’t move immediately. Even though her eyes were closed, she could feel him watching her, and it was somehow both exciting and comforting.

She wanted to stay awake, to make sure that he didn’t try to leave, but the excitement of the day and the long trip had exhausted her more than she realized. Her mind started to drift into unconsciousness. She was half-asleep when she heard him move, and she tensed, expecting him to leave. Instead, he lay down next to her. She could feel the heat emanating from his body, and she smiled.

“That’s nice,” she murmured and rolled a little closer. They were just barely touching, but she could feel the muscular strength of his body against hers and she smiled as she drifted off to sleep.

*I SHOULD LEAVE, Z-384 THOUGHT. SADIE’S BREATHING HAD SETTLED INTO THE easy rhythm of sleep, and she wouldn’t notice if he left. Or would she?*

Her body was touching his, leaving a trail of fire down his side, and if he tried to leave, he might awaken her. Or at least, that was what he chose to believe.

How long had it been since he was this close to a woman? Certainly not since he became a cyborg, and even before that, they had been few and far

between. Before he joined the military, he had been well aware that most of the women who seemed to be interested in him were actually more interested in his family's wealth and position. And after he joined the military, he'd had little time to indulge.

He tried to tell himself that the impact of her presence was only due to its rarity, but he couldn't quite convince himself. It wasn't because it was unusual—it was because it was Sadie. He'd felt the connection between them as soon as their eyes met in Serena's office. He would never have let another woman get this close to him.

She sighed in her sleep and tried to move closer, on the verge of slipping off the edge of the sleeping pad. He bit back a sigh of his own and rolled over, using his body to prevent her from landing on the ground. She made a contented noise and snuggled against him, branding him with those luscious curves. He didn't even try to stop himself from putting his arm around her and settling her into a more comfortable position against his chest.

The lush mounds of her breasts pressed against him, and he could feel the stiff peaks of her nipples despite the thin layers of cloth between them. His cock throbbed and he was almost unbearably tempted to push that silky fabric lower and discover every delicious detail, but he would never betray her trust in such a manner. Instead, he ignored the throbbing ache of his cock and simply held her. And despite the fact that he was painfully aroused, he couldn't remember the last time he had felt so content.

He allowed himself to rest.

Several hours passed before he heard her give a soft moan and his eyes flew open. Was something wrong? Even though she moved restlessly against him, her eyes were still closed and he realized she was still asleep. He also realized that over the past few hours she had moved even closer and was now sprawled on top of him. One hand was up around his neck, and her leg was thrown over his, her hot little cunt resting against his thigh. She moaned again and wiggled against his thigh. He almost reached for her ass to help her move, but he was sure she was still asleep.

“Sadie,” he said gently. “Wake up.”

Her eyelids fluttered open, and big blue eyes looked up at him before she

gave him a sleepy smile.

“Zeb.”

Despite the nanites controlling his system, he could have sworn his heart actually skipped a beat.

“You were dreaming,” he said, trying to sound stern.

“Was I?”

She suddenly seemed to realize the position she was in, and her face turned that delightful shade of pink again but she didn’t move away.

“I guess I got a little closer. You make a very good pillow even though you’re not very soft.”

“I am not soft at all,” he growled.

Her leg flexed, brushing against the erection that refused to go away, and she grinned.

“No, you’re definitely hard.”

“Are you trying to torment me?”

Her teasing smile vanished. “No, Zeb. I’m trying to get you to enjoy yourself. To remember that you’re still a man.”

“I’m a cyborg,” he said stubbornly.

She shrugged, her breasts moving tantalizingly against his chest.

“I didn’t say you weren’t. But that doesn’t mean you’re not also a man with feelings and... desires.”

Her leg moved again, and this time he was sure she deliberately rubbed it against the hard ridge of his cock. The brief contact sent a surge of desire through his system, and he growled.

“You are not playing fair.”

Her eyes sparkled. “Maybe not. Is it working?”



“Yes,” he admitted as he finally allowed his hand to close over the lush curve of her ass. Fuck, she felt good. From the increased scent of her arousal, she seemed to like it as well.

“Maybe we should try something else,” she whispered.

*This is a bad idea*, he told himself, but he couldn’t stop himself from asking.

“What did you have in mind?”

“Kiss me, Zeb. Please.”

He didn’t know if it was the sound of his name or the hopeful look in her big eyes, but he couldn’t refuse her. He pulled her further up his chest, suppressing a groan as her leg dragged along his cock, and then he kissed her.

Her mouth was as small and sweet and perfect as he had anticipated and he lost himself in the kiss. She responded just as eagerly, her tongue darting out to tease his as she squirmed against him. All those dark, lonely years disappeared as hunger took over and he rolled her on her back. Both of her arms came up to circle his neck as she arched against him. He finally let himself do what he’d wanted to do since the first time she crossed her arms over her chest and slid his hand down to cover a breast, the soft mound almost overflowing even his big hand.

She gasped encouragement into his mouth as he found the stiff peak of her nipple and tugged on it, quickly discovering what made her respond. She was squirming even more impatiently now, trying to rub that sweet little cunt against him, and he couldn’t resist. His hand slipped lower, gliding beneath her silky panties to the even silkier skin beneath. Fuck, she was hot and wet. And small. A distant part of his mind blared a warning and he gentled his touch, running a single finger through those soaked folds. Even his finger seemed far too large, but she didn’t protest. Instead, she pushed against him, crying out when he found the hard little nub of her clit.

“Oh, God, yes.”

She broke the kiss long enough to urge him on, and he obeyed, circling the swollen bud until her whole body tensed, then pressing down on it. She shuddered, and he could feel her body pulsing against his finger as the climax swept over her.

He continued stroking her, prolonging her pleasure until she finally pushed limply at his hand.

“Wow. I never knew it could be like that.”

“You’ve never climaxed before?” A terrible thought struck him. “Are you a virgin?”

She smiled and shook her head. “No, Richie Ballenger took care of that during our first year in college. But he never made me feel like that.”

Satisfaction filled him. “I’m glad that I pleased you.”

“You certainly did. Will you let me please you?”

Her hand slid towards his cock, but he caught it just as those soft little fingers touched him. It took all of his willpower to pull her hand away, but he was afraid that if she touched him, he would never be able to let her go.

“Don’t worry about me. Go back to sleep.”

“Of course I worry about you.”

She gave an adorable pout, but her eyes were already drifting closed, and a few minutes later she was asleep in his arms again.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

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Sadie woke up feeling wonderful, her body still humming with contentment. She reached for Zeb, but he was no longer next to her. Instead, he was standing at the airlock, his hand poised on the control. He wasn't looking at her, and the muscles in his broad back were rigid. She had an uneasy feeling that he'd been standing there for a while, just waiting for her to wake up.

"I'm going to prepare breakfast. You need to get dressed."

He disappeared into the airlock before she could respond.

She sighed and picked up a sleepy Eggie when she climbed on to her knee, burying her face in the soft fur.

"Guess he's not a morning person."

Or he was regretting what they had done the previous night. From the tension in his body she suspected it was the latter, but she wasn't really surprised. She would just have to convince him that it was okay to make her feel good—and for him to feel good as well.

After using the sanitary facility for a quick cleanup, she put Eggie on her favorite perch on her shoulder and went to join him. To her surprise, he wasn't bent over the stove. He was standing next to the dome, staring out across the desert.

"What is it?" she asked.

“I don’t know. Something about the sky feels wrong.”

If he hadn’t looked so serious, she would have teased him about his feelings. And she knew what he meant. The sky had a strange, almost yellowish cast and it seemed to loom heavily over their heads, pushing down on them.

“It doesn’t have the usual signs, but I’m afraid there’s a sandstorm coming. We’re too exposed here. I think we need to head for the mountains.” He looked over at the rover and shook his head. “That’s not going to have the necessary speed. We’ll have to leave it. You can ride with me.”

“What about my equipment?”

He looked at the two white containers, then shook his head.

“If we take those, we won’t be able to bring the dome or any of the other supplies.”

“I don’t care. They’re more important than a dome.”

“The dome is for your protection.”

“But it’s not necessary.” She folded her arms across her chest and glared at him. “My work is necessary.”

In the end, they compromised. He left the dome and brought the survival pack Cyrus had given him, along with the minimal necessities. She stripped everything out of her containers except the communication equipment and the embryos. She could tell he still wasn’t happy, but he kept glancing at the sky and was obviously too worried about whatever was going to happen to continue arguing. He fastened the containers behind the saddle, then lifted her easily onto the horse’s back.

She clutched the built-in saddle horn, looking nervously down at the ground. It seemed like a very long way down. But then Zeb mounted behind her and put his arms around her and she relaxed. She was quite sure he would never let her fall. She also noticed that in spite of the situation, he no longer seemed as tense as he had earlier. Taking action must have helped him put aside whatever had been bothering him.

As soon as Zeb was in the saddle, Soldier started moving, settling into an

easy lope as they headed for the mountains that flanked each side of the vast plain. Despite the circumstances, she found herself enjoying the experience. A cool breeze blew across her face, but Zeb's big body kept her warm. She leaned back against him, enjoying the feel of all those firm, hard muscles against her back. His muscles weren't the only things that were hard she realized as she adjusted her position and her bottom settled against his erection. It felt just as massive as it had the night before and she regretted that she hadn't had a chance to explore him.

Eggie had been perched on her usual place on her shoulder, but when Sadie settled back against Zeb, she climbed up to his shoulder instead.

"Your rodent seems to think that I'm her personal throne," he muttered, but she could hear the smile in his voice.

"You do make a very comfortable throne," she agreed, deliberately wiggling her ass against his erection, smiling when she felt his cock jerk. One of his hands left the saddle horn and came up to circle her waist, his thumb brushing teasingly at the underside of her breast.

"You're playing a dangerous game, Sadie."

The deep growl of his voice reverberated against her back, and she shivered pleasantly.

"Am I?" she asked innocently. "It can't be too dangerous—it even has built-in seatbelts."

A little shocked at her own daring, she nudged his hand higher until it closed over her breast, his fingers automatically tightening on the soft mound as it had done the night before. *Mmm*. She shivered again as he stroked his thumb across her nipple.

"Is this what you want, sweetheart?"

"I thought I made that clear last night. You were the one who said no."

His hand stilled as his body tensed and she suspected he was about to release her. She quickly put her hand over his, keeping it cupped around her breast. She couldn't have kept his hand there if he decided to move away, but he gave a muffled groan and his thumb stroked across her nipple again.

“I am not human,” he said, his voice tortured.

“You keep saying that, but I don’t understand why. Being a cyborg doesn’t mean you’re not also human. But the term doesn’t matter. I don’t care what you call yourself—I like you anyway.”

*A lot.* This proud, wounded man had already started to worm his way into her heart.

“Sadie,” he groaned again, his hand tightening.

She tilted her head back against his chest so she could look up at him—and a bolt of lightning split the sky open.

Eggie squeaked and scrambled down off Zeb’s shoulder and dove into the specially designed pocket in the front of Sadie’s coverall. Zeb had already released her, leaning forwards with a grim look on his face.

“Faster, Soldier,” he urged, and the horse took off.

The easy lope was gone, replaced by a flying gallop that made her heart leap to her throat. She grabbed for the saddle horn again, even though Zeb still had his arm around her.

“Don’t worry, Sadie. I won’t let you fall.”

He gave her a comforting squeeze, even as he urged the horse to greater speed. More lightning flashed overhead, accompanied by the boom of thunder as they reached the base of the mountains. The steep terrain and rocky ground forced Soldier to slow down while Zeb scanned the slopes above them.

“There. We’ll head for that cave.”

The horse climbed nimbly up the slope, but Sadie just closed her eyes and held on. She didn’t open them again until the echo of Soldier’s hooves let her know that they were inside the cave. It wasn’t huge, but even seated on the horse, Zeb’s head didn’t touch the roof. He swung down, then reached for her. Her knees threatened to collapse when she reached the ground, and she clung to him until Eggie gave an indignant squeak and climbed back out of Sadie’s coverall. She hopped down to the ground, and Sadie smiled as she

watched her wander off to explore.

“I guess the ride didn’t bother her.”

“Did it bother you?” he asked, his face worried.

“I enjoyed it until right at the end. Maybe we could do it again, when we’re not being chased by a storm?”

“I’d like that.” Soldier butted his head against Zeb’s shoulder, and he actually laughed. “I guess Soldier approves as well. What is it?”

“I’ve never seen you laugh before,” she said slowly. It transformed his expression, and he looked younger—almost carefree.

“I haven’t laughed for a long time. I think you bring it out in me, sweetheart.”

He bent his head and kissed her. This time, there was none of the hesitation of that first kiss. He kissed her with a confident heat that left her breasts tingling and a low ache throbbing between her thighs. When he finally lifted his head, he started to say something, but another crack of lightning illuminated the cave. He gently set her aside to walk to the entrance and look out over the valley. Swirls of dust were rising from the desert below, but of course there was no rain. As she went to join him, she didn’t even see the gathering clouds that threatened a sandstorm.

“What’s happening?”

“I don’t know. I wish I did. But something about this just doesn’t feel right.”

“How long do you think it will last?”

“I don’t know that either, but I think we should plan on spending the day, and possibly the night, here.”

“All right,” she said, but even she could hear the lack of enthusiasm in her voice.

“You’re the one who insisted on bringing your equipment rather than our camping supplies,” he told her.

“I know. And I’m sure sleeping rough never hurt anyone.”

He smiled at her as he removed everything from Soldier's back. "We'll see if you feel the same way once the storm passes."

But despite his warning, he managed to make the cave, if not comfortable, much more livable than she had expected. He had brought the thermal blanket, and he wrapped it around her while he set up the small portable heater at the back of the cave where the walls were closer and would reflect the heat. He heated some water to make tea, and they sat silently, chewing on a protein bar and sipping tea as the sky outside the cave grew thick with clouds. Soldier stood in the opening, silhouetted against the fading light, clearly on guard.

"What is he watching for?" she asked softly.

"I don't know, but he frequently takes that position." He shook his head. "We have been... companions all these years and I never thought to question why he did the things he did."

"There are rumors that Dr. Abbott, the scientist who originally created the horses, came to believe that they developed a type of sentience. But she never published anything to that effect."

"Is she still working with the horses?"

She shook her head.

"No, she resigned. But she lives here on Mars. I was hoping to meet her, but she seems to have disappeared after she left GenCon."

"Ask Cyrus," he suggested. "Almost all the supplies that land on Mars go through him. If anyone knows where she is, it will be him."

"That's a wonderful idea."

She gave him a surreptitious glance. He was sitting next to her, but only their arms were touching. She almost wished they were back on the horse so she was cradled in his arms again. Of course, there was always more than one possible solution to any problem...

She gave an exaggerated stretch, making a face as she moved. He noticed immediately.



“What’s wrong?”

“Oh, it’s nothing. I’m just a little stiff. This rock isn’t very comfortable.”

He hesitated a fraction of a second and then he sighed and lifted her onto his lap. Oh, yes, this was much better. She grinned up at him, ridiculously proud of the success of her plan.

“I do not believe that you ache at all, sweetheart,” he said severely.

“But I do. Here.” She cupped her breast. “And here.” She let her other hand trail across her lap, delighted when his eyes heated.

“You are an evil temptress.”

“Really? That’s the nicest thing that anyone has ever said to me.”

He laughed, his face relaxing. “I find it hard to believe that no one has ever called you a temptress.”

“They really haven’t,” she said sadly. “I’ve spent most of my life surrounded by scholars and scientists.”

On the whole, they had been far more inclined to dismiss her because of her appearance than to tell her she was attractive. The exceptions tended to be the kind of creeps she did her best to avoid.

“Then they were fools,” he said firmly.

“Now here we are, all alone in this cave. What can I tempt you to do?”

His eyes heated again. “Almost anything, I suspect.”

“Good. Then please kiss me.”

He obeyed, his mouth devouring her as his hands caressed her body. She could feel his erection against her ass, and she pressed against him, wanting more. A sudden wave of dizziness swept over her. Sadie assumed it was due to her growing excitement, but then Zeb went rigid. Soldier neighed just as Eggie squeaked and scrambled up her leg before diving into the pocket in her coverall once more.

“What was —”

She didn't have time to complete the question before the ground shuddered beneath them. With a loud crack, it split open and then they were half-sliding, half-falling down a long rocky slope into the darkness below. Zeb swore, wrapping his arms and legs around her and doing his best to protect her from the rocks falling all around them.

She'd never been as scared in her entire life and a scream threatened to escape her lips, but she refused to let it. Instead, she buried her face in Zeb's neck and clung to him as she waited for the inevitable collision with the ground below. If she had to die, at least she wasn't going to die alone.

They seemed to fall forever before he slammed into something, the impact rippling through her despite his protective hold. She heard him cursing in a low, continuous stream as they finally came to a halt. He immediately moved, rolling them away from where they had landed, and she just had time to wonder why before a second wave of dirt and rocks fell behind them. She choked as dust filled the air, and he pressed her face to his neck.

"What happened?" she whispered as the air slowly cleared and silence descended, interrupted by only a few of the last falling rocks.

"Earthquake," he said grimly, his voice hoarse and filled with pain.

"Are you all right?"

"Yes. Not entirely," he admitted. "I have sustained some damage, but it will heal. I am more concerned about you."

She stretched cautiously, but although she felt bruised and shaken, nothing seemed to be broken.

"I think I'm okay. You protected me. And Eggie," she added as she felt the small body wiggle up out of her coverall.

"It is, of course, most important that the rodent is safe." His tone was ironic, but she felt him run a quick finger across Eggie's head.

"You know you love her," she said, trying to sit up.

He grunted, but he assisted her into a sitting position. Not that it made any difference to her ability to see—they were surrounded by pitch darkness. Her

heart beat a painful tattoo against her chest as the full impact of their situation finally penetrated. They were trapped and alone, far beneath the surface of Mars.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

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Zeb tightened his arms around Sadie as he felt her tremble. She was a very intelligent woman, and he suspected that she had just realized the seriousness of their situation. He had no idea how far they'd fallen, but he'd heard the rocks falling behind them and blocking their path.

With the nanites in his system, he could survive down here—not forever, but for an extended period of time—but Sadie could not. Once his leg healed, he might even be able to dig his way back up to the surface, but it would be far too late for her.

No. He refused to accept that. There had to be a way out, and he would find it.

“I wonder where we ended up,” she said, and despite her attempt to sound casual, he could hear her voice shaking.

“In a cavern, I think.” If there had been even the slightest amount of light, he would have been able to see, but they were surrounded by total darkness. “Based on the echo from our voices, a good deal of space surrounds us.”

“I don't suppose you have a light, do you?” she asked, still trying to sound calm.

“No, I... Wait a minute.” He searched the ground around him, trying to find the pack Cyrus had given him. It had been the only thing close enough to grab when the ground gave way. His fingers closed over the strap, and he pulled it towards him. “I'm not sure what's in here.”

He fumbled through the bag before his hand closed around the familiar shape of a lantern and he pushed the switch. His eyes automatically adjusted to the soft glow, but Sadie flinched, covering her eyes for a moment before looking around.

“You were right,” she whispered.

They had ended up in a vast cavern, the far wall deep in shadow and the ceiling too high for the light to reach. He was more concerned about the long slope behind them filled with loose rocks and debris—and completely blocked. He suspected they must have slid down a lava tube, the slope angled enough to prevent them from simply falling to their deaths.

Her face was pale and frightened, but she did her best to smile at him.

“What else do you have in there?”

He pulled out a thermal blanket, but they were far enough underground that the temperature was quite reasonable. Among other things, the pack contained the rest of the protein bars and a device intended to extract water from the air. It would be a lengthy process, but at least it would be something. It was all useful—but he didn’t think it would be enough to sustain her life long enough for them to escape the cavern.

“We’ll have to tell Cyrus thank you. When we see him,” she said, her voice breaking.

“We’ll do that,” he promised, hugging her to his chest.

As he did, she shifted her weight and he couldn’t help wincing.

“What is it? What’s wrong?”

“I damaged my leg in the fall,” he admitted.

“Oh my God. Why didn’t you tell me?” She scrambled off his lap, staring in appalled horror at the crooked angle of his leg.

“I said I sustained some damage. It will heal.” He could already feel the heat as his nanites worked to repair the injury. “Although I do need to straighten it.”

He tried, but even though his back was against the cavern wall, he didn't have enough leverage. He was starting to sweat with exertion when she made an exasperated noise.

"Tell me what to do to help you."

He wanted to refuse, but he didn't want his leg to heal crookedly.

"All right," he said reluctantly. "Just pull my ankle towards you."

Her face turned even paler, but she nodded and went to his ankle.

"Hold on to it," he warned, and twisted his leg. A surge of agony went through him as it popped back into place, but he did his best to hide it.

"Did that work?"

"Yes. Thank you, sweetheart."

"How long will it take you to heal?"

"I should be mobile again in a few hours," he assured her. Mobile, but a long way from his usual strength.

She sat down on his uninjured side and he automatically put his arm around her as he tried desperately to come up with a solution. Once he could walk, he would explore the rest of the cavern. Perhaps there was another way out.

"I think Soldier will go for help," she said suddenly.

He considered the idea, then nodded. "You may be right. I may not have chosen to acknowledge his personality, but I have always appreciated his intelligence."

"That's good, right? He can lead someone here and they can rescue us?"

He hesitated, hating to disturb the hopeful look on her face.

"The truth, please, Zeb."

"I'm not sure if anyone would know that we're down here. Even if Soldier brings them to the cave, what would they see? If the crack was filled with debris, they might not know to look below the surface."

“You mean we could be trapped down here.”

“No,” he said immediately. “As soon as my leg heals, I’ll start digging a way back up to the surface.”

He couldn’t bring himself to tell her that it might take weeks.

“Dig,” she said thoughtfully. Eggie, who had been snuffling around the cavern, looked up and chirped. “I wonder.”

“Wonder what?”

“Remember what I was telling you? It’s what she designed to do—to move through the Martian soil. If she can get back to the surface…”

“It would let them know where we are,” he finished. “Do you really think she can do it?”

“Like I said, it’s what she was designed to do,” she said slowly. A tear sparkled on her cheek as she looked up at the long rocky slope. “But it’s so far and she’s so small.”

“We can wait and see how much progress I can make,” he offered, hating to see her so distressed.

Her mouth trembled, but she shook her head.

“No, by then they may have stopped looking for us.” She picked up Eggie and kissed her long nose. “Time for you to go to work, sweetheart.”

She rose to her feet and carried Eggie over to the rock slide, placing her gently as far up as she could reach.

“Go home, Eggie.” Eggie hesitated, and Sadie repeated the command. “Home, Eggie.”

Eggie chirped, then dug at the dirt with her strong little paws and quickly disappeared. Sadie put her hand over her mouth, and he saw her shoulder shake.

“Come here, sweetheart,” he ordered, cursing his inability to go to her.

To his relief, she obeyed and he put his arm around her as she sobbed against

his chest. Her sobs finally died away and she gave him a tremulous smile.

“I’m sorry for crying all over you.”

“Don’t be. I am always happy to have you in my arms.”

“Really?”

He looked down at those wide, hopeful blue eyes and finally stopped fighting the truth. No matter how bleak the future—perhaps even because of that uncertainty—he wanted her to know how he felt.

“I always want you in my arms. You’re mine, Sadie, do you understand?”

“Really? You’re sure you’re not just saying that because you think we’re going to die?”

“No. I know it sounds crazy, but you’ve been mine since the first moment I saw you in Serena’s office.”

“Not crazy at all. I feel the same way.” She smiled up at him. “Although it took you long enough to admit it.”

“I was a fool.”

“Yes,” she agreed, and then she smiled at him again. “And now that you’re not, will you kiss me?”

He was only too happy to oblige. Ignoring her protest, he picked her up and put her back on his lap where she belonged.

“But your leg…”

“Is healing,” he said firmly.

She put a tentative hand on his thigh, and her eyes widened.

“It’s so hot.”

“That’s part of the healing process. The nanites generate heat as they repair the damage.”

“Does it hurt?”



“Not exactly. It’s more like a burning itch beneath my skin—even though there’s no skin on my leg.”

She gently stroked his thigh, and his body began to respond. Her eyes widened as she saw his cock begin to swell.

“How can you possibly be aroused now?”

“How could I not be when you’re touching me?”

She started to remove her hand, but he took it and placed it firmly over his cock instead, groaning with pleasure. She immediately tried to pull her hand away.

“I didn’t mean to hurt you.”

“Sweetheart, you are not hurting me. You’re making me feel better.”

“Really?”

“Yes,” he said firmly. “Now I believe you requested a kiss.”

He didn’t wait for her to answer, but bent his head and kissed her, his hunger flaring at her eager response. Her hand was still on his cock, and her small fingers tried to tighten around him. His hips automatically tried to rock against her hand and the pain in his leg flared, but he ignored it. Kissing her was far more important.

“I want you, Sadie,” he growled when the kiss finally ended.

Her cheeks turned pink, but she didn’t hesitate. “I want you too. But we’ll have to wait until you’ve healed.”

“No, we don’t.” He couldn’t stand to wait any longer. “Take off your clothes.”

## CHAPTER NINE

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Sadie hesitated at Zeb's command. They were trapped in an underground cavern and she was far too aware of the dangers of their situation. And yet, if they didn't have much time left—if *she* didn't have much time left—she didn't want to wait any longer. Her body ached, more than ready to make love to him, but her conscience kept reminding her of his injuries.

“But your leg...”

“I told you it's healing.” He closed his eyes and took a deep breath. “Please, Sadie.”

“You're sure I won't hurt you?”

A flash of humor crossed his face as he put his hand over hers where it still gripped his cock.

“You'll be relieving the ache.”

Her heart was racing, but she managed to smile at him.

“If anyone else said that, I'd think it was just a line to get me into bed.”

She slipped off his lap, and he let her go. His face closed down, and she suddenly realized he expected her to reject him. She didn't try to convince him with words. Instead, she began removing her coverall, just as she had the previous night. But this time, she didn't stop there. Her fingers shook as she lifted the tank over her head.

“Fuck, you’re beautiful.”

The growled words reassured her, and she reached behind her and unfastened her bra, then let it drop to the ground. His eyes traveled over her breasts, so heated that she felt as if he actually left a trail of warmth across her skin. She slipped her panties down over her hips and stood in front of him, naked, aroused, and more than a little nervous.

“Come to me, Sadie.”

It was a request this time, not a command, as he held out his hand. She gathered her courage and took it. He gently pulled her closer, then lifted her across his lap so that she was straddling him. The thick ridge of his erection, still covered by his pants, pressed against her damp folds, and she shivered with excitement. Her nipples were so hard they ached. He covered her breasts with his big hands, tugging gently on the distended peaks, and she gasped, rocking against him.

“So responsive,” he murmured as she arched her back, seeking more of that tantalizing touch.

He continued working her nipples until she was quivering with excitement and on the verge of climaxing. Then he finally freed his erection and it sprang up between them—thick and hard and enormous.

*Oh my God.* Another shiver worked its way down her spine. How could she take all of him? She tried to put her hand around him, but her fingers didn’t meet.

She gently stroked the silky skin and felt his pulse against her before he pulled her hand away.

“If you keep touching me, I will disgrace myself.” He lifted her chin so he could look directly into her eyes. “Are you sure about this, Sadie?”

“I’m very sure, but can we go slowly?”

“Of course.”

He obeyed her request, bending her back over his arm as he slowly, thoroughly worshiped her breasts with his mouth this time. He took his time,

exploring every inch as he teased her nipples into swollen, aching peaks. She rocked against his erection, her folds opening around his thick width as she grew hotter and slicker. She tried to move even closer, seeking relief from the building pressure, but he held her in place.

“Maybe that’s a little too slow,” she panted, and he gave a hoarse laugh as he raised his head.

“Are you ready for more?”

“God, yes.”

He put his hands on her hips and lifted her easily into the air.

“Hold on to my shoulders,” he ordered as he lowered her down again, her pussy directly over the head of his cock.

She obeyed, gripping the hard muscles as he pushed against her entrance. Her body resisted, overwhelmed by his size, then gradually began to open around him. God, he was big. And thick. Shivers skated across her skin as she was stretched wider and wider.

“Relax, sweetheart,” he ordered, his voice strained, and stroked his thumb across her clit.

The resulting surge of arousal made her gasp, and she opened a fraction more, enough that his cock finally slipped inside. Her nails dug into his shoulders as she tried to breathe. Even though she could see the tension in his muscles, he didn’t try to go any deeper, just held her suspended over the head of his cock as her body adjusted.

She finally gave a tentative push and he lowered her a little further. The stretch wasn’t any easier, but then he teased her clit again and the pressure eased just a little. As it did, he let her sink further down over his cock.

As he moved deeper inside her, his cock started to vibrate against the sensitive walls of her channel, until it felt as if he were stroking her clit from within as well as from the outside.

“How are you doing that?” she gasped.

“There are some advantages to being a cyborg.”

She wanted to agree, but fiery sparks of pleasure were shooting through her body. She pushed down again, and that wide vibrating head scraped against her inner walls. Her climax rushed over her so hard and so fast that she jerked in his arms, his cock thrusting up another inch, two, as she shuddered helplessly.

His passage eased by her climax, he kept going, lowering her until she felt their bodies touch. She was totally, unbelievably full, her pussy still fluttering helplessly around his massive girth, but she'd done it. She'd taken all of him.

Filled with triumph, she grinned up at him, but his face was so taut it was almost frightening.

“Zeb?” she whispered.

“Control,” he growled, and she understood what he meant. He was doing his best to remain in control so that he wouldn't hurt her.

“I'm fine. More than fine. Wonderful.”

“Yes,” he groaned, but he didn't move.

Maybe he needed a little more encouragement. She deliberately tightened around him as she leaned forward and licked his nipple.

He roared and his restraint vanished, lifting her up, then thrusting her all the way back down over him. The sudden hard plunge sent another climax racing over her, and this one never seemed to end, new ripples of pleasure shuddering through her each time he slammed her back down over that massive cock.

One last hard plunge as he buried himself inside her and then a hot rush of liquid filled her, hot enough that she could actually feel the heat inside her channel. His arms tightened almost painfully around her as he called out her name.

She clung to him, their bodies locked together, as a series of smaller shocks washed over her until at last she was limp and boneless in his arms. He stroked her back, his big hand rough and soothing, and she felt him press a kiss to the top of her head.

“Thank you,” he said quietly, and she smiled against his chest.

“I’m the one who should be thanking you. That was amazing.”

“Yes,” he agreed. “Because you’re the one who finally reached the man inside me.”

A lump appeared in her throat.

“Okay, now that’s the nicest thing anyone has ever said to me. But you should know that I’ve never felt like this before either.”

She leaned back to look up at his face, and the movement made his still-embedded cock jerk inside her. It was almost too much for her oversensitive body, and he must have seen her reaction because he carefully lifted her free.

“Are you all right?”

“I’m wonderful, but maybe a little overwhelmed,” she admitted. And the tiniest bit sore, but she wasn’t about to tell him that. “It’s been an eventful day.”

“You—we should rest. As soon as my nanites have healed my leg enough for me to maneuver, I’ll search the cavern. If there isn’t another way out, I’ll start on this end of the rock slide.”

She cast a doubtful look at the long slope, thinking of poor Eggie tunneling her way through all that dirt, but she didn’t voice her doubts out loud. Instead, she used one of the cleansing cloths to clean them both up. His cock was still half-erect—and shockingly large even in its diminished state—and it jerked as she wiped the cloth over it.

Despite her exhaustion she was tempted to explore further, but he tucked himself away before she could do anything. She pulled on her tank and panties, but didn’t bother with the rest of her clothes as she settled down next to him. The unforgiving stone floor made her think wistfully of the sleeping pad from the night before, but then he made an impatient noise and pulled her on top of him. He was infinitely more comfortable, but...

“Are you sure I’m not hurting you?”

“No,” he said firmly. “Now try and go to sleep.”

SADIE SETTLED DOWN AGAINST HIM, BUT ZEB KNEW SHE WASN'T ASLEEP. THE feel of her soft little body against his distracted him from the burning ache of the nanites as they healed his leg, but it also kept him erect. He was more than ready to make love to her again, but he suspected she needed more time to recover.

When she moved restlessly, he gave in to curiosity, eager to know everything about her.

“You said you didn’t have any reason to remain on Earth. Didn’t you have a family?”

Her body tensed almost imperceptibly, and he was about to tell her to forget the question when she finally answered.

“Not any more. My father died before I was born. He came from a very wealthy family. That was why my parents could afford the license for a child, but when he died unexpectedly, his family threw my mother out without anything. It was the same day he died.” Her fingers tapped restlessly against his chest. “She always worked two or three jobs to support us. When I showed a gift for learning, she worked even harder.”

“What happened to her?”

“She died.”

The abrupt words echoed in the cavern, and for a moment he didn’t think she was going to say anything else. Then she sighed.

“She didn’t even tell me she was sick because I was in the middle of writing my dissertation and she didn’t want to distract me. The day I graduated, she was so proud. She put on her best clothes and dragged herself to the ceremony. I thought I’d finally be able to take care of her for a change, but she went into renal failure that night and died two days later.”

“I’m very sorry.”

“So am I.” She looked up at him with a shaky smile. “The only way I knew how to handle it was to work even harder. I chose GenCon because she used

to tell me stories about Mars when I was little.”

He stroked her back, and she nestled against him.

“What about your family?” she asked a moment later.

“I have no family.”

How could he tell her that his family had been just as rich, just as privileged as her grandparents? He’d grown up surrounded by every luxury and had joined the military from a combination of rebellion and the desire to make a difference. Even then, his name was enough to allow him more privileges than the other recruits. But the one thing his family name couldn’t do was to save his life when he was critically injured.

Cybernetics had been the only answer—but it was not an answer his family was prepared to accept. He still remembered lying in the lab, fire raging through his body as the newly introduced nanites tried to heal his broken body, when his father appeared and stood looking down at him.

Zeb tried to say something, but his body would not respond.

“What have you done to him?” his father asked coldly. “He is no longer human.”

*Yes, I am*, he tried to protest, but the words would not emerge.

“It was the only way to save his life,” the doctor said.

“What life? He is a cyborg—a machine. He has no legal rights. He can’t even own property. As far as I’m concerned, my son is dead.” The icy expression never changed. “Will he remember who he is?”

The doctor coughed nervously. “We did not use the memory blocking procedure because we thought you would prefer that he retain his memories. Although it is still possible that he will not remember—his injuries were very extensive.”

“I hope that is true, but if he does remember, tell him he is no longer a member of my family.”

Then his father walked out. Zeb never saw him again.



The doctors tried to wipe his memories after that visit. He wished they had succeeded, but the influence of the nanites in his system was already too powerful.

He was renamed Z-384 and sent to Mars to work alone in the solitary dark. He shut off any memory of his humanity and did his best to become what his father had called him—a machine. He'd thought he'd succeeded, but perhaps the anger that had lingered for so many years had actually helped him to remain human. He suspected that Soldier might have helped as well, but it had taken Sadie to completely destroy the lie he'd been telling himself.

He wasn't just a machine. He was still human.

"I'm sorry," she said softly, pulling him out of his memories.

"Don't be. Perhaps I was destined for Mars all along. For Mars, and for you."

## CHAPTER TEN

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Sadie asked Zeb a few more questions, but so many of his memories seemed to be unhappy. No wonder he'd been so closed off. Her own life had been hard and the loss of her mother still ached, but there had been many small, happy moments along the way.

Exhaustion gradually crept over her, and eventually she fell asleep.

Fell asleep and dreamed.

In her dream she was someone else, someone not human who swooped and flew through the air with an exhilarating sense of freedom. Golden scales covered her skin, matching the wings that carried her aloft. Far below, she could see the neat rows of the canals and the fields they serviced, but she was more interested in the male chasing her.

He reached for her, his claws just grazing her ankle before she laughed and dove away from him. She heard him swear and laughed again as she started to climb.

"You know I'm going to catch you, my love," he called after her.

She could hear the hunger in his voice, and her body responded, the primal thrill of being chased heating her blood.

"Are you sure?" She swooped close enough that her wings brushed his back, then danced away. "Only the finest hunter will catch me."

"I am the only one who will ever catch you," he growled, and her breath

caught at the dark promise in his voice.

The desire to tease him disappeared, and she flew higher, faster, feeling him growing closer and closer until his much larger body slammed into hers, pulling her against him.

“Mine,” he swore, his eyes flickering briefly from emerald to grey.

“Always,” she agreed, and then his fangs sank into her neck as they were locked in their mating spiral.

Sadie started awake, the desire from the dream still heating her body. Zeb’s arms tightened around her, and she looked up to find him watching her. For a fleeting second, his eyes seemed to reflect an emerald glow.

“I had the strangest dream,” she murmured.

“So did I.”

“The dragons? Flying and... mating?”

“Yes.” The look of hunger on his face matched the expression of the dragon’s mate.

“That’s so odd.”

“Yes,” he said absently, his hand probing between her thighs.

He growled his approval when he found her wet and ready, then flipped her onto her back and raised her hips. He shoved her panties aside and buried his cock inside her in one long hard stroke. Despite the lingering excitement from the dream, she struggled to take him, her body resisting as he withdrew, then thrust again. The overwhelming stretch turned into a burning pleasure, and she arched against him, urging him on as he fucked her with hard, demanding strokes.

Her climax swept over her with a sudden, shocking intensity, but he didn’t slow down as she shuddered in his arms. Instead, he moved even faster, plunging into her until all she could do was cling to him. As he finally exploded inside her, his mouth closed down over her shoulder and he bit her, the sharp sting sending her into another shuddering climax as he dropped down over her.

“Mine,” he growled as he released her neck.

“Always.”

He hummed and licked the wound, and then his body tensed. When he raised his head, he looked appalled.

“What the fuck did I do? I’m so sorry, sweetheart.”

“Don’t be sorry. I like it when you lose control like that.”

If anything, he looked even more horrified.

“I never lose control.”

“Then maybe it’s good for you.” She smiled up at him. “Maybe we should have dreams like that more often.”

“Why do you think the dream had anything to do with it?”

She debated telling him about the fact that his eyes had turned green but decided it would only upset him. Instead, she shrugged.

“In my dream the male dragon bit the female.”

“In mine as well,” he said slowly, his eyes going back to the mark on her neck. “It is a very primitive thing to do.”

Despite his words, there was an unwilling satisfaction on his face.

“I don’t mind getting primitive occasionally.”

Her breath caught as his cock flexed inside her.

“How occasionally?” he asked as he began to rock against her.

“Maybe even frequently,” she whispered as she tugged his head down for a kiss.

ZEB STARED INTO THE DARKNESS LONG AFTER SADIE FELL BACK ASLEEP. HE’D turned off the light after checking the wound on her neck one more time. He still felt guilty about having bitten her, but there was a primitive part of him

that loved seeing his mark on her skin.

But as happy as he was to claim her, he couldn't ignore the reality of their situation. They were still trapped below the surface, their chance of survival dependent on two artificially created animals. He found he had a surprising degree of faith in both of them, but so many things could go wrong.

A distant scabbling sound disturbed his thoughts, and he raised his head. Had Eggie given up and returned to them? He turned on the light in time to see her nose poke through the dirt between the fallen rocks, followed by her small body. His heart sank, but when she scurried over to them, he noticed a strap around her body with a long wire attached.

“Sadie, wake up. Eggie’s back.”

She blinked up at him, still half-asleep, then gave a choked sob when Eggie climbed up eagerly up her leg. She picked her up and cuddled her close.

“Oh, thank goodness you’re all right. I was so worried—” She gave him a startled look as she discovered the strap. “What’s this?”

“I think it’s hope. Let me see.”

He carefully removed the strap and found a tightly rolled message on the other side.

“They have a plan,” he said, relief filling him. “I need to reel in this wire—they’ve attached a type of stretcher to the other end and I can use the wire to pull it down through the debris. Then they can pull us back out on the stretcher.”

He immediately began tugging on the wire. He could feel the resistance on the other end, but gravity was on his side as he pulled. More rocks and dirt fell as he continued to reel it in, and he sent Sadie to wait a safe distance away.

“I can help.”

“I appreciate the offer, but this is a job for a cyborg.”

“But what about your leg?”

“It’s fine,” he assured her.

It had healed to the point where he could stand, and that was enough. He braced himself against the wall and kept working.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

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Sadie pulled her clothes back on, then watched anxiously as Zeb pulled on the wire. She could tell his leg was still weak, but the powerful muscles in his arms were working just fine. She hated not being able to help, but she was smart enough to know that she didn't have the strength. Instead, she cuddled Eggie and prayed that this scheme was going to work.

A sudden shower of rocks and dirt descended into the cave, followed by what must be the stretcher. Calling it that was somewhat of an overstatement. It consisted of a lightweight metal sheet with a curved end that would come down over their heads and upper bodies to protect them. It looked far too flimsy to support them both, and she gave it a doubtful look.

“Do you really think this will work?”

“Yes,” he said firmly.

She tucked Eggie into her pocket, and then they strapped themselves in place. He tugged on the rope, signaling that they were ready. The stretcher jerked, then began to move. As they climbed upwards, she realized that they'd left the light burning. *I suppose it doesn't matter now*, she thought as the stretcher slid higher, looking back over the vast cavern. The light flickered, sending shadows across the walls so that they almost seemed to come to life...

“Zeb!” She clutched his arm. “Look. Over there. Do you see it?”

“See what?”

“The dragon.” The more she looked, the more confident she was. A huge

version of one of the dragons she had seen in her dreams, etched into the rock on the far wall.

“That’s impossible.” But he was staring at the same place.

“I don’t care—you see it, don’t you?”

“I see something,” he admitted. “Perhaps a dragon.”

They had reached the top of the cavern now, dirt showering down around the protective dome, and the image disappeared from sight as they started to move up through the lava tube.

“We should tell someone.”

“Maybe not,” he said slowly. “None of the reports ever showed any signs of life on Mars.”

“Which is why this is so important.”

“This planet had kept their secret all this time... Why reveal it now?”

*Maybe he has a point,* she thought as they began the slow ascent. As a scientist she was used to searching for knowledge, but perhaps not all knowledge needed to be shared.

As they moved higher, the darkness and the crushing weight of the surrounding dirt terrified her, but she buried her face in Zeb’s neck and tried not to think of all the things that could go wrong.

*It’s better than dying in that cavern.*

To distract herself, she tried to remember the details of the image, but it had only been a fleeting glimpse. Had she seen it at all, or was it merely the shadowy light and the lingering memory of the dream?

The stretcher jerked to a stop, and her heart skipped a beat. Were they stuck?

“Zeb?” Her voice shook, and he tightened his arm around her.

“I’m sure it’s fine. They won’t give up.”

After what seemed like an eternity but was probably only a few seconds, the



stretcher began moving again. They stopped twice more, and each time she had to fight down a wave of panic, but Zeb remained calm and reassuring.

There was a last jerky pull and they broke through the surface into the cave, surrounded by daylight and the cool Martian air. The small space seemed to be full of rangers, all of them cheering as they pulled the stretcher the final few inches to solid stone. Only the rear of the cave had collapsed—the front part, including her precious containers, was still intact.

Soldier pushed through the crowd, snuffling anxiously at their faces. Zeb gripped his neck and used the horse to pull himself to his feet, bringing her with him. He leaned his head against the horse's neck.

“Thank you,” he said, despite the presence of the others, and she echoed him.

One of the rangers offered her a towel, and she took it gratefully, doing her best to wipe away the dirt. Another ranger was talking to Zeb, and she gave the pair an anxious look. While Zeb was still standing, she could see he was using Soldier to help support him. An older cyborg appeared next to her. She didn't know him, but he had an air of authority.

“He's hurt,” she whispered. “His leg was injured in the fall because he was protecting me.”

“I'm sure his nanites are already healing him,” the man said in a deep, reassuring voice. “But my wife will check on him.”

“I'm fine, sweetheart.” Zeb limped over to join them, Soldier still at his side.

She took his hand, but gave the other man a worried look. “Your wife? Can she help?”

“Yes. Addie is an expert on nanite behavior.”

Her eyes widened. “Addie Montgomery?”

Expert was an understatement. The woman's work had been instrumental in expanding the use of the nanite technology originally intended for the cyborgs.

The man smiled proudly. “That's her. We live close by and your horse came to us.”

“Sadie, this is the Judge,” Zeb said. “He is the voice of the law in these parts.”

“I’m retired now—call me Sam. Now let’s get both of you back to our habitat. Can you mount your horse?”

Zeb started to nod, then sighed and shook his head. “I’m not sure.”

“Then I will assist you.”

Before Zeb could object, Sam boosted her into the saddle. Zeb reached down for her, but Sam ignored him and lifted her onto the horse. She heard Zeb growl, but she ignored it and smiled her thanks at the other man.

“This is quite a horse you have here,” Sam said, stroking Soldier’s mane. “As soon as he realized he couldn’t reach you, he came for help.”

She could see the marks on the rock where Soldier had pawed at the ground trying to reach them, and shuddered. Thank God he had.

“We didn’t understand why he led us here, until your little friend appeared. Serena had told me about your mission.”

Eggie chirped enthusiastically and Sam laughed.

“My daughter Kami is going to be thrilled to meet her. Follow me and I’ll show you the way.”

“That would be wonderful, we have to take my equipment as well.”

Sam nodded, but insisted on loading the white boxes onto his big, black horse instead of Soldier. More horses waited outside the cave, and after a brief exchange of thanks, the other rangers mounted and began to ride off. Sam climbed onto his horse and started to lead the way back down the mountainside.

Zeb had his arms around her but he didn’t speak, and she had a sudden attack of nerves. Was he regretting what had happened between them?

“Are you sorry?” she whispered.

“Sorry? Sorry for what?”

“For saying that I was yours. I know we thought we were going to die, and it’s okay if you changed your mind and —”

“Is that why you didn’t object?” he asked, his voice stiff. “Because you thought you were going to die?”

“Me? No, of course not. But I don’t want to pressure you and maybe you didn’t think it through.”

“Sadie, I’ve been thinking about nothing but claiming you since the moment we met.”

“Oh.” She knew she was blushing as she tilted her head to look up at him. “So you don’t regret it?”

“No,” he growled. “You are still mine, Sadie.”

“Good, and you’re mine.”

His arms tightened as he dropped a kiss on the top of her head.

“I can’t believe you were foolish enough to think otherwise,” he said.

“It’s just that you were so quiet.”

“I was wondering if it was too soon to ask the Judge to marry us.”

Her eyes filled with unexpected tears. “Really?”

“Yes. Will you marry me? I know it may be too fast, and I will wait until you’re ready...”

“I’m ready. I love you, Zeb.”

He looked so shocked that her heart ached, but then his face relaxed and he gently cupped her cheek.

“I love you too, Sadie. I promise I will make you happy.” Eggie chirped, and he grinned. “I’ll even make the rodent happy.”

She laughed through her tears, and then he kissed her.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

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Despite his exhaustion and the continuing burn from the healing process, satisfaction filled Zeb as Soldier slowly followed the Judge's horse down the rocky slope.

*My wife.* Their union would not be recognized on Earth of course—cyborgs had no authority to marry—but the new Martian government had no such restrictions. The paperwork would have no effect on his feelings, but he relished the idea of publicly announcing his claim on her.

*Not the only sign of my claim,* he thought, gently stroking his thumb along the spot where he had bitten her. She shivered, and her nipples beaded beneath the coverall. After a quick glance ahead to make sure the Judge wasn't looking back, he stroked them as well.

"You're never going to get a chance to heal at this rate," she scolded, even as she arched into his touch.

"On the contrary, you make me feel much, much better."

She gave a breathless laugh as he pulled her back against his erection, the lush curves of her ass cushioning his aching shaft, and wiggled happily.

"Well, as long as it's for your health..."

He laughed, feeling lighter than he could remember, and once again found his hand returning to the bitemark.

"I still can't believe I did this."

“In my dream, it was a mating bite between a bonded couple.” She tilted her head to expose more of her neck to his touch. “Maybe your subconscious was just jumping ahead of your actual proposal.”

“Perhaps.”

Unable to resist, he bent his head to nibble at the mark and she gasped.

“Just like my dragon wanted him to claim her, like I wanted you to claim me.”

He hesitated, remembering more fragments of the dream, of the thrill of chasing the female he loved.

“Why did it feel so real?”

“I don’t know, and maybe we don’t need to know. Our feelings are real, and that’s all that really matters.”

“I think you’re right, my brilliant almost wife.”

He pressed one more kiss to the bite mark, then reluctantly raised his head. She settled back against him and they rode in silence until they reached the Judge’s home.

The large, multi-domed habitat was situated on a plateau above the desert, allowing a clear view of the surrounding territory. His military instincts approved, even though there were no obvious enemies on Mars.

As they dismounted, the Judge gave them both a quick glance.

“Sadie, I’ll store your equipment in my workshop. Why don’t you go inside and meet my wife? I’m sure you’d like to rest.”

“Go ahead, sweetheart. I’ll talk to the Judge and join you shortly.”

Despite his encouragement, he still had to fight back the urge to keep her at his side when she nodded and headed for the habitat. Her small shoulders were drooping, and he knew she was exhausted. *Which is partly my fault.* Although he couldn’t regret it, the least he could do was give her a chance to rest.

After he watched to make sure she was safely in the habitat, he turned to the

Judge.

“We would like you to marry us. As soon as possible.”

There was an unmistakable hint of amusement on that hard face as the Judge nodded.

“I think that can be arranged. Although I should warn you that my wife and daughter will insist that everything be done to their satisfaction.”

*Daughter.* The word gave him an unexpected pang of longing. He’d never thought he would be lucky enough to even have a wife, but the idea of a family with Sadie was surprisingly appealing. If he could even have children...

“There aren’t many children on Mars,” he said thoughtfully.

“No. Kami wasn’t born here. She is the daughter of my heart,” the Judge added.

“Is it... possible for us to father a child?”

“You haven’t heard?”

“Heard what?” He shrugged. “I don’t spend much time talking to people.”

“Our nanites can control the viability of our sperm, just as they can control our other bodily functions.” The other man grinned, his face relaxing. “If you require further proof, my wife is pregnant.”

“Congratulations,” he said automatically, even though his mind was racing.

So it was possible. *Eventually*, he reminded himself. He knew how important her work was to her and he vowed not to rush her. He wouldn’t even mention it until her project was complete. But he smiled as he went to help the Judge with Sadie’s equipment.

SADIE’S HEART THUDDING ANXIOUSLY AS SHE WAITED FOR THE AIRLOCK TO cycle and the inner door to open. Dr. Montgomery’s groundbreaking work had been instrumental in some of her own research, and she couldn’t wait to

meet her. That didn't stop her from a quick admiring glance back at where Zeb was talking to the Judge—strong and powerful and hers.

She was still smiling when the inner door opened to reveal a wide, well-lit dome, a little cluttered but very comfortable. The woman who'd been standing by the window turned to smile at her, and Sadie burst into nervous speech.

“Dr. Montgomery? I'm so sorry to intrude, but your husband said it would be all right if I joined you. I'm Sadie Tucker, and I'm very honored to meet you.”

As Dr. Montgomery came to meet her, Sadie realized that the pretty blonde was very heavily pregnant. *Pregnant? By her cyborg husband?* Her heart skipped a beat. Earth Government claimed that all of cyborgs had been sterilized, but what if it were possible...

The idea of a child with Zeb filled her with unexpected longing, but she reluctantly decided they would have to wait to explore it. Her project had to be completed first.

Dr. Montgomery rubbed her back and gave her a rueful smile.

“Forgive me for not coming outside to meet you, but I swear I get more ungainly every day. And please, call me Addie. I'm equally delighted to meet you. Serena had told me about your project and it sounds fascinating. Is this your prototype?”

Despite its accuracy, the word sounded unexpectedly cold, and she found herself frowning.

“This is Eggie, and she's much more than just a prototype. She's a... companion,” she said defiantly, bracing herself for criticism.

Scientists were not supposed to develop feelings for the subjects of their experiments. Instead, Addie nodded understandingly.

“Of course. I didn't mean it in a negative way. She's very charming.”

The sympathy on the other woman's face only made her feel worse.

“I'm sorry. I probably overreacted. It's just... if it wasn't for her, we might

still be trapped beneath the surface.”

Her voice threatened to break on the last words, and Addie quickly led her to the closest chair and poured her a cup of tea.

“That sounds horrible. What happened? Not that you have to talk about it if you’d rather not.”

She took a grateful sip of tea and managed a somewhat shaky smile. Now that they were away from the cave and without Zeb’s reassuring presence, the terror of the situation was resurfacing.

“I don’t mind talking. We took shelter in a cave because there seemed to be a storm coming and we were at the back of the cave when the quake struck. We ended up sliding down a lava tube that was subsequently filled by debris.” She shuddered and tightened her fingers around her mug. “But at least I wasn’t alone.”

Addie’s eyes were unusually penetrating, and she could feel the heat rising to her cheeks, but then the other woman smiled.

“Sometimes it takes a crisis to, umm, bring a situation to a head.”

Her blush deepened, but she couldn’t help smiling.

“Zeb wants your husband to marry us.”

“Excellent. I love weddings—and it’s surprising how many we’ve ended up assisting. My daughter is going to be equally delighted when she gets back. She’s visiting a friend who just had a baby.”

“I don’t want you to go to any trouble,” Sadie said quickly.

“Nonsense. It’s no trouble at all.” Addie eyed her speculatively. “Please don’t be offended, but would you like to borrow a dress? I think we’re pretty close in size, or at least the size I am when I’m not pregnant.”

She opened her mouth to refuse, then reconsidered. The idea of Zeb seeing her in something pretty was too hard to refuse.

“If you’re sure you don’t mind...”

“Not at all. Come with me.”



The next hour passed in a whirlwind of activity. Kami, Addie's delightfully precocious daughter, returned and threw herself enthusiastically into the preparations. She was also absolutely thrilled with Eggie and Eggie was equally enraptured, quite content to perch on Kami's shoulder as Addie set about dressing Sadie.

Addie was right—they were very close in size and the dress only needed a few minor alterations. As Addie made the changes, she questioned Sadie about her project, and the conversation ranged from highly technical scientific theory to the best way to arrange her hair.

Kami insisted on keeping her and Zeb apart until the ceremony, which didn't help the butterflies in her stomach, but it was worth it when she returned to the living area to find him waiting for her beneath a string of paper flowers. Kami danced ahead of her, scattering more paper flowers, but Sadie had a single precious real flower tucked behind her ear, and Eggie had one fastened to her goggles.

Zeb's face had been etched in the old stern lines, but as soon as he saw her the expression disappeared. His eyes heated as he took in the pretty pale blue dress, lingering briefly on the rather large expanse of cleavage revealed by the lowcut dress before going to the bitemark on her neck. Even though she blushed at his hungry look, she was suddenly glad that Addie had laughed and refused to raise the neckline.

His gaze lifted to Eggie, perched on her shoulder. He shook his head and smiled as she joined him, his face warm and open.

"A rodent for a bridesmaid and a cyborg for a husband. I'm not sure that's every girl's dream."

"It's my dream," she said firmly.

"And you are mine."

He bent down to kiss her —

"Not yet," Kami said indignantly. "You have to wait until Daddy says you can kiss her."

"Then we'd better get started, because I am going to kiss her. A lot."

“Yes, please.”

“In that case, let us begin,” the Judge said solemnly.

Hand in hand, they turned to face him. Her butterflies had disappeared. They loved each other and that was all that really mattered.

## EPILOGUE

*O*ne year later...

ZEB WALKED INTO THE LAB AND FOUND HIS WIFE STARING PENSIVELY OUT across the experimental farm that surrounded the lab. *My wife*. The knowledge still filled him with immense satisfaction.

After a brief, but extremely satisfying wedding night, Addie had checked his injury and assured him that he was healing properly. He and Sadie had finally completed the trip to the lab. While she began work on the first batch of embryos, he began preparing the land for the farm. The work had been hard but satisfying, seeing the farm begin to take shape. He suspected that his father would have hated the idea that his son had become a farmer almost as much as he had hated the idea that he become a cyborg, but that rejection had long since been smoothed away by Sadie's love.

He'd resigned from his ranger duties in order to stay with her at the lab. He still wanted to improve the world, but he chose to do so by assisting Sadie. He believed in her work and what she was capable of accomplishing.

"Feeling sad, sweetheart?" he asked, putting his arms around her.

The experiments she'd run over the past year had been very successful—so successful that the first group of the bioengineered moles had been delivered to an assortment of homesteaders to begin work on their claims. But even though he knew she was thrilled by the progress they had made, he also knew

that she hated to see the little creatures leave.

“A little, I suppose. But it will be nice to have some additional data as well.”

“And you still have Eggie,” he said as the trap door in the floor opened and Eggie emerged. She had free run of both the lab and the surrounding farm, but she never strayed far.

He bent down and picked her up, stroking her head before handing her to Sadie. His wife cuddled Eggie closer, but she still seemed oddly distant and kept looking out at the farm.

“What’s really troubling you? Are you tired of being out here alone?”

The isolation of the lab and farm suited him just fine. He might have come to terms with his humanity, but he still preferred the quiet of the open desert. Sadie had seemed equally content, but perhaps she was beginning to long for company.

They hadn’t been entirely alone, of course. Several other scientists had come for brief periods to discuss additional ways to speed up the development of actual farms. Cyrus had put her in contact with Dr. Abbott and the two of them communicated frequently, although they had yet to meet in person.

Serena, John, and their son had also come to visit several times. Serena always seemed more relaxed when she was away from the city, and she and Sadie had developed a genuine friendship.

“Is that what you want?” he prompted when she didn’t respond. “To move back to New Arcadia?”

“What? No, of course not. Unless you...”

“Not at all,” he said firmly. “Now tell me what’s troubling you.”

“I was wondering if I made a mistake making all of the moles female.”

That was why she looked so troubled?

“You told me it was to control the population, in case they began to damage the crops.”

“It was, but now it seems unfair to deprive them of the chance to have

children.”

“Eggie doesn’t seem very deprived,” he said gently as the mole chirped happily under Sadie’s caresses.

She smiled faintly. “No, I guess not. Maybe I’m projecting.”

His heart skipped a beat despite his nanites.

“Are you saying that you want children?”

She turned and looked up at him, her blue eyes hopeful.

“I think maybe I do—one at least. That is, if you —”

He barely managed to remember to put Eggie safely aside before he lifted Sadie into his arms, kissing her frantically, thankfully.

“Yes,” he finally managed to say. “Now?”

“Are you sure?”

He pulled her even closer, letting her feel the throbbing ridge of his erection.

“I’m very sure. Now?”

“All right,” she said, smiling up at him. “Let’s start a family.”

A part of him thought he should take her to their bedroom, make love to her slowly and tenderly in order to celebrate the next step in their lives, but that part was drowned beneath a wave of urgency. He lifted her onto the counter, opening the coverall to reveal her beautiful breasts. Normally, he would have lingered, given them the attention they deserved, but he couldn’t wait.

He stripped off her clothes and freed his erection, then notched his cock at her entrance, breathing a sigh of relief when he found her wet and ready for him. Unable to wait, he plunged into her tight, welcome heat and shuddered, already on the verge of coming.

He’d felt the slight resistance as her small body struggled to take him and he tried to control himself, but then her legs wrapped around his hips. She arched against him and he was lost, thrusting into her with fast, demanding strokes as she urged him on. He heard her cry out his name, felt her channel

flutter around him, but he couldn't stop, desperate to release his seed inside the body of the woman he loved so much.

Fire streaked down his spine and he came so hard that his vision actually blurred. He could feel his nanites racing through his system, trying to calm his pounding heart and slow his frantic breathing as he collapsed over her, careful not to crush her. When he finally raised his head, concerned that he might have been too rough, she smiled up at him.

"I guess you liked my idea."

"I love your idea. Just like I love you." He ran his finger over the faint red mark on her neck, the lingering trace of where he had bitten her. The sight of it always filled him with possessive pride and a tinge of regret. "My wife."

"My husband. I love you too." Her eyes started to sparkle. "Do you realize I might already be pregnant?"

He shuddered as another surge of blood raced to his cock. "It's entirely possible. I allowed my seed to be fertile."

"Of course you realize that even a successful experiment has to be repeated in order to make sure that the results are correct." Her face was alight with mischief.

"Indeed. Are you suggesting that a repeat performance is in order?"

Her channel tightened teasingly around his still hard cock.

"Just to be sure."

He laughed and picked her up in his arms, smiling as he carried her out of the room and into the promise of the future.

## AUTHOR'S NOTE

Thank you so much for reading *Cyborg Rider*! I always enjoy returning to Mars! Not only do I enjoy helping our lonely cyborgs find love, I adore the horses - and in this case, they are joined by Eggie! I've loved moles since I read *Wind in the Willows* and I'm delighted to have found the right place for my own version! I hope you enjoyed her as much as I did!

Whether you enjoyed the story or not, it would mean the world to me if you left an honest review on Amazon – reviews are one of the best ways to help other readers find my books!

As usual, I have to thank my readers for coming on these adventures with me - I couldn't do it without you!

And, as always, a special thanks to my beta team – Janet S, Nancy V, and Kitty S. Your thoughts and comments are incredibly helpful!

What's next? More Martian revelations are on their way, but in the meantime I'm returning to the *Seven Brides for Seven Alien Brothers* world with a new series - *How the Aliens Were Won*!

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# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

*USA Today* bestselling author Honey Phillips writes steamy science fiction stories about hot alien warriors and the human women they can't resist. From abductions to invasions, the ride might be rough, but the end always satisfies.

Honey wrote and illustrated her first book at the tender age of five. Her writing has improved since then. Her drawing skills, unfortunately, have not. She loves writing, reading, traveling, cooking, and drinking champagne - not necessarily in that order.

Honey loves to hear from her wonderful readers! You can stalk her at any of the following locations...

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