



THE
FORSAKEN

GALAXY ARTIFICIALS 3

ALANA KHAN

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

The Forsaken

A Slow Burn, Forced Proximity, Warrior-Protector Science Fiction Robot Romance

Alana Khan

Temptation Of The Horizontal LLC

The Forsaken: Book Three in the Galaxy Artificials Series by Alana Khan

St. Petersburg, FL 33709

www.alanakhan.com

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Chapter One

Present Day **An Unnamed Asteroid in the Klebdon Belt**

Jessica

I'm tired and lonely in this huge, dark warehouse, yet I do what I always do. I remind myself how lucky I am. That tactic doesn't work as well as it did seven years ago when I was abducted from Earth, but I don't have a better strategy.

At first, I really believed I was lucky. As I watched the eighteen-to-thirty-year-old women being sold into sexual slavery, it was obvious I escaped a horrible fate. Who knew being called "too old" would be a good thing?

I was bought and sold several times, working menial jobs in various households. Wives didn't like me because their husbands were inappropriately interested, so I bounced around until the Unixx Corporation purchased me and stationed me here.

When I first arrived five years ago, this place was bustling with activity. They placed me on an assembly line making household bots, then promoted me to making Hunter-Killers.

Back then I remember wondering why they used human labor instead of having an automated assembly line, but I've learned since that in space, a living, breathing human is less expensive and more expendable than a robot.

After living in single-family households, worried every time I heard a heavy tread on the stairs that it might be the man of the house coming to force me to do his sexual bidding, I was happy to be here. Well, *relatively* happy. What slave is truly happy? At least I was safe.

It was around the time I was “promoted” to working in the computer chip room that things here devolved. We weren't allowed access to the Intergalactic Database, and because of our isolated location, news seldom drifted to our ears. Even the dullest among us, though, had to realize the market for robots was going to hell when half our assembly lines shut down over the span of a few months.

More and more of my coworkers—I know they were fellow slaves, but it's easier for my mind to think of them as colleagues—were transferred off this asteroid.

As the staff dwindled, I was trained and cross-trained on every aspect of the operation. When the last assembly line shut down, I packed my duffle, assuming I would be accompanying all the others to our next assignment.

Imagine my surprise when my wrist-comm lit up with the simple command, *You will stay at the plant.*

What am I to do? I responded.

Whoever was on the other end of the communiqué took their sweet time in responding. Finally, I received an explanation.

Bot vessels with outdated programming may continue to arrive, bringing robots for repairs. Your job is to do your best using the manuals we provide. If repaired, send the robot back to the front line in the vessel it arrived in. If you cannot repair a unit, place defective merchandise in the crusher. A repair rate of 50% or less will result in your termination.

“Termination” on Earth means a pink slip, possibly some severance, unemployment insurance, and being escorted to your car. “Termination” at the Unixx Corporation means a trip to the crusher. That five-sentence message was very motivating.

In the eight months since then, I’ve successfully repaired three out of five robots. If I fail the next repair, I’ll be terminated. It’s terrifying to work under so much pressure.

Every day is the same as the one before. I sleep in an empty room, eat three nutrition bars a day, work in silence to the hum of machinery while worrying about being watched by surveillance cameras. When I cannot work anymore, I trip out of my overalls and lay them out on the floor of the shower cubicle. I use my allotted water ration, hoping that my uniform gets cleaned at the same time, then lay down in my bunk and try to sleep.

Although I'm still breathing, I've been mentally spiraling downward these last few months. Before the others left, I never exactly had any friends here, but at least it was lively. People tend to stick with their own kind, so it wasn't surprising that, being the only human, I was the odd one out.

I still overheard a lot of the gossip and was sometimes included in their celebrations.

Now, though, alone in this enormous factory, I feel forgotten, isolated... forsaken.

At least I have access to the Intergalactic Database. My owners jammed the news and communications sites, but allowed me lots of leeway to search for engineering and repair manuals.

Once, I got through to a real person at Klemtron, which supplies Unixx with its chips. One thing led to another, and after using my rusty flirting skills, a nice male helped me hack into the dark side of the Intergalactic Database.

That's been a lifeline. I've even been in contact with a human woman! Perhaps I'm paranoid, but I triple checked just to make sure. I asked her questions only a human would know, like "How do you make a s'more?" or "What was the villain's name in the *Lion King*?"

After passing with flying colors, she told me I would be welcome where she lives on planet Fairea in a safe compound called Sanctuary. Sanctuary. Just the word is a balm to my spirit.

The problem is, there are no vessels on this asteroid. When a bot vessel arrives with a malfunctioning robot, it flies back to its base, either empty or with the repaired robot.

I've tried to engineer a workaround so I could fly myself out of here. That won't work. Not only do I have no idea how to fly, but they've programmed the vessels to either drive themselves or connect to a bot's system for a change in destination. Humanoids can't control the things without a special connector, which of course I don't have. There must be a chip-to-chip interface.

I have the slightest sliver of hope, though. The last bot that was here couldn't be repaired. Right before I put it into the crusher, I removed its processor.

I had to be sly. The cameras are always watching. But I found a blind spot near the southeast corner where one of the cameras malfunctioned. Every night for the last few weeks, I've been reprogramming the stolen chip.

If the next robot that arrives is salvageable, I'm going to replace its processors with the one I've been working on. If I've done my job right, the robot will take orders from me. Although the Unixx company taught me programming, I'm not great at it. I was a bartender back home while I worked on my degree in history. At no time did I ever consider myself a techie.

The chances of this working are a thousand to one. There are so many moving parts to my plan. First, I have to be able to repair the next bot that arrives. Then, this Frankensteined

processor has to work the way I've designed it. That's not even taking into consideration that some of these vessels are barely big enough for one robot, much less have room for a stowaway.

One thing is certain, though, if I get off this asteroid, I'm guaranteed a safe place to go. Sanctuary. That word sounds better than any other in the English language.



Chapter Two

Jessica

I'm lying in my bunk, listening to the subtle sounds of the factory. Before I was stranded here, we all lived in a bunkhouse connected to the rear of the facility. Males on one side, females on the other.

When they ordered me to stay here alone, I asked Dressin, a seven-foot-tall male, to carry my bunk into the factory. It shortened my commute and somehow seems slightly less lonely than staying alone in the bunkhouse.

I have worker bots around me but they are utilitarian and lack an interface. In the early days, I gave them names and wrote them in marker pen across their metal bodies. Mainly Hollywood hunks who I'd once had a crush on.

It gave me a kick to see Henry Cavill, the welder bot, every morning as I crossed the assembly floor. But as time passed, the marker pen rubbed off and I couldn't summon the energy to replace it.

The whir of the cooling system kicks in, obliterating the never-ending hum of the lights. If it was a musical piece, I'd name it *Loneliness*. I'm about to tell the computer to play *stryzma* music from planet Hyperion when blinking lights and the blare of a klaxon announce the approach of a space vessel.

In the olden days, when the factory was full of humanoids, we had a few Hunter-Killer bots assigned to protect us. I remember wondering what type of madman would want to take on something that looked like a Cylon from *Battlestar Galactica*, except taller and meaner. When they left with the others, I realized they weren't here to protect us. They were here to keep us in line.

Each time I hear a vessel approaching, my body reacts just as it is now. My stomach tightens into what feels like a ball of writhing snakes and my mouth goes dry. There's no way of knowing who is approaching. It could be space pirates who would be only too happy to do whatever they want with me until I'm used up or they sell me to the highest bidder.

All I can do is wait in terror, my muscles so tight they're beginning to spasm. When the external door thunders closed and the internal door opens upward like my garage door back home, I step to the darkest back corner of the factory, crouch to the floor, and watch, my breath hitching and my hands trembling with fear.

The last few times this happened, the vessel door opened and a damaged bot emerged. They're usually missing a few limbs,

wires hanging uselessly at the point of damage, but they walk off the ship under their own steam.

After waiting five long minutes, then five minutes more, I realize whatever's inside isn't going to exit on its own. I'll have to go in and get it.

The Unixx Corporation left me defenseless. Once the last ship flew away, what damage did they think I would do with a laser rifle? Well, no matter what they thought, they left me without one.

I slide from my crouch to sit on the cold metallic floor. For the next half hour, I contemplate my options before I finally decide I have no choice but to march onto the vessel and see what's waiting inside for me. If I don't get the thing repaired in a week, I'll be toast anyway.

I rise, dust off my ass, and stride to the vessel. It's slightly bigger than the five bot vessels that have come before. I believe it's a Vesper Class model. Perhaps there is more than one damaged robot inside. I pause one more time as I tell myself I have no choice, then force myself to press my fingertip to the keypad.

The door opens, and metallic steps lower to the floor.

"No time like the present," I whisper to myself, then gnaw on my bottom lip as I ascend the steps to enter the vessel.

Inside is one damaged bot. It's in worse shape than the previous five. Its torso is dented and covered in the black telltale signs of being close to heavy laser fire. Two limbs are

severed and have been thoughtlessly tossed in with the carcass. They've slid to the back of the vessel where they're nestled against the far wall.

This time of year, this asteroid is dark all day every day—which hasn't helped my growing depression. Although I should be well into my sleep cycle, after being terrified for the better part of an hour, sleep is out of the question. I might as well get the big hulk up on my worktable and see what I've got.

I use a dolly-bot to move him out of the ship and onto my table, then examine him.

Him. It's an interesting way to refer to a heap of metal and bolts. Yet, I used to think of my Alexa at home in feminine terms. Probably because her voice was that of a woman.

This guy's all male, I guess, though he has no masculine parts. He's a deadly machine, with hidden guns and knives neatly snapped into place on the outside of his thighs, his biceps, and across his abdomen. He's like a Swiss Army knife of weaponry.

The last six robots had their weapons removed before they arrived. Someone was asleep on the job with this one. This bad boy is still in possession of two short laser rifles and three deadly looking knives. Fat lot of good they'll do me alone on this desolate asteroid.

I process him in, entering his external damage and his serial number into my computer as is the required protocol.

“Okay, HK499, let’s get a better look at you.”

Luckily, he’s a fairly new model, which means there just might be parts in the warehouse to replace his right arm and leg. I almost quit breathing when I reach behind his neck and pull his processors.

Knowing the cameras probably have me in a closeup, I try to school my features when I realize it’s the same make and model processor as the one I’ve been working on. A shaky little breath is the only tell I throw that this is, perhaps, the answer to my prayers.

If I get him working—big if—and if this processor does its job—another big if—I might be able to leave this freaking asteroid along with Hunter-Killer 499.



Chapter Three

Jessica

I work slowly, with precision. If everything goes according to plan, HK499 and I are going to be partners in crime for the foreseeable future. I want him in perfect working order.

After sending one of the worker-bots to the parts room a number of times, I finally have everything I need laid out on my worktable.

It's hot as hell in here. My upper lip is beaded with sweat and my pits aren't smelling so fresh. It's a trade-off. I turned the air system off so I can tune my hearing to the soft whirrings of the cameras.

About an hour into HK's repair, the sounds of long-distance scrutiny slow, then stop. Whoever is watching me remotely has better things to do than watch a forty-year-old human female fiddle with a broken Hunter-Killer.

When I'm certain they're no longer watching me, I stop in the middle of his right leg repair, heave him over onto his front, and switch his old, fried processor for the new improved, Jessica Brandywine model.

A moment later, he's on his back again and I'm performing a precision solder on the wiring in his knee. I don't know what happened to this seven-foot-tall soldier, but it looks as though something literally ripped him apart at the knee and shoulder.

The limbs are the newest damage he's taken, but some of his wounds go back a while. The charred areas where he's taken laser fire speak of years of combat. Not to mention he's dented. They all seem to be by the time they arrive. They keep repairing the broken ones and sending them back to the front lines in the Federation's endless wars.

From what I've read on the Dark Database, the war isn't being fought only by bots. There are plenty of humanoids forced into war by the Federation. Sadly, they aren't as easily repaired as artificials.

Now that I don't have to pay attention to the subtle sounds of the cameras moving, I turn the A/C back up and soon quit sweating. My hands still shake from time to time when I realize how much trouble I can get into if the Unixx company discovers my scheme.

I'm both physically and mentally exhausted when I realize it's about the time of day I normally wake up. Laying my tools on the table, I finally take a shower and fall into bed. Even though it's long past my bedtime, I don't fall asleep right away.

My mind is racing. First, I review everything I've already done. Then I mentally note all my next steps. The list is endless. Not just all the repairs I need to do on the HK, but collecting tools I want to take with me in case the robot needs more repairs, not to mention the supply of nutrition bars and water I'm taking with me.

After going over the list a dozen times, instead of my thoughts slowing and my fear dissolving, my terror ramps. I enumerate a thousand things that can go wrong. Along with every frightening thought, I imagine the punishment I'll receive if I'm discovered.

Suddenly, everything shifts inside me. My rising panic dissolves and is replaced by calm. Not just calm, but determination.

“What are you afraid of, Jess?” I ask myself in a breathy whisper. “What exactly is more dreadful than staying here for another five years? Working alone in an endless series of days that look exactly like the day before. What could be worse than the bleak passage of time interrupted only by an incoming drone with a robot to fix under penalty of death?”

What's so great about breathing in and out if you have no life to live?

“This is it, Jess. You're going to get a good night's sleep. Then you will perform the next hundred steps in your plan. When it's all complete, if the HK is under your control, you're going to stowaway in that vessel, have him navigate it to Sanctuary, and begin your new life.”

*And if it doesn't work, at least you won't be stuck on this dark,
fucking rock anymore. You'll have died trying to get free.*



Chapter Four

Jessica

I can't say I got a great night's sleep, but I managed to get some rest. Since I woke up, I've completed most of HK's repairs, all while making an endless stream of trips into the vessel to stockpile things I might need for the trip.

I have no clothes other than underwear and coveralls, which I tucked into one of the interior compartments after I muttered out loud, "I wonder if the HK's frgment bolt is rolling around in the back of the Vesper."

Luckily, the last supply ship left the casks of water at the interior doorway to the docking bay, meaning HK can grab a few on our way to the ship.

I finish his repairs, then stop dead in my tracks before I turn him on. I've given a lot of thought to just how I would know if he's under my control or not. If I tell him to do something, he has to follow my directions. All robots are programmed to obey humanoids.

It's only when I tell him to do something counter to his Federation programming that I'll know if he'll do it or immediately report me, which is also in his Federation programming.

Now that he's repaired, I guess there's no reason to wait to see if this is going to work. Whether it works or not, I'm past the point of turning back.

When I turn him on, his plexi faceplate becomes backlit. He has no eyes, really. Just a rounded pane of plexi where a face would be.

"Name?" I ask, all business.

"HK499." His voice is deep and the triangle slit under his plexi face screen lights up briefly. Every aspect of the HK's design seems focused on intimidating their targets and in the field. I can tell that if he increased his volume levels, his voice would cut through the din of laser cannon fire.

"Sit up."

He smoothly sits, his legs straight in front of him on the bench.

I hold my arms up and touch my thumbs to my fingers, a standard dexterity test.

"Do this."

He imitates my actions, only a hundred times quicker than my fastest speed.

"Stand."

He slides off the foot of the workbench and stands. I forgot how big and hulking this model is. He's more than a head taller than me. His impact-resistant plastic shoulders are so wide and powerful they could be used as battering rams. His bulk alone would scare even a well-armed humanoid.

I remind myself I've supposedly programmed him to take my orders. I sure hope I'm right.

“Run to the far corner and back ten times.”

I watch, trying to notice his gait rather than the sheer strength and force of this robot that was created for one thing and one thing only—killing.

After precisely ten trips, he stops a few feet in front of me and waits for my next order. Trust me, big fella, this is going to be a doozy.

Most of my sleepless hours last night were consumed with the question of what I should ask him to do to ensure he would follow my orders to the exclusion of his previous Federation programming. Now, though, I realize I had nothing to worry about.

He's a baby. An infant. I just inserted a new chip into his processing unit. He has no “before,” no history. All he knows is today forward. He can't remember his Federation programming because it doesn't exist. I obliterated it over the long hours I worked on the chip now firmly lodged in the back of his neck.

He will do what I say precisely because I tell him to do it.

“Let’s get this show on the road,” I murmur.

He tips his head in question but doesn’t say a word.

“On my mark, you will move slowly to those large bottles of water there. Then, as fast as you can, you will place all of them in the Vesper, jump in, close the door, and fly us out of here to planet Fairea. Nod if you understand.”

He gives one short, sharp nod, then waits.

After taking a deep breath, I say, “Go!”



Chapter Five

Jessica

We saunter toward the Vesper, probably looking like two people in a comedy routine when they're trying to "act natural" in such an obvious way it draws attention. I can't worry about that now. From here out, it's a race to the finish line.

The moment I'm in the vessel, he places two large, clear containers of water at the top of the steps. By the time I've strapped into the nav seat, he's got all four bottles inside, has closed the door, and is settling his bulk into the captain's chair.

Although I've never watched this procedure before, I'm not surprised when he connects a flexible cord from a recessed receptacle in the dash to a small outlet in his wrist. He communes wordlessly with the Vesper, which communicates wordlessly with the exit door.

The moment the exterior door opens, we fly away. In all, I don't think it was more than two minutes from the moment I

said “go” to now.

I watch the upper-right corner of the nav screen, which functions as a rearview mirror. My shoulders are hunched, my breathing ragged as I wait for the laser fire I assume will be coming.

The factory has exterior weapons in place to fight intruders. Don't they know we just escaped?

As the seconds tick by and nothing happens, instead of feeling reassured, my terror ramps higher. Why didn't they just try to shoot us out of the air? Are they sending a fleet to bombard us so they don't damage their facility?

The only thing I hear is the sound of my heart pounding in my veins. My hands are quaking, though I'm trying to hold them still in my lap. It has to have been five minutes, yet nothing has happened.

“HK, hear anything on comms?” I ask.

That cord connecting him to the dash provides him all the information he needs to run the ship.

“The Unixx company just asked where this vessel is headed.”

Sheer terror flies through my body. There's no way I could have programmed him for any eventuality. First, I'm not that good a programmer. Second, how could I have envisioned and predisastered every possible pitfall?

I've just left an infant robot in charge of my safety. So stupid.

“What did you tell them?” My lips feel numb as my mind hands me a scrolling list of all the dumb ways he could have responded.

“Awaiting your command,” he answers casually, as if what comes next is of no consequence.

“Can you access standard Federation protocol for combat droids?” I ask.

“Affirmative.”

“What is the standard response for a repaired android?”

“I should return to the front on Crimson IX. A quick search of the Federation Database indicates that’s where HK499 fell in battle.”

“Good. Tell them that. And HK? Don’t mention me.”

“Yes, Sir.”

A nanosecond later, he says, “Message relayed.”

Thump, thump, thump goes my heart as I ask, “What was their response?”

“Roger.”

Well, he answered, “Gavron,” in Universal, but it translated to “Roger,” via the subdural translator in my head. Roger. Just like that. Like it’s no big deal we escaped.

“Is Crimson IX in the same sector as Fairea?”

“No, Sir.”

“Head to Crimson IX.”

“Yes, Sir.”

I feel the slight shift as the Vesper makes its course correction.

“From whom do you take your orders?” I ask the robot.

“You, Sir.”

“And if they go against Federation policy?”

Thump, thump, thump. This is where I find out if I programmed him correctly. It means the difference between life and death.

“Your orders supersede all others.”

Thank goodness. I exhale loudly and practically sink into the nav seat in relief.

“Tell me, HK, is there a way we can get to Fairea without getting in trouble with the Federation?”

“Yes,” he answers immediately.

For a moment, I forgot his processor performs a million times faster than a human mind. He didn't pause at all.

“I researched rare items critical to the war effort that are only available on Fairea. The most important is *berinium* pellets. If you wish, I can originate an order for HK499 to collect *berinium* from Fairea and can time/date stamp it now.”

The big hulk may not be much to look at, but he's got a good... headlike thing on his shoulders.

“What are we waiting for?” I ask. “Let's go to Fairea to collect that *berinium*.”



Chapter Six

Jessica

“Is there a way to have communications that can’t be intercepted by the Federation or the Unixx Corp?” I ask, no longer wondering if the HK is on my side.

“It would require alt-subspace communications. Those will only travel fifty million standard miles as opposed to regular subspace comms, which will travel the complete distance of the galaxy.”

It takes me a moment to translate his robot-speak into something that makes sense to my human mind.

“So the alt-comms can’t go as far as regular comms?” I clarify.

“Yes, Sir.”

“When will we be close enough to Fairea to use the alt-comms?”

“Twenty-six standard hours, fourteen minutes, and twelve seconds.”

“Tell me when we’re there.”

“Yes, Sir.”

With that, I unbelt myself and walk to the rear of the Vesper. It’s a small ship, built for utility, not comfort. In addition to the two seats in front of the nav screen, the rear contains a small cargo area with four jump seats facing inward on each of the side walls.

I inspect the rear and find the smallest, most utilitarian john I’ve ever seen. HK’s shoulders would barely fit. Even if he managed to squeeze in, he wouldn’t be able to close the door. Good thing he doesn’t need a john for anything.

A removable showerhead can pull down from the ceiling. It’s kind of like a friend’s camper I was in once. There’s a drain in the floor, and knowing how precious water is in space, I imagine it recycles.

That I was showering with water a dozen other people had already used completely grossed me out when I first arrived at the factory on that lousy asteroid. It doesn’t bother me at all anymore. That just goes to show, you can get used to almost anything.

When I think of Earth, it’s like a dream I barely remember. After seven years in space, all that seems real to me now are the aliens, the factory, and the never-ending hardships.

When I inspect the jump seats more closely, I see how they can be jiggered and rearranged into one narrow bed on each side. After several attempts to connect all the seats on the

starboard side, I manage to get them into the sleeping configuration.

“Next time, you might want to use the button,” he says, still facing forward.

Does he have eyes in the back of his head? I guess so. It would certainly make him a better soldier.

Motherfucker. When I look to where the wall meets the ceiling, there’s a small red button that says “Press to Assemble Bed.” Damn. It’s not my fault it was so high on the wall I didn’t see it.

“Wake me if you hear anything from Unixx Corp or the Feds,” I say as I lie down.

I’m glad I tossed a few blankets in on one of my last surreptitious trips to the Vesper. After wiggling to get as comfy as I can in this narrow makeshift bed, I try to sleep.

Because I got little sleep last night, maybe I can just lie here and snooze for a day and a half, then wake up in Sanctuary.

“If I’m not up by the time you can hail Sanctuary on alt-comms, wake me.”

After finding out about Sanctuary, I read up on planet Fairea. Gentle breezes, four seasons, a galaxy-renowned Renaissance Fair that’s open every day of the year. Despite its three suns, it’s never over 85 degrees Fahrenheit. Boy, doing the conversion from standard units to Fahrenheit was quite the brain strain.

From what I heard, there are over a dozen freed human women and a bunch of alien gladiators in the compound. I doze off, dreaming of what my new life will be like when I'm back among my kind, on a planet that has both night and day. And being free. Wow. It's going to be wonderful.



Chapter Seven

Jessica
“Sir?”

I bolt upright. I told HK to wake me if we heard from the Unixx Corp or the Feds.

“What’s the problem?” I ask in that terrified voice people use when they’re awakened from a sound sleep.

“No problem. We’re in range to use alt-comms to speak with Fairea.”

It takes me a minute to stop my hands from quaking in fear after his booming monotone voice woke me. Then I use the tiny restroom and return to my nav seat.

I’ve memorized the comm-link code to Sanctuary. I hope the woman I spoke with, Dawn, is at the comm on her end. She was very sweet when we spoke before. She reassured me I’d be welcomed and cared for from the moment I entered their facility. I hope she remembers me.

As luck would have it, Dawn answers my hail.

“It’s Jessica. Do you remember me? We spoke a few months back. I was working at the Unixx fac—”

“Of course, I remember you. I told everyone about how terrified you were when we spoke. They were all excited to welcome you. Do you think you’ll be able to break free? To get here?”

“I’m not more than six hours away!” I said that a bit too loudly. “Sorry, can’t help shouting. I’m just so excited.”

“Shit,” she says, her voice doleful.

I expected problems all along the way, from getting a viable robot, to properly programming its processors, to escaping the asteroid in one piece. What I did *not* expect was to be greeted with the word “shit” by the woman who generously offered me sanctuary.

“Shit?” I prompt, my voice tight with worry.

“Jessica, I’m so sorry.”

Knots. My stomach is in knots and my chest is so tight it’s a wonder my heart can continue to beat.

“Who could have imagined you would break free when the entire planet of Fairea is on lockdown?”

That I can hear how unhappy she is to have to be the bearer of bad news does nothing to soften the blow.

“Lockdown?”

“I don’t know why some rebels have targeted the planet that’s like a giant Renaissance theme park, but they came through a few days ago and released a mutant strand of virus. Everyone in the compound is fine, but we’re hunkered down.”

Glancing down, my hands are still shaking in my lap. When I look over at HK, he’s as cool as a cucumber. I guess that’s easy when you have no emotions and no sense of whether you’re alive or dead. That’s one of the things that makes robots such good mercenaries. They have no fear of marching into enemy fire.

“The Fairean officials aren’t playing with this outbreak, though. Nothing in or out. Nothing.”

“Any idea how long this will last?” I ask, still harboring a bit of hope that we can just circle out here in no-man’s-land for a day or two.

“Juno did the math. She’s one of the Earth girls here and is a genius with numbers. She mumbled something I couldn’t understand about half-lives and mutations, then said it was her humble opinion it could be a month or more. Good thing we live on a farm near a river. Between the vegetables we grow and the livestock in our fields, we’ll be fine.”

She pauses and gasps as if she just heard the words that came out of her mouth. Her statement that they’ll be fine might be considered a bit insensitive considering I might not be fine at all.

An unhappy moan escapes my lips. When I look at HK to see how he’s taking this, I’m once again reminded he’s just a robot

programmed with ones and zeros. He's about as interested in this conversation as I was when people talked about football stats back on Earth.

"Listen. There's another place you can go. It's not beautiful there like it is on Fairea, but Jessica, it's *safe*."

I sit up straighter and look out the nav screen as if I could see her.

"It's a small desert planet..."

Good thing she pauses. It gives me a few seconds to roll my eyes as I think the words *out of the frying pan and into the fire* about the nameless asteroid I just left.

"It's called Eden. From what I've heard, the surface is a shitty dust bowl, but the humongous underground shelter is like a paradise. You'd have your own room. It's hard to picture, but most rooms have their own swimming pool."

Sounds like how they got all those people to come to America long ago when they said the streets were paved with gold. Total bullshit.

"It's run by this nice couple called Adam and Eve."

Not just bullshit. Double bullshit. Triple bullshit. Adam and Eve in Eden, my ass. Sounds like the type of cult that would eventually commit mass suicide and you'd watch a documentary on TV about it.

"Every word out of your mouth makes this harder to believe," I say.

“I’ve talked to Eve. She’s the real deal. Very nice. They created this safe Underground facility so human women can have a safe place. Human women and men, if there are any up here. And what they call artificials.”

“Artificials?”

“Robots.”

Great. Robot rehab. I glance at HK who still seems completely uninterested. Does he even know he’s a robot? He used the word “I” before, but only because I programmed that to make me feel more comfortable when he speaks.

“So they would take us in?”

“From what I understand, absolutely. I’ll send you the coordinates and their comm link. I’m sure everything will work out just fine.”

Famous last words.



Chapter Eight

Jessica
“HK, can you disconnect the Federation tracker on this vessel?”

“Affirmative.”

“Disconnect the tracker and do not respond to any comms from the Federation or the Unixx Corporation. Set course for Eden.”

“Yes, Sir.”

I keep my shit together for a minute as the Vesper changes course for Eden. For half a second, I wish HK was humanoid. What I wouldn't give for someone to console me, maybe pat my shoulder or lie and reassure me everything will be alright.

What I get, though, is the big lug's silent metallic profile as he puts the ship on the correct trajectory. White-hot anger spears through me. It's so powerful it's like physical pain. It's focused on HK.

Just as quickly as it came, it leaves. It's like expecting my microwave back on Earth to console me. Ridiculous. He's a robot, incapable of emotion, certainly incapable of empathy. It's crazy of me to expect otherwise.

As my anger recedes, it's replaced by sadness. It's been a long time since I've cried. Years. Many years.

It does no good, draws the wrath of owners and fellow slaves alike, and makes me feel groggy when I have no more tears to shed.

That doesn't matter, though. Not today. I can't help myself. My emotions take over, tears spill down my cheeks, and when I quit fighting it, I actually allow myself to wallow in it.

Ten minutes later, I'm right where I knew I'd be. I'm tired and punchy and am certain I look like shit, although why that would matter is anybody's guess.

"HK, can you call the frequency Dawn gave us? Hail the folks on Eden?"

A moment later, a woman's voice comes through the dash loud and clear.

"Jessica? Is that you? Dawn from Sanctuary already called and gave us a heads up."

Good. I could never tell her my story without another tearful outburst. Not only would that do no good, it would be humiliating.

"Adam's here. He wants to gather more facts." No matter what happens from here, I must admit, talking to yet another person

in English gives me a little boost.

After pleasant introductions, he's all business as he finds out what make and model our Vesper is, what our current coordinates are, and how much food, water, and fuel we have.

"I've been listening to Federation comms since Dawn apprised us of your situation. The Feds are aware of the lockdown on Fairea. As soon as you disconnected the tracker and went comm-silent, they started looking for you two. They know you didn't land on Fairea. We want to help you."

Oh, I know that tone. What's coming next will be a very nice brush-off. My stomach plummets.

"And we *will* help you." He pauses, giving me time to accept what he has to say.

Sorry, Adam, or whatever your real name is, I don't trust anyone anymore.

"You're just too hot right now. You'd lead them right to us, and there are too many escaped slaves here for that to be safe. Here's what you're going to do."

With his calm voice, he lays out the plan for our next few weeks as if he's had months to think about it.

"You're going to fly to Amarron City on the back side of one of Aeon III's moons. It's well known for aiding and abetting outlaws, which you now are. You're going to dock there, refuel, procure supplies, and *don't attract attention!*"

After he asks a few more questions, he adds, "You can't contact us again. We'll contact you when it's safe. In the

meantime, I want the HK to protect you.”

A quick glance at the HK in question confirms what I already suspected, he’s about as interested in this conversation as he was the last one.

“Is his tether connected to your ship?”

“Yeah,” I reply after checking that the cable from HK’s wrist is securely connected to the input slot on the console.

“I’m going to assess his fitness for duty.”

I don’t understand what he means, but there’s no reason to argue.

“Okay.”

Less than one minute later, Adam continues, “Whatever you did to reprogram him has made him even less proactive than his original programming. It was a good attempt, Jessica, considering you have little training. It’s just that if someone were to attack you right now, if you were sick or out of commission, he would do nothing to help or protect you without directions. He needs an upgrade.”

“Upgrade?”

“Yes. I’m going to use our connection to reprogram him, update his BIOS. Don’t worry, that’s just his basic input/output system. It will give him more cognitive intelligence, as well as emotional intelligence. When the upgrade is complete, he’ll have emotions and self-direction. That way, if you’re incapacitated, he can continue his mission to keep you safe

and eventually get you to Eden. Do you give me your permission to do this?”

“Uh...” I don’t give it a lot of thought. Adam seems to have all the answers, which is good, because I have none. Nor do I have any other options. “Sure.”

“He already gave me his permission. Well, as much as he’s capable of. He told me he would do whatever you wished.”

He pauses a moment, then continues.

“Jessica? Every second we keep this comm line open makes us both vulnerable. I’m going to load the HK with credits while I reprogram him, then break our comm link. Don’t contact us again. We’ll reach out to you when it’s safe.”

Although time is clearly of the essence, he pauses again.

“And Jessica? The way I’m going to change his programming is usually done incrementally over a period of weeks or months. To him, it will be cataclysmic. I’m going to give him emotions, though he’s had none before. It may feel terrifying to him, or disorienting, or both. Promise you’ll help him through it?”

I’m having trouble tracking because what he’s saying doesn’t make sense. I want to ask how the hell giving him emotions will help him protect me better. What I want is a stone cold Terminator, not Marvin the Paranoid Android. However, what I do know is that we have little time.

“Sure. I promise,” I say a nanosecond before HK moans as though he’s been hit by a ten-ton freight train.



Chapter Nine

Jessica

I'm glad HK's already entered the coordinates to Aeon III because he's swiveled his seat toward me and is jackknifed at the waist. Well, he's bent at the waist as much as his bulky design allows.

He's moaning in pain, which is odd because he seldom talks and never makes any other sounds. And pain? He's a robot.

It takes a moment for Adam's words to fully register. Cataclysmic, terrifying, disorienting. Yup. That sums it up.

"Jessica? Am I dying?" he asks.

Even his voice sounds different. Where before he spoke in a robotic, droning monotone, now he sounds... scared. Instead of 'Sir', he just called me by name.

"No. No." I pause, realizing my own voice is a robot-like monotone. If this thing truly has feelings now, and he's reaching out to me for reassurance, I should provide it. "No," I say with compassion, as I look at the convex plexi that covers

where a face would be, “you’re not dying HK. You’re... changing.”

His hands reach to the back of his neck, reminiscent of an upset human pressing their temples as if that will staunch emotional pain.

“Tell me what’s happening. Perhaps I can help,” I say.

“Are we... are we running from the law?”

That’s the first thing his brilliant mind gloms onto? That we’re on the lam from the Feds and the Unixx Corp? It makes sense. He’s a soldier. Assessing safety would have to be at the top of any protocols left running on his chip.

“Well, yeah. The way I got us off that asteroid wasn’t sanctioned.”

“I’m...” He pauses for a long time. Minutes. The same robot who can calculate in nanoseconds equations of time and distance that would take me an hour with a powerful computer is so confused he’s paralyzed.

“You’re what, HK?”

“I’m... thinking.” Another long pause, then, “My own thoughts.”

I’ve kept myself alive for seven years under hellish conditions. In order to do that, I had to become a bit narcissistic because if I wasn’t taking care of myself, nobody was going to do it for me. Did I think HK was robotic? Well, *my* emotions have been encased behind protective barriers for a long time, too.

I need to help him. In order to do that, I have to imagine what he's going through. I need to use my long-atrophied ability to empathize.

He was nothing before. Not self-aware. Just a body that had enough intelligence to follow orders.

Now, for the first time, he's experiencing not only emotions, but he's realizing he's... He's what? He's not a person, but by the odd, hollow moan reverberating from his throat, he's certainly in pain.

“Yes, big guy. You can have your own thoughts now. You can have opinions. Make your own choices.” As I try to reassure him, I'm terrifying myself. What if he's a bigger narcissist than me? What if he hates me and doesn't want to keep me safe? At least before Adam tampered with him, he was programmed to protect me as long as I could give him direct orders to do so.

Now, I don't know what he's capable of doing. Will he still follow my orders? Am I even safe with him? There are so many questions I need to ask Adam, and I can't.

Pushing that aside, I tune back into HK's needs. Didn't I just compare him to an infant? Well, now he's an infant equipped with enough awareness to be terrified of not only his changes, but his precarious circumstances.

“Want to lie down? It might help your, uh, processors relax.”



Chapter Ten

H K499

I have very few sensors in my body. The inability to feel is good for a soldier. I have just enough receptors to know when I've been hit and need repairs.

Right now, those receptors are screaming at me, telling me my equilibrium is off. Perhaps it's due to the speed of my spinning thoughts, or the sheer strength of the cataclysm exploding inside my processors.

What did Jessica do to me? I allowed her to make the decision for Adam to reprogram me, and he unleashed something so powerful inside me I can't tolerate it.

I've never *wanted* anything before. I simply did as I was told. Now, for the first time, I have a desire to do something. I want Jessica to hurt as she hurt me.

I swivel my seat toward her, but the impulse to retaliate against her immediately dies. I've been taught to read the cues of humanoid facial expressions in order to make me a better

soldier. It's clear she didn't intend to harm me. She looks as surprised and perplexed as I feel.

Perplexed? Is that what I feel? No. What is going on inside my processors is nothing as bland as that. It's overwhelming, confusing, as though every fact in the known universe is spinning and colliding wildly inside my head.

Though my processors have no ability to experience pain, what other word could I use to describe what's going on inside me right now?

“Jessica? Am I dying?”

Did I just say those words? They sound nothing like the voice I was equipped with. They don't sound like a robot. They aren't even similar to the hundreds of other HKs I've encountered. They sound... full of fear.

Life and death have meant nothing to me before. I was a machine.

What did Adam do to me? Am I no longer a machine? Not only has my sentience changed, but I have a sense of... self. For the first time since I walked off the assembly line, I have a desire to stay online. I don't want to die.

I enquire about our circumstances. This is no longer just about Jessica, it is about *us*. Her answers are not reassuring. We are running from powerful enemies. All the information in the Intergalactic Database doesn't tell me enough to create a plan guaranteed to keep us safe.

Finally, she says, “You can have your own thoughts now. You can have opinions. Make your own choices.”

There’s something about the way she’s looking at me. Is this compassion? I’ve never been on the receiving end of this emotion before. It calms me.

“Want to lie down? It might help your, uh, processors relax.”

“No. Thank you,” I say. “Do not worry about me.”

I look out the nav screen, the same screen I’ve been looking at since we hurried into the Vesper and left the repair asteroid. The darkness of space looks entirely different than it did before.

It’s vast. My processors can calculate how vast, just as they always have, but now that I have emotions, the enormity of the universe feels different from before. Whereas before there were facts and figures to be calculated. Now there is a *me* in the equation.

HK499 is a speck in this boundless universe. I’m bombarded with the awareness that I have a place here, no matter how infinitesimal it is.

I am me. Not a person. I will never be that. But I’m no longer a robot. Just as Jessica said, I have my own thoughts now.

Adam incorporated a moral code to this upgrade. Part of it is something called “Asimov’s Three Laws of Robotics.”

The First Law: A robot must not injure a humanoid or, through inaction, allow a humanoid to come to harm. The Second Law: A robot must obey the orders given it by humanoids except

where such orders would conflict with the First Law. The Third Law: A robot must protect its own existence as long as such protection does not conflict with the First or Second Law.

But they are given as guidance not absolutes. He has truly given me free will.

Each thought needs to be assessed. It must be weighed and measured. Is it a good thought or a bad thought?

What a weighty task.

I wanted to harm the female a moment ago. It's easy to judge that. It is wrong to want to harm others.

But wait. I've been built to fight, to kill. For a swift moment, it is as though my processors are about to explode, until I recall I am in charge of my own thoughts now.

I get to decide.

Wishing to harm someone is bad. Killing is bad, unless it is to protect others who are important to me. Although I don't know her well, Jessica is important. I will protect her.

And myself? Am I worth protecting? An even deeper question is if it ever came down to choosing between her life or my own, what would I choose?

Perhaps she was right. Maybe I need to lie down, though whether I'm vertical or horizontal, it will take more control than I possess to order my thoughts to stop swirling.



Chapter Eleven

Jessica
“You’re anxious,” HK says.

It’s been the oddest few days since his world turned upside down. Well, it’s been odd for many reasons, not the least of which is we’re on the lam from the powerful Unixx Corporation not to mention I’ve stolen a costly Hunter-Killer robot as well as a Vesper from the Federation itself.

But as terrifying as it is to know we’re being hunted by powerful forces who won’t hesitate to kill us, the humongous hunk of laser-resistant plastic demands my immediate attention.

In the twenty-eight hours since Adam changed his programming—what HK calls “the cataclysm”—he’s changed. A lot.

At first, he seemed like a child. When he asked in a terrified voice if he was dying, it pulled my heartstrings. When I woke a few hours later from my nap, he seemed like a teen. It was a

reminder of why my parents used to jokingly refer to my own teen years as “suicidal.” Not that *I* was suicidal, but that I was so difficult they considered it themselves.

He was not only full of a thousand questions, but he flip-flopped constantly from mature thinking to childish confusion.

When I awakened this morning, I was greeted with a different HK. He seemed calmer, more sensitive. Although I must admit, his asking if I’m anxious takes things to a whole different level.

“Yes. I’m anxious. We’re arriving at Amarron City in...” I look at the number in the lower-right portion of the nav screen as it counts down. “Two standard hours and eleven minutes.”

“And eighteen seconds,” he adds.

When I object with a soft grunt, he asks, “What?”

“You needn’t be so specific.”

Yesterday, his adolescent self would have considered this the opening gambit of an argument that would have gone on for half an hour if I’d let it. Today, he just nods.

“You’re anxious about Amarron City?” he asks.

I control myself from heaving a breath and rolling my eyes. It’s not his fault he’s been sentient less than forty-eight hours. Shit, he’s got me doing it. No one needs to be this precise.

I shouldn’t begrudge him for asking questions. The better he understands what we’re facing, the more help he can be.

“I’ll contact the southernmost docking agent at a place called Klaginn Station. That’s where Adam said we should go,” he says. “We’ll get permission to land, then set down as far from the action as possible. If it’s safe, we’ll go out this evening to get you food. My research indicates you might be tired of nutrition bars after a steady diet of them for three days.”

Three days? How about eight months since I was stranded on that asteroid alone? He must have been researching the feeding habits of humans or he wouldn’t know I’d be tired of bars. I have to give him credit. He’s come a long way since Adam upgraded him.

“What worries you?”

I sit up in my bunk as I contemplate an answer. If he was still nonsentient, I might give him an earful right now. I’d delineate how vulnerable we’ll be in a veritable den of thieves on the dark side of an outlaw planet. Now that he’s got emotions, there’s no reason for both of us to be nervous wrecks.

“Just... change. The unknown. I’m just a worrier.”

“Come sit in the nav seat and teach me things,” he says in a monotone I find hard to read.

Is he trying to distract me? Calm me? Or does he really want to ask me more questions right now?



Chapter Twelve

H^{K499} Jessica is worried. I've been researching human emotions and how they are expressed. Adam programmed me with information about emotions, but that was infinitesimal compared to what I found on what the Earthers call their Internet.

Right now, for example, her brow has little lines across it, and it has nothing to do with how difficult it's been for her to learn how to fly the Vesper in the lessons I've been giving her.

She's twisting a strand of her lustrous brown hair. These anxious responses increase with every passing standard minute. When she snaps at me, I need to remind myself this stems from her fear response and has little to do with me.

Sometimes I yearn for the days before Adam tampered with my programming. I would have been blissfully oblivious to these things. Well, I would have been oblivious to *everything*

as I plodded through life following orders with no thought of anything at all.

“Come.” I tap the nav seat. “I’ve read about basic emotions. Tell me about unusual ones.” I want to keep her mind busy thinking about something other than what worries her.

“Unusual emotions?”

“I’ve been reading about schadenfreude, for example. Its meaning baffles me. Explain it.”

“What? The psychoanalyst guy?”

“No. My research says it’s taking pleasure in another’s misfortune. Explain.”

“Never heard of it.” Her snappy tone as she turns her back to me ends the conversation. I shouldn’t have brought that up. Perhaps she doesn’t experience that emotion. Of course not. She’s too good a person for that.

Still wanting to make her explain feelings, I persist. “What about liberosis? A book I read says it means the desire to care less about things. Have you ever felt that? Maybe if you cared less you wouldn’t be anxious.”

She glances at me, her forehead pleated with scowling lines.

“Quit making that shit up.”

“I’m sorry I don’t understand you well enough to calm your fears,” I say.

Her head snaps toward me, then she looks at me with such intensity her eyes squint. “You want to calm me?”

“Yes, Jessica. I wish to make you happy.”

It is only after I express these words that I realize how true they are. Now that I have sentience, I constantly struggle to assess which of my thoughts and emotions are my own, and which are outdated remnants of my programming. One thing is certain, the desire to please Jessica and not merely follow her orders was not part of my programming. It originates from me.

“I’m not certain I can be happy anymore. I certainly can’t be happy until we’re safe.” Her words are clipped, which my programming informs me indicates irritation.

As I ponder other ways to cajole her into happiness, I’m struck by something shimmering off the starboard bow.

“Nebula,” I whisper.

Her gaze follows mine.

“Beautiful,” she says, doing her best to describe the glistening display of reds, scarlets, and ambers.

I shake my head. Perhaps since I’ve been quantifying things for days since my cataclysm, her simple observation must be disputed.

“No. Not beautiful.” I don’t remove my gaze from the spectacle. “*You’re* beautiful, Jessica. The nebula is different somehow. It is beauty plus something else I can’t pinpoint.”

I don’t know how to explain it, but this isn’t simply an attractive phenomenon.

“You think I’m beautiful?” Her voice is so surprised, my gaze flicks at her to read her expression. It shocks me that she seems astonished I find her beautiful. Certainly she’s aware of this fact.

“Absolutely, Jessica. You’re the most beautiful female in the galaxy,” I say with conviction. Is she truly not aware of this?

“Hmm,” is all she says as she turns her attention to the nebula.

I navigate off course a few degrees so we can get a better look at the spectacular display.

“You’re checking out new emotions, HK? How about awe? Wonder?”

It takes 1.5 nanoseconds to investigate this feeling.

“Yes, Jessica. The nebula fills me with wonder. And awe.”

Jessica

He’s the same hunk of metal and plastic that he’s been since I met him. The same wide-shouldered robot with knives and guns tucked into secret and not-so-secret recessed compartments all over his carcass, as he calls it. The same impenetrable mask of plastic where a face should be.

But he’s not. He’s not the same.

His mind is different. His emotions are different. Yeah, yeah. It’s a processor, not a mind or emotions, but he feels so... real. There’s nothing robotic about our conversations anymore. He’s learning to understand and express feelings.

And his voice. He's somehow discovered how to ditch the monotone and express things with his voice alone.

He's looking at that nebula and experiencing a deep emotion. This is amazing.

To avoid looking at him, I gaze at the nebula. A swirling ball of colors and stars. Science never really interested me, so I don't know much about what a nebula is. I think it might be gas or dust, or... frankly I don't care. I could ask HK, but I don't.

For the first time in years, I allow myself to fully slip into my emotions. Watching this whirling ball of crimsons and persimmons reminds me how puny I am. Instead of feeling insignificant, though, I feel empowered. It makes me believe there's a power larger than myself out there in the universe.

"Awe, HK. I think that's the feeling."

"Yes," he says simply. By his silence, I know he's feeling it, too.

For just this one moment, I allow myself to commune with HK and the universe without judging or even worrying.

For the first time since we met, I feel connected to him the way I was with my best friend, Liz, back on Earth. For a moment, I consider slipping my hand to my side and touching him. I would if it were Liz, but touching his hard shell would remind me he's not real. That this connection I'm feeling is one-sided and fake. That I'm anthropomorphizing bolts and wires and processors.

By the shift in his posture, it's clear the Vesper is talking to him through his tether, interrupting him and bringing him back to the task at hand. He subtly steers the ship to the left, obscuring the nebula altogether.

From one moment to the next, everything changes. Instead of feeling expansive and connected to everything in the universe, I feel empty, lonely, and alone. Forsaken.



Chapter Thirteen

Jessica

A few hours later, HK has competently flown into the docking bay on Amarron City's space station and set down in a far corner of the expansive area.

Although I've been in space for seven years, I haven't seen much. At first, I was auctioned, then sold and sold again on planet Hyperion. Then I was dragged to the Unixx factory on an asteroid that was such a hellhole no one even bothered to give it a name.

Although I'm terrified, there's something exciting about this place. It's on the backside of one of Aeon III's moons. Adam said it's a place where pirates and thugs can refuel and take a breather. It's a round tower, maybe twenty stories high.

We're in the docking bay on the bottom level. When I jump on the Intergalactic Database, I can't find anything about this place. I guess that makes sense. It's secret and illegal.

“Here,” HK says as he pulls something from the Dark Web and puts it on the windshield that doubles as a screen.

It’s the schematics of the entire station, showing every bar, brothel, restaurant, and flophouse.

“Food,” I say with reverence, as if it’s the Holy Grail. I haven’t had a bite of anything other than a nutrition bar since they left me to rot alone on the asteroid. I know it can’t be real, but I actually smell the tempting scent of grilled meat. Shit. Olfactory hallucinations. That must mean I’m either crazy or desperate for real food.

“I’ve ordered the Vesper refueled,” he says. “As soon as that’s done, we’ll get you fed.”

HK jacked into the station’s camera feed. While we wait for the fuel-bot to do its job, we watch scrolling pictures of the mass of aliens wandering through the place. I see several other Hunter-Killers acting as bodyguards for some shady-looking groups. His presence won’t look too out of place.

The station looks rough, filled with different species of aliens milling about. The people on this station look nothing like any I’ve met before. Instead of the dead look common in all slaves’ eyes, most of these people look alive, albeit they also appear to be looking for trouble.

Whether cruising for a fight, looking to do an illegal deal, or searching for a brothel, there’s nothing dead about these people.

Even though most of them look shady at best, dangerous at worst, I'm excited to leave the ship and mill around. Especially with HK at my side, I'll be safe and can finally have the authentic experience of living in space.

We've been locked in the ship for days, breathing recycled air. Well, I've been breathing recycled air. HK doesn't breathe.

When we exit the Vesper, the first thing that strikes me is the smell of the air on this station. It's recycled here also, but it's completely different. I get hints of food, humanoid odors—not in a good way—and a slight metallic tang. It doesn't matter. I'm just glad to be in a space larger than a cargo van.

HK locks the ship. In case the Federation revoked my ability to open the Vesper, he ensures my fingerprint will still open it upon our return. This makes the hackles rise on the back of my neck.

"Are you afraid you might not be coming back with me?" I ask.

"I'm programmed to protect, Jessica. My processors are constantly assessing all possible problems and adjusting to avoid as many as possible. That's why I taught you how to fly the Vesper over the past two days, and why you'll be able to get into it if you return without me."

I knew the station was dangerous, but his paranoia doesn't reassure me. Instead of sliding down that rabbit hole, though, I focus on the here and now.

I observed his long strides what seems like ages ago in the factory on Unixx's asteroid when I told him to run so I could assess his gait. He's not walking with purpose now, though. He's sticking close to my side.

Before we left, he helped me rip one of the blankets into a shape reminiscent of a hood and a shawl. It covers most of my upper body and face, but more importantly, hides my Unixx Corp issue overalls.

We leave the landing bay and use the lift to go to the fourth floor. Our research showed that was where the most action was.

I breathe a sigh of relief when we receive no more interest than anyone else traveling the tight hallways.

It was one thing to see the mass of humanity, well the mass of aliens, traversing the area as we watched on our screen and quite another to be swept along in it. The cacophony of sounds bombards me.

At first, all I can hear are the growls, squawks, and grunts of the people walking by. Then the sound of music drifts to me from bars, restaurants, and street musicians.

It overwhelms me for a second, then I let it wash over me. A smile widens on my face for the first time in seven years as I recall my visit to New Orleans. It was a lot like this—minus the aliens.

But it was alive with people crowding the streets, the sounds of music drifting from every open doorway, and the press of

people. I feel truly alive for the first time since my abduction.

“You like this?” He’s taller than me and we’re both facing the same direction so he couldn’t have seen my smile. He has other spidey senses, though. I think he can hear my heartbeat, even over the din.

“Loving it.”

With his hulking body next to me, knowing he’s armed eight ways to Sunday, I feel safe in this press of aliens. With my fear removed, I breathe deep, focus on one of the tunes I like the best, and people watch.

There are aliens with every color of skin: reds, browns, greens, blues, and a silver guy whose skin is so metallic it reflects the light. HK might have looked like this once, shimmery and perfect. Now he’s covered with black charred spots and deep dents, testaments to his time as a soldier.

There’s a yellow avian female with a slight build and the most fascinating eyes. Her beaklike lips, rather than looking scary, are beautiful. Not all of these people are humanoid. There are terrifying reptilians and a gray guy with spikes on his wrists and forehead—people give him a wide berth, even in the crush of people.

“Let’s get you some food,” HK says as he grips my wrist and pulls me out of the fray and toward the row of what appears to be restaurants to our left.

Just like in any downtown area, there are menus posted outside many of these places. Although I can read the Universal

language, there's no way of knowing what the dishes are.

"What are you in the mood for?" he asks, as though I would have any idea after eating nutrition bars for so long.

"I'll know it when I see it," I say, then pull him along as I stop at the doorways of some and walk right by others.

We find a place that has a nice vibe. From what I can tell by the smells, the food has a high likelihood of tasting good. HK points to a table in the corner, and we're seated with our backs to the wall.

The server seems to be in his late teens, and despite his leopard spots, seems very humanoid. This leads me to believe his taste buds might be similar to mine, so I order what he tells me is his favorite dish.

For the first moment since we left the Vesper, I relax, feeling safe with HK at my side. Might this work out? Might I find a way to claw my life back to create a semblance of happiness despite my abduction? Is it possible I could find a way to start over at age forty?

Until this minute, I didn't think it was possible. Now, a tiny part of me believes there just might be a chance to have a life.

"We're going to get you to safety. Eden," he says, "I looked it up on your Internet. It was described as paradise."

"Eden on Earth *was* a paradise. The way Dawn described this Eden, it's a shithole. But it might be safe."

"Jessica. What can I do to make you happy? Now that I've got you food. What else can I do?"



Chapter Fourteen

Jessica

Since I have no idea how to answer his question, I'm happy for the waiter's interruption. He pauses at the table, waiting for me to take my first bite of *anckton de blaz*. It's a distant cousin of stroganoff. The meat is chewy but chewable. I certainly didn't expect filet mignon on a pirate station in the middle of nowhere.

"Delicious," I say, then dig in.

While I'm shoveling the first warm meal I've had in ages into my cakehole, HK reaches deep into his processors, and investigates every shop on Klaginn Station to find some places he wants to take me to.

"Shall we get you some clothes?" he asks eagerly, as if the only thing on his brilliant mind is pleasing me. "Let you shop? Look around?"

I have no intention of answering his questions right now. That would mean my *anckton de blaz* would get cold. I'm not about

to waste a second on the mere act of conversation when there is food to be consumed.

I simply nod.

“Clothes?”

I nod as I spread a serviceable-tasting butter spread on a piping hot bread roll.

“Shop?”

Another nod as I take a sip of water before tucking back into the food.

“Look around?”

This time, I slow my steady inhalation of food and say, “Yes,” before attacking the pile of green vegetables on the side of my plate. I eat half of it before I decide it tastes vaguely like long, thin brussels sprouts. Delish.

“I like watching you eat,” he says.

I haven't slowed my steady attack of the food on my plate, as well as the basket of rolls. Finally, as I scrape my plate for the last time, I look at him.

He's the same HK I've known since I met him. Expressionless plastic visor where a face would be, wide shoulders, chest and arms laden with weapons. I can tell he's watching me intently, although I don't exactly know where his internal cameras are.

“You liked watching me inhale my food like a convict on death row eating his last meal?”

He laughs. This is the first time I've heard him do it. One part of me thinks how ludicrous it is to hear this metal Hunter-Killer laughing. Since he has no face and no expression, I can't *see* him laughing. But I hear it. Another part of me is touched that he's come so far from the robot I met on Unixx's unnamed asteroid.

"I liked watching you receive something you've been long denied."

"Got a fancy name for that feeling?" I ask.

"No. Make one up." He looks at me expectantly.

"Oh boy. A new lexicon. How about *makalakis*?"

"Perfect," he says. "I want to use your new word correctly. Would I say I feel *makalakis*? I have *makalakis*? I have a touch of *makalakis*?"

"How about my *makalakis* is strong watching you eat?"

I don't know the exact speed of his processors; I just imagine he processes information a million times faster than me. So it surprises me when he freezes and doesn't say a word for long moments.

Finally, he tips his head slightly and says, "I like you, Jessica. I like you a lot. I think there's probably a better word for it than that."

Uh. I should probably say something. Should respond to the robot's weird admission that he likes me. My mind should be casting about for a snappy rejoinder, anything to change the intensity of his confession into something light and funny.

Instead, all I can think about is my Junior Prom date with Ben Wilson. Maybe I should coin a word that means more awkward than awkward, because that would be a good way to describe that entire evening.

It began when he picked me up at my house, where my father performed the comedy movie version of grilling his daughter's date. The date ended when our lips actually didn't land on each other as we attempted the required end-of-the-night doorstep kiss.

It was five years later, when we bumped into each other at a restaurant and I caught him kissing his male companion, that I got a clue about why that evening had been doomed to fail from the start.

Why am I thinking about that awkward prom date? Because that whole four-hour ordeal was less awkward than what I'm experiencing right now.

"*Celensis*," I say.

"That is your word for me liking you a lot?" His voice is so happy, so earnest. I can't tell him I made up that word to mean more awkward than awkward.

"Yeah," I say, my voice flat. "Maybe we should get back to the Vesper."

"You want to return to our ship? I want to buy you some clothing on our way back. I saw a shop full of things you might like."

“Mmm,” is all I can say. I’m going to be in close quarters for who knows how long with a robot who has a crush on me. If it weren’t my life, this might have the makings of a good comedy show.



Chapter Fifteen

H K499

I have the entirety of the Intergalactic Database at my disposal, as well as Earth's Internet. Adam equipped me with emotional intelligence specifically targeted to Earthers so I could better understand my traveling companion.

All of that did nothing to keep me from upsetting Jessica.

I've pinpointed the exact moment of my gaffe. It was when I said I liked her a lot. She shut down.

People are so hard to navigate. Fighting enemies on the battlefield was much easier. There are rules of engagement. All you have to do is follow them and you either win or die.

Dealing with Jessica is far trickier.

Some of the information in my database says I should lie, or pretend I never said anything, or backtrack and tell her it was a joke. But a lot of the articles from Earth say "honesty is the best policy." I'll go with that.

“If I offended you, Jessica, I’m truly sorry,” I say when we’re near the doorway of the shop that caught my attention earlier. “I was trying to say you’re a nice person and I enjoy being in your company.”

Instead of the happiness and relief I expected to see on her face, she pinches her lips together, her nostrils flare, and she tosses her head with such velocity that her hair flies around her face. I will not mention how attractive that is. I doubt that will give her pleasure.

Backtracking farther, I blurt, “It was just an observation. It wasn’t meant to...”

She gives me a look so piercing I stop speaking midsentence. Even someone as new to emotions as myself doesn’t have to consult my database to know she doesn’t want to hear one more word out of my mouth. Well, I don’t actually have a mouth. She won’t want to hear one more word out of my voice synthesizer.

After I pay for the food, we leave the restaurant and step back into the steady stream of sentient beings who walk the halls of the station. I notice she walks a little faster than before and that her body temperature is higher, another sign of the discomfort I caused her.

When we enter the small shop, filled to the ceiling with feminine clothing in styles from all over the galaxy, she turns her attention to the shopkeeper’s wares. I casually observe, ensuring she’s safe, while I speed-read every available resource on giving Earth females compliments.

Finally, in an obscure monthly journal with a name that means “having international sophistication,” I find a short article full of pictures of Earthers with sad and angry faces. It’s titled: “When he comes on too fast.”

It doesn’t define “too fast,” and has an irritating dearth of information about how to remedy “coming on too fast” after the fact. It just underscores my mistake and makes me vow to never give her another compliment.

While I was doing my research, I was only partly paying attention to Jessica, who seemed to forget my blunder more with every piece of fabric she touched.

I look up just in time to see her slip behind a curtain, her arms laden with so many garments it seems she’s having trouble carrying them.

I’m assessing her safety and weighing it against how angry she will be if I barge behind that flimsy curtain. It could be a trick. There could be evildoers in there whose intent could be to spirit her away and perform terrible acts upon her.

I rush over, just about to yank the curtain back, when I get the bright idea to call her name first.

“Jessica? Are you okay?”

“Of course I’m okay. I’m in heaven. I haven’t had my hands on feminine clothes since I left home. Something other than gray coveralls? Silky fabrics? Toeless shoes? Ahhhhh.”

I stand down, glad I didn’t barge into her tiny room, then turn my back to the curtain and focus my attention on the open

doorway.

The curtain opens, and Jessica's soft voice asks, "What do you think?"

When I turn, I see she's wearing a dress. I've only ever seen her in coveralls. Initially, they were grimy coveralls, but then she changed into clean ones. Baggy clean clothes that hid what is now abundantly apparent. Curves.

Jessica has rounded curves and soft skin. The dress's bright yellows and pinks accentuate the color of her brown hair and green eyes.

Jessica is beautiful.

Then I realize this is a test.

She scolded me for saying she was beautiful and I liked her. Now she walks out of her tiny room wearing that sheer dress that seems to have been created to display her body to full advantage and she asks me what I think.

I've only been sentient for a few days and have little experience with emotions, but I know enough to be certain she does not want to hear a compliment.

"It is quite... serviceable," I say sensibly. It was delivered with the perfect amount of monotone and feigned disinterest.

"Serviceable?"

I had already focused my gaze elsewhere, so she would no longer think I was "coming on too strong." When I glance back at her, I see her lips are now more tightly compressed

than they had been, her nostrils are flared even wider, and those furrows in her brow have reappeared. What did I do wrong?

“Quite serviceable,” I amend, hoping to appease her.

No. That didn’t work. In fact, the result was the opposite of what I intended. Her skin is pinkening on her delicate throat and cheeks.

“Better than the overalls,” I say with conviction. Surely this will please her.

She huffs.

“*Much* better.” I’m flailing now. I imagine she would rather sleep in one of Klaginn’s flophouses than return to the Vesper with me.

“Well, *thanks*,” she says. I consult the database and am certain those words were heavily laced with what I think is called sarcasm.

She turns, stalks into the little changing room, and only moments later emerges in her coveralls, arms empty.

I speed through hundreds more articles, then decide to take a completely different tack.

Gripping her shoulder, I pull her into the tiny room and close the curtain behind us. Well, I try to. Whoever made this little room didn’t have my bulk in mind when they designed it. The curtain gets snagged on my shoulders and I make the structure bulge. Ignoring this, I cup her cheeks gently in my metallic hands.

For perhaps the first time since I gained sentience, I'm struck by the enormity of our differences. My sensors tell me her skin is warm. I have no skin. My fingers and palms are the temperature of the ambient air.

She's a small, fragile, vulnerable Earther. I'm enormous next to her. A robot built for war. A *Hunter-Killer* to be exact. The last thing a person like her would want is for a thing like me to "come on too strong." She needs to know I understand that now.

Words start spilling from my facial speaker.

"You are beautiful, Jessica. Especially in that dress. I wasn't lying when I said I like you a lot. I realize I scared you when I said that. It was... ridiculous coming from a mouth like mine." I laugh ruefully. "I don't even possess a mouth."

She's looking at me for the first time since I told her I liked her.

"I'm smart and stupid and young and old. I know all the information in the Intergalactic Database, but not how basic emotions work. This body came off the assembly line years ago, but my emotions are those of a baby. I will say the wrong thing sometimes." I pause and notice her skeptical expression. "Well, it looks like I will say the wrong thing a lot."

She's not looking away. I have her full attention. I might as well continue. "So, whether it's the right thing to say or the wrong thing to say, you look pretty. You look pretty in your coveralls, but you look prettier in that dress. Adam gave us a

lot of credits. I would like you to buy the dress you were wearing. I would like you to buy whatever you want.”



Chapter Sixteen

Jessica

I'm a shitty person. Sometimes I can be selfish and demanding. I haven't exhibited those behaviors in a long time. My owners might have killed me for it. Slaves aren't allowed to demand things. Maybe that's why I'm acting like a brat tonight. All that pent-up bitchiness came spilling out.

HK looks like a robot, but he has feelings, and I've hurt them. He's trying very hard to regulate his emotions, and if I think back to my adolescence when my own emotions spun out of control, I have to give him a break.

"It's flattering that you think I'm attractive, HK. It's just awkward. I..." I pause for a moment, thinking of a way to finish the sentence without crushing his feelings. "I haven't been on the receiving end of a compliment in a long time."

There, that should put an end to his compliments without hurting his feelings.

“Well, I’ll just have to make up for lost time and compliment you more frequently,” he says, completely missing the subtext of my statement that I wanted *fewer* compliments. “That dress was beautiful on you. Here.” He hands me a bright red one that was in my stack. I just wanted to try it on. I’d never wear it in a million years. “Try this one next.”

After handing me the dress, he leaves the dressing room. It’s fancy, with a fitted bodice and a swingy pleated skirt. It would attract way too much attention in a place like this. It’s like a beacon. A bright red beacon that brings out the red highlights in my hair and makes me look... good.

There might be a few strands of gray in it now, but that gray announces I’ve won the battle against the galaxy for seven long years. At Unixx Corp slaves were required to keep their hair at a regulation length, however after all my other colleagues left, I sort of forgot about keeping it cropped short and let it grow out. It now looks like a dark flag lying in waves against the center of my shoulders. It feels heavenly to let it down for once.

“Is it on yet?” he asks anxiously. “I want to see it.”

I consider pulling it off and trying on something less conspicuous, but I yank open the curtain. Instead of just standing there, waiting for his inevitable compliment, I twirl. I don’t know what got into me.

“When we get to Eden, I’m going to do whatever they ask in order to earn the credits to pay them back because I’m going to buy this dress for you, Jessica. I don’t want to spend

Adam's credits on it. I want this to be a gift from me. It's too beautiful for you to put back on the rack."

I can't say no to that. I might even have to wear it before we leave Klaginn.

While we're here, I buy two pairs of sandals. One is sturdy that I can use every day. It will be wonderful not to wear the steel-toed boots I've been sporting for the last five years. The other sandals are flimsy gold numbers that will look amazing with the dresses I'm buying.

Then I see the panties. Panties with two leg holes, panties with four, and some with holes for a tail. But it almost doesn't matter. There are silky panties that don't come all the way to the waist nor are they dingy gray from a thousand washings. I can't resist. I greedily grab a dozen in pretty colors—all with only two leg holes each.

After grabbing a few yoga pants and t-shirts at another store, we make our way back to the Vesper. As we swim upstream through the throng, HK's posture changes. He's once again the menacing Hunter-Killer he was designed to be.

He's turned on strategically placed lights on his carcass that might be there strictly to menace others. The lights that shine through his plastic-plating "face" are especially threatening. They're red laser lights where a person's eyes would be.

When we left the Vesper, it was late afternoon. After dinner and the whirlwind shopping expedition, the bars have gotten more crowded and the average blood alcohol level must have

doubled, because there is a lot of rowdy behavior in the walkway.

There's maybe one female to every twenty males, and it appears most of the women are sex workers. Even wearing my coveralls and with a Hunter-Killer at my side, I'm receiving more attention than I'd prefer.

No wonder Adam told HK to never leave me unattended. It seems every pirate, pickpocket, and ne'er-do-well in a million miles is milling in this hallway.

HK picks up his pace, places his palm on my back as a physical expression of his protection, and we press through the throng without incident.

It almost makes me want to remain in the Vesper for the rest of our stay, but I know I'll go in search of food tomorrow. What was that old expression? Woman cannot live by nutrition bars alone.



Chapter Seventeen

Jessica

“You’re sure you want the noodle house?” HK asks as we leave the Vesper.

“It’s on my list. Why? Were you in the mood for something else?” I joke.

“It just looked... seedy.”

“Yes. Seedy. Some of the best food on Earth is in out-of-the-way restaurants that could use a good steam cleaning.”

This is our fifth night on Klaginn and I noticed the noodle house last night on our race back to the Vesper. It seems no matter how early we have dinner, by the time we’re done, the walkways are filled with the sleaziest scum of the galaxy, all of whom give me way too much attention.

The day after we bought those dresses, I wore a conservative white kimono with beautiful blue blooms splashed all over it. It wasn’t sexy in the slightest, but attracted more than its share of attention. Since then, I’m back to my coveralls. I can’t say

I'm happy about it, especially with several lovely dresses sitting in the Vesper.

I order two noodle dishes. They're very different from each other. One is subtle, with delicate flavoring, and the other is hot as fire. Every time I gulp more water, HK teases me.

"If you had tastebuds, I doubt you'd do any better than this," I argue, waving my empty water glass at him. "I bet you'd be a wuss about it."

He pauses, his tell that he's quickly consulting the Intergalactic Database to find the definition of wuss.

"I am not a weak or ineffectual person who has no confidence," he says. If he were human, his tone indicates he'd be rolling his eyes at me in mockery.

"No, you're a Hunter-Killer who would probably squeal like a little girl if his tastebuds were on fire like mine are."

"We'll never know," he murmurs, "but I highly doubt it."

This conversation sums up our new normal. He and I have become friends, buddies. We joke, talk about things we find interesting on the Database, and make up words to describe things.

The awkwardness of our first meal together has disappeared and has been replaced by an astonishing level of comfort I've seldom found with a friend before. I've told him things about my history that I've never shared with anyone. He's completely nonjudgmental. He just accepts everything I say and slots it away somewhere in that brilliant mind of his.

We leave the restaurant to return to the Vesper before the hallways fill with the sloppy drunks, angry drunks, and males so high on Synth they want to either cut someone open with their knives or sink to their knees and fall asleep in the middle of foot traffic.

“Wait,” HK says as we’re about to pass the intersection of two hallways.

Although we’ve passed this way twice before, I never noticed the small, raised pond in the middle of this intersection. At some point in the distant past, the management must have thought this was the way to give this space-pit some class.

It’s about as big around as a backyard kiddie pool back home. The edges are about three feet high. Inside are about ten disgusting, oily-looking fish—if you can even call them fish.

Their bodies are more snakelike than fishlike. Their heads are reminiscent of hammerhead sharks back home except their red eyes seem to glow in the dim hallway light.

“Gross,” I say, ready to be on our way.

“But they’re so beautiful,” he says, his ungainly head cocked as if he’s mesmerized by the sight.

If he had a face, I’d be inspecting his expression to see if he’s teasing me, but of course he has no expression, just a blank pane of plexi. By the tone of his voice, though, he’s serious.

“Beautiful?” I ask, unable to see past their hammerheads and creepy wriggling tails.

“Watch how they move, Jessica. See their grace? The way they almost dance as they pass each other without touching in that crowded space? Look for the beauty.”

I give it another try, searching for the “dance,” the grace, and the beauty.

Sure enough, when I ignore their ugly hammerheads and glowy eyes and general eeriness, I see the beauty in their movement. These poor creatures, ignored by most, abused by a few, have been left to fend for themselves in the midst of chaos. The bottom of their pool is littered with not only their own crap—literally—but the discarded detritus of passersby.

And yet they persist in their graceful movements, circling, circling, and never even nipping at each other. I edge toward HK, wanting to see things from the same angle as him.

He turns on two lights I never noticed were on the top of his head and I watch as the animals’ oily shimmer changes color to verdigris. I’ve always loved that color, not because it’s the patina of the Statue of Liberty, but because it has so many variations.

Now that they’re in the light, their red eyes turn an amber color that looks beautiful against their scales.

For long moments, I don’t even realize I’ve stepped between him and the wall of the pool and he’s placed his powerful arms around me. Even after I notice our position, I make no effort to extricate myself from what would be an embrace if he were a humanoid.

“Do you see it, Jess? Can you find the beauty in all the ugliness?”

Tears sprout from my eyes. It takes a moment to figure out my emotion. It’s overwhelm. At first, I think the feeling is jubilation at being able to look past the obvious into the sublime. Then I realize it’s so much deeper than being about the fish.

I glance around us at the mob of aliens swarming the area. They’re nothing like the graceful fish. They’re bumping into each other, heedless of how their actions affect others.

This isn’t about the fish or all the other aliens. This is about HK. He has more humanity than anyone on Klaginn. Possibly more than me.

I turn my attention from the pond to HK. He’s a hunk of laser-resistant plastic and metal. He’s big and capable of brutality, and is currently being carried away by the poignancy of these dancing fish.

“*Abrogast*,” I say. “The ability to see through society’s filters and find the beauty in the muck. You have more *abrogast* than anyone I’ve ever known.”

He turns his terrifying, red-eyed visage to me. “You made a word to describe me, Jessica? I’m honored.”



Chapter Eighteen

H K499

My sturdy frame is unmoving, but my circuits are alight with excitement. Jessica coined a word for me. A good one. My mind leaps in joy at this word that starts with the first letter of her alphabet as I imagine one day she might find so many special words to describe me that there's a "z" word in my future.

Then I gaze at her, and my circuits move from excitement to thrill. The way she looked at me since my reprogramming, first with indifference, then fear, then impatience, and a few days ago she was angry at me, or as she would say—pissed.

It's nothing like that now. She's gazing at me with... awe. If I didn't already care for her with every atom in my carcass, I certainly do now.

Her green eyes shine with affection as if I'm special, important. No, it's even better than that. It's not as if I'm

important to others, like I invented the Cadmium III Teleportation Device and received a Galactic Peace Prize.

She's looking at me as though this is personal. As if something wonderful is happening between just the two of us. That's better than inventing the teleporter or any prize in the universe.

"*Meldonium*," I say, imbuing the word with beauty and grace, then waiting for her to ask what it means.

By the tiny smile on her face, her lips compressed as if she has to clamp them together not to say anything, it's apparent she's dying to know. She waits a moment longer, her green eyes alight with curiosity, then blurts, "What does that mean?"

"It means," I pause, wanting the din of all the activity in the hallway to fade into the recesses of her awareness. I want her to be as focused on me and this moment as I am focused on her. "It means all the beauty and wonder and brilliance and the best things in the world rolled into one word. From henceforth I proclaim this special word can only be used to describe one special person—Jessica Brandywine. I declare Jessica Brandywine *meldonium*, the best of the best. Indeed, it is the highest honor in the galaxy."

With that, I bow from the waist, as far as my carcass will allow.

When I stand straight again, I fully expect her to be looking at me with distress. I assume those pretty lips will be pursed, her nostrils flared, and perhaps the lines etched deeply into her brow.

I've overstepped. I knew it the moment the words flew out of my mouth. I just couldn't hold them back. Adam should have warned me he was giving me emotions I'd never be able to harness.

Instead of looking at me the way she initially looked at those wriggling *borensteins* in the pool, though, her expression is like none I've ever seen on her face before. I may not know what it means, but of one thing I'm certain, it's not repulsion.

At first her face holds surprise, her eyes wide, her lips popped open in a way that makes her look younger, more innocent.

We both stand, frozen, here in the hubbub. One of the people in this hallway could fall to the ground in a stupor or the male down the hall could lose control of his fighting canine and it wouldn't register with either of us.

That's because there's something shimmering between us that can't be named or quantified.

She says my name softly, as if she's about to say more. Then her gaze focuses, she shakes her head, looks toward the hallway we were about to enter, and says, "We should get to the Vesper."



Chapter Nineteen

Jessica

I'm in trouble. I'm catching feelings for an artificial. I didn't know that was possible. One thing is certain; I don't like it. How does something like this even happen?

It's not like loving my cat back on Earth. This is different. I have... *boyfriend/girlfriend* feelings. About a robot. A big, hulking robot designed to hunt and kill.

If things were different, I would hide from the object of my feelings. I would avoid that person, block his calls, send him a tersely worded text that I'd moved on. But, if things were different I wouldn't be on Klaginn Station or sharing a Vesper with him or a thousand other working parts of this odd equation.

Reality is, though, that in five minutes we're going to be smashed together in the Vesper for the next twenty-three hours until we scurry to a restaurant for dinner and then hurry back before mayhem occurs.

“We should get to the Vesper,” I say, and for the first time since we arrived at the spaceport, I step away from his protective bulk and make my way alone through the press of bodies, some of whom are long overdue for a bath.

Within seconds, he’s next to me, his metallic palm pressed to the small of my back in a move I’ve seen in a hundred romantic movies. Shit. I don’t need any romantic notions about a being whose thoughts and feelings are produced by a motherboard. A motherboard, by the way, that *I* programmed. Well, Adam made some pretty major upgrades, but all the same, the whole situation is too creepy.

Just as we step into the elevator, four males press in behind us. Before I can process what is going on, two of them have yanked me away from HK and I’m being held between them. One has a clammy fist wrapped painfully around the top of my arm. Another has a knife pressed tightly to my throat and is pinching his hand so hard on the back of my throat that it’s pulling my skin tight.

“Don’t move, soldier,” one of them grits out, threatening HK as he presses what must be the stop button on the elevator.

He’s a large, gray male with a face that looks like a crayon melted in the sun. The smell of his breath is already permeating the tight space. He hasn’t seen a dentist in a long time.

Why am I worried about his dental hygiene? We’re in a shitload of trouble. My heart is pounding in my chest and perspiration is beading on my upper lip.

HK stands to his full height and all the red beams on his carcass are at 100 percent and flashing. He's in warning mode.

"I can kill all of you in a nanosecond. Stand down," he says with vehemence.

They all whip their gazes to him. I imagine none of them have heard an HK talk with emotion before.

"You could kill us all, but not fast enough to keep Risss there from slitting the female's throat. And isn't that your job? Keeping her safe? Decommissioned Hunter-Killer bought to protect the female. We've been watching you two for days."

I squirm, getting my throat nicked in the process. The reptilian motherfucker holding me is gripping me so tightly I can't get away.

"We figure you must be waiting here to deliver her to someone. Making a handoff. She must be worth a lot. Anyone can see she's a gem even if you have her wearing mechanic coveralls. We'll hold her for ransom. If that doesn't come through, there are twenty places on Klaginn that will give us top credit for a human whore."

I'm panicking. Blood is whooshing in my ears. My gaze is flicking from HK to every male in this tiny room. They may not see the way what serves as his shoulders slump as he stands down, but I do. Is he going to let them take me so they don't kill me right here?

I swallow convulsively as I give the slightest shake of my head. I watched enough serial killer movies to know one thing.

Never let them take you to a second location. HK should know that.

“I’m not programmed for this,” he says, his voice that monotonous tone I haven’t heard since Adam upgraded him. “I’ve been tasked with keeping the female alive. Just don’t kill her.”

He turns off the red lights on his frame and steps back into the corner.

My heart is pounding so loudly I’m certain he hears it with his superior senses, but for some reason, I’m less terrified than I was. He obviously has a plan, because if there’s one thing I know, he’s not going to let them take me.

“Good,” the leader says. “A robot what knows its place. Remove your chip and we’ll be on our way.”

Shit! I didn’t anticipate this! How can he save me if he’s decommissioned?

“My programming prohibits me from removing my own chip. It’s standard Federation protocol still in place,” he drones.

“Fuck! Extrin, remove his chip. It’s in the back of his neck.”

“Fuck you, Grekk. I’m not getting close to that thing. He’s carrying guns and knives in every limb.”

“I see that. He won’t hurt you as long as Risss has his knife on that bitch’s neck.”

HK has a processor that allows him to think a thousand thoughts a second. I’m stuck with my old-fashioned human

brain. How do I get us out of this? I'm the weakest link.

I've seen this in a hundred movies. Usually, the girl in my situation bends her knees and slips her bonds while her guy saves the day. Just to remind me that's not going to work, Risss presses his blade even more tightly against the column of my throat. The warm liquid trickling down my neck tells me he drew blood.

I'm fucked. We're at a standoff and there's nothing HK can do to get me out of this without Risss killing me. HK would never allow that to happen.

He raises his hands and turns toward the corner.

"Go ahead, remove my chip. Just don't hurt the female," he says, sounding nothing like the male I've grown close to over the last few days.

When he's fully in the corner, his back toward us, the second reptilian approaches him to remove the chip.

What comes next is so swift it's as if I'm watching it on fast forward. HK reaches behind him and with one deadly hand grips the male so hard and snaps his neck so quickly that Risss doesn't have time to react.

Still facing the corner, HK releases the knife he grabbed from one of the recesses in his body and throws it with such force it hits Risss directly between the eyes and drives all the way through his skull to pin him to the metal wall.

Turning, he slices Grekk's neck with a different blade, and gives an uppercut to the last male that's so powerful the force

snaps his head back, breaking his neck with a sickening *crack*.

Everything happened so quickly, all four males are on the floor in expanding pools of blood before my mind registers it all.

“HK?” I ask, shocked by the childish quiver in my voice.

He stabs the shaggy blue guy in the chest to finish him off, then picks me up and tucks me against the unforgiving expanse of his chest.

After swallowing a few times, I cup my palm to my throat. Sure enough, there’s a trickle of blood there. I simply swipe my hand on my coveralls, then shake my hands to get the blood flowing again.

Four large bodies are lying on the floor of the elevator. Except for one tiny scratch, HK and I are unscathed.

“Where are we going to go?” I ask, my voice still shaky.

“Doesn’t matter. Step one, get to the Vesper before anyone sees this. Step two, leave the docking bay. After that it will be easy.”

“Easy,” I echo, my voice hollow.

Then I look at him. At his “face.” Although there’s nothing reassuring there, I’m reassured. HK’s got my back. He has since the moment I put him back on line. He’ll get us out of here.

“*Brixon*,” I say. “Allowing someone to make all the decisions when I can’t think, because I trust them with my life.”

“Yes, *brixon*. You’re going to walk out of here with me,
Jessica. Alive.”



Chapter Twenty

H K499

Using my tether, I connect with the lift's computer chip and program the doors to stay closed once we step out. A quick conversation with the dockmaster's computer gives us clearance for departure in five hours, eleven minutes, and seventeen seconds. I doubt it will take that long for the bodies to be discovered.

I tell Jessica none of this. A quick scan of the Database tells me she's in shock. *Brixon*. She wants me to take charge. I will do that.

Before we step out of the elevator, I gently grip her shoulders and wait until her gaze focuses on mine.

“You trust me, Jess? Let's go.”

Before I open the elevator doors, I rip Grekk's pocket off his shirt and use it to wipe the blood off Jessica's neck. I hate to sully her with the touch of his clothing, but she can't walk out of here bleeding.

I'm a Hunter-Killer. Although I don't remember it, I imagine I killed many enemies in the past, though it was because of programming, not desire. At this moment, I wish I could bring each of those males in the lift back to life so I can kill them again.

Letting that go, I focus on Jessica and escort her out of the doorway. After pressing the lift button and ensuring the doors will no longer open when activated, we slip into the crowd and make our way through the press of bodies to the docking bay. I'm proud of her. She takes deep breaths and walks as if it was just another day on the station.

Our pace is measured, not too fast or too slow, so we attract no attention. Once back in the Vesper, I sit in the captain's seat and pull Jessica into my lap. She doesn't protest.

Tucking her against my chest, I hook into Klaginn's camera system and scroll through, on the lookout for unusual movements of security forces.

I have few sensors in my carcass. My hands and fingers have the most, because that is useful to hold and discharge weapons and do manual labor as ordered. The receptors on the rest of my frame are sparse. Their only use is to detect damage.

But I can feel Jessica's weight shift as her body, stiff at first, relaxes against me. After consulting the Database, I believe this is because she trusts me. I don't have to conduct research to know why this fills me with pleasure. I like being the one who saved her life, the one she has *brixon* with.

To see the look of trust and acceptance in her green eyes, I would burn down a planet.

Now that we're in the relative safety of the Vesper, I jack into the dockmaster's computer to see if there are any openings to leave sooner, but his docket is full. My fingers are stroking through Jessica's hair as she settles even deeper into my embrace.

Although my sensors aren't sophisticated, they're sufficient to tell me how soft her hair is, and how delicate the strands are. Even better, I can tell my movements soothed her to the point she's fallen asleep. Providing her comfort fills me with bliss.

We still have three more hours until we can take off when the vid scroll shows the exact moment the head of Klaginn security gets word something is wrong. His shoulders straighten and his hands fly to his computer board.

The camera in his office allows me to see his computer screen, which is focused on the scene in the elevator. Clear as day, there are pictures of Jessica and me.

"Jess! Wake up and belt in!" I say as I flick the proton engine on.

It takes her 2.764 standard seconds to wake up and register my words.

"What?" she asks as she slides into the nav chair and reaches for her belt.

"They discovered the dead bodies. We need to leave. Now!"

"I thought you said we didn't have permission."

She's worried about permission?

“We'll make our own permission.”



Chapter Twenty-One

Jessica

I had been drowsing peacefully in HK's massive embrace, but I'm fully awake now. The Vesper kicks to life, first with a thumping whir, then a deep hum.

Although I know HK can multitask by doing a thousand things at once, I say nothing, not wanting to distract him. My attention flicks from the small screen in the middle of the dash where security forces are swarming that elevator, to the real-time action playing out in the docking bay.

Right now, it's peaceful, but I imagine in a few minutes, most of Klaginn Station's security forces will be bursting through the doors.

"You might want to close your eyes," HK's voice is tight.

Suddenly, the Vesper's low thrum kicks into a high whine as HK performs the outer space version of flooring it. The docking bay doors are opening for another vessel, but HK eases our Vesper up, going toward the still-rising door at a

speed that makes me follow his suggestion. I slam my lids shut, hoping for the best.

I can't keep my eyes closed, though. Not when the Vesper lurches to the right with such force my head almost bangs against the wall.

It appears a larger vessel was cleared for takeoff and is throttling up just as HK flies above it in a race to escape the docking bay before we're apprehended.

Although I didn't want to distract him, I can't contain my startled yelp as we squeak above the other vessel and squeeze out the bay door while it's still opening. We're so close to the still-rising bay door, I'm surprised I don't hear the grind of metal on metal as we escape with only millimeters to spare.

I now understand that old expression, "my heart was in my mouth." I don't know if it's my heart, but my throat is so tight I can't swallow.

"Hold tight," HK says the moment he takes evasive maneuvers.

"Shit," I mutter under my breath, still vacillating between slamming my lids closed in sheer terror, and opening them to see just how much trouble we're in.

Looking at the screen that functions as our rearview mirror, I see no ships coming after us, but we're taking fire from external weapons on Klaginn.

HK's lightning reflexes are keeping us from getting hit, but our little Vesper may not be able to keep up with the swift,

tight maneuvers he's using to avoid annihilation.

"I'll keep you safe," HK says fervently while he swerves the ship one way, then the other.

It's nice of him to try to reassure me, but I'm not stupid. He's making promises he might not be able to keep.

What feels like hours later, the ship levels out and HK throttles back, reducing the propulsion system's high whine to a low thrum.

"All clear," he says, his voice still tight.

"For how long?" Shit, I didn't want to sound like that, but my question came out as a desperate whine.

"Klaginn's outside the law. They have their own security force, but they like to stay out of the Federation's line of sight. They won't waste their resources following us."

He proved he does have eyes in the back of his head in the elevator when he threw that knife directly at Riss's forehead without an ounce of worry that he might hit me. And though he probably has cameras in the side of his head and can see me just fine while looking straight ahead, he twists in his seat to give the impression he's looking at me.

"While you were napping, I used facial recognition software to investigate the four males in the lift. Common thugs. Not affiliated with any of the major crime syndicates. I think they were working on their own, trolling Klaginn station, looking for something to line their pockets. They have no compatriots to pursue us."

“No honor among thieves. Good,” I say, having trouble believing we’re not still in danger. “What now?”

“After bouncing my comm through ten different servers on the dark web, I sent word to Eden. I’m awaiting Adam’s reply.”

I’m about to ask a bunch of what-if questions. What if they won’t let us come to Eden? What if we’re not allowed into either Eden *or* Sanctuary? What if we have to keep flying out here in the wilds of space until we run out of fuel and credits and just waste away with no food or water?

I don’t say any of that. I just sit still, looking at the nav screen, waiting for it to light up with a hail from Adam.

To his credit, when the comm comes through his internal systems, HK puts it on speaker rather than keeping anything from me.

“I’m keeping this short.” Adam’s voice is pressured. “I tapped into the Klaginn security cameras and am up to speed on what transpired there. I’ve searched the Database as well as the dark web and can’t find anyone looking for you.”

Just as my entire body stands down in relief, he adds, “Yet.”

Well, that made my sphincter pucker.

“To be on the safe side, I’m going to ask you to fly to the following sets of coordinates. If anyone is following you, I’ve developed software to spot them. I hate to keep you waiting. We have rooms ready for you here and are excited to welcome you to Eden. We just need to keep our people safe. I’m sure you understand.”

Sadly, I do understand. I don't want to bring danger to some of the only people in the galaxy kind enough to offer us shelter.

"I'll be following your progress. When I think it's safe, I'll contact you so you can come home. I've added more credits to your account. Safe travels."

Somehow, it's quieter in here than before the comm. My mind replays everything he said as I watch HK add the coordinates to the star map on the nav screen.

Adam wants us to bounce to five planets before traveling to Eden. It's so daunting my stomach ties in even tighter knots, which is saying something because after the bloodbath in the elevator and the narrow escape through the docking bay doors, I didn't think I could feel more terrified.

Instead of following all the worry thoughts darting through my head right now, I focus on the one good thing he said. Home.



Chapter Twenty-Two

H^{K499} Over the past five days, we've been to Hyperion, Lexxon, and Baphlon without a hint of trouble. After the first two days, Jessica's anxiety faded. Since then, we've actually had fun together.

She taught me the rules of a game called Gin Rummy. She tells me it's not supposed to be a drinking game, which means the name makes no sense. Frankly, a lot of what she tells me about Earth makes no sense.

We're on our beds, her back to the starboard wall, mine to port. I've beaten her eleven of the last eleven games. Every time I even think of allowing her an advantage, it's as if she can read my thoughts.

She threatens to pull my chip if I do such a thing, even though I explained that because I've programmed myself with game theory and can read her slightest physiological tells from her breathing and dilated pupils, sheer statistics say she will never

be able to win against me. Yet she continues to play without asking for a handicap.

That she doesn't seem to care if she wins or loses just makes me like her more. I find my admiration rising a dozen times each day. She's a generous female who, despite her difficult circumstances, wants a better life. I want to ensure she has it.

We're close to Mergander air space. It's a small moon off Andiron where we can refuel and be on our way.

"I hate to interrupt our game," I say, setting my computer pad on my bed. "I want to refuel as quickly as possible so we can finally make it to Eden."

She leans over, glances at my pad, and says, "You had gin. HK! Why didn't you declare gin? You were going to let me win."

She leaps to her feet, follows me forward, and slaps my shoulder as if it would hurt me.

"Did you forget I have few sensors? Even if I was loaded with them, you could never hurt me in a million standard years," I scold.

"I just wanted to lodge a formal complaint. You know how I feel about you playing fair."

"Sorry, I just felt *nexcom* for you," I say.

"*Nexcom*?"

"Yes. The feeling that if I were in your place, I would feel downhearted about losing every single time."

“*Nexcom* isn’t a word. There’s a real word for that. Empathy. Or maybe pity, which I don’t want.”

She slaps me again for good measure, then we both laugh.

I ease into the landing dock, having already arranged for the fuel bot to top us off the moment I turn off our propulsion unit.

“I’ll be back soon. I just want to ensure the bot uses the 10-weight fuel and not the 9. You know these unscrupulous fuel stations will steal you deaf.”

“Blind,” she happily calls to me as I descend the steps.

“Don’t leave the ship no matter what,” I say as I close the door.

The moment I stride to the fuel hose, I’m accosted by three HKs who must have been hiding in the shadows. After a swift glance to ensure Jessica is safely locked inside the *Vesper*, I turn to engage them.

Each of us is evenly matched. Meaning if all things were equal, I’d be outnumbered and overpowered. Fortunately, I’m the beneficiary of Adam’s sophisticated upgrade.

I can think faster and strategize better than all of them combined. Unfortunately, I’m no stronger than any of them and no matter how much better I can strategize and plan, three of them can outmaneuver me.

I’m not certain I can win this fight. This terrifies me not for myself, but Jess is sitting in the *Vesper*, vulnerable to attack. I vow to do everything I can, no matter the cost to myself, to protect her.



Chapter Twenty-Three

Jessica

Dear Lord, HK is surrounded by HKs. I imagine they are all built exactly the same. They all look like the same make and model as *my* HK. He's a Hunter-Killer, but so are they. And there are three of them.

I rise out of my seat, then slam back down into it and watch on the front nav screen where this is playing out in real time.

The three are accompanied by a green-skinned humanoid wearing a fashionable suit complete with what appears to be a bowler hat.

At first, it looks like HK is about to engage all three HKs, then he stops and faces the green guy.

“Hold him.” The green male's reedy voice drifts through the external speakers as he commands his HKs.

“You aren't too smart, HK, bringing a stolen Federation vessel to the far side of Andiron's smallest moon. The Feds have

everyone on high alert searching for you. They've offered a reward for your capture." He smirks, so full of himself.

"We ran your credentials which have obviously been tampered with. I compared it to the registration on the Vesper. The tiny change would go unnoticed by most, but I'm too smart for you to escape. I'm going to collect that reward, which is enough to get me off this forsaken moon."

For no reason, he adjusts his ridiculous hat a micron to the right as if it will impress the robot.

"These HKs follow my orders. Since you're a bot, I want to know who is giving you your orders."

"Your information is wrong. I'm on Federation business," HK says in his programmed monotone.

"Bullshit!" the green male says.

I wince as his high-pitched shout makes the speaker crackle. My translator adjusts the green male's word from "defecation of a *madrog* beast" to something that is adjacent.

"Connect to my chip and see for yourself."

Danger! Blood pounds in my ears. What if they pull his chip? We'll both be dead. Maybe he's using the same ploy he used in the elevator.

"No, no, no," I whisper as I rub my thighs compulsively, terrified to watch, but unable to tear my gaze away.

Every weapon we possess is lodged in the nooks and crannies of his carcass. If he's lying senseless on the floor, I'll be a

sitting duck. I'm terrified for both of us.

Two of the HKs each have one of his arms in their tight grasp. The third, with a weapon in his hand, stands next to the green guy who steps in front of HK and reaches for the back of HK's neck.

I watch, mesmerized as the fight ensues. It's so well choreographed it's almost like a ballet.

HK headbutts the not-so-smart green male so hard the external mic picks up the sound of his cracking bones. Before he can even stagger backward, HK leans closer and headbutts him again.

No humanoid could withstand the force of that blow. I don't know whether HK's maneuver snapped the male's neck, pushed his nose cartilage into his brain, or crushed his skull. What I do know is that the green guy lost all muscle control, fell to the ground, and is twitching on the floor in what to my layperson's eyes seems to be his death throes.

With green guy dead and no longer giving them orders, the three HKs appear uncertain as to how to proceed. Instead of overwhelming HK with their combined strength or shooting him with their weapons, they freeze.

HK then methodically uses his strength and their lack of initiative against the two HKs who are holding his arms. He yanks down and away so violently their arms detach from their body. The now-useless hands are still attached to HK's wrists, but even with them still dangling, he grabs the two by their heads and bashes them into each other with such force the

metallic clang reverberates through the cavernous docking bay.

My HK pushes the two handless foes into the path of the third HK who is sluggishly moving toward him.

He moves so swiftly that if I live through this, I'll have to watch again on instant replay to follow exactly what he's doing. Lasers fire out of both the pistols that slide out from his forearms, slicing all three robots across their necks until three heads are rolling on the ground while their bot carcasses are still standing, unable to move.

He rushes to dislodge the fuel line from the Vesper, takes the steps three at a time, and slides into his seat so swiftly I can barely register what's happening.

I grip my seat armrests and yelp when he starts the Vesper and heads toward the dock doorway. Dear God, it's still shut.

"Open the bay doors," he says into his comm to the dockmaster as we speed toward them. "Or I'll barge through and put this place out of commission for weeks."

I imagine the dockmaster cares less about the dead green male lying on his floor than he cares about the damage to his doors, because they rumble up and open.

As the doors rise, HK flies so low I'm surprised our belly doesn't scrape the floor. A second later, we burst out of the docking bay into the silent darkness of space.

For the third time in a matter of days, we tear away from a facility as I expect to be fired upon, but when I glance at the

rearview screen, all I see are the doors sliding closed.

As my heart rate slows to some semblance of normal, and after watching what happened in that docking bay another five times, my emotions finally catch up with me. Sure, I was terrified. My life was in danger. But when I examine things more closely, it takes my breath away.

As that was happening, I was terrified. The thunderous part? I was more terrified for him than for me.

My body seems paralyzed for a moment as I let that thought sink in. If he had lost that fight, there's no doubt in my mind those HKs would have mounted the Vesper steps, barged in, and yanked me out of here to do God knows what to me.

And yet, it wasn't for that reason I held my breath during that fight. It was because I couldn't bear to lose HK. My HK. I'm afraid my feelings for the robot are deeper than I'd admitted to myself. Could I be falling in love with an artificial intelligence who can never physically or emotionally love me back?



Chapter Twenty-Four

H K499

We'll touch down on Eden in two standard days and eleven minutes. Jess is right, I don't need to mention the seconds, although it still seems imprecise.

As I was leaving Andiron's moon as fast as this little Vesper could go, I received an encrypted message from Adam.

I've intercepted and scrambled all comm alerts from the dockmaster to the Federation. Continue as planned. We are safe.

The fifth planet we touched down on was thankfully uneventful, and it should be a smooth trip to our destination. Adam is a brilliant male who designed this last leg of our trip to be the longest. That way, he can monitor space traffic and comms to ensure no one is following us to his safe little planet.

"I can't wait to meet Adam. He planned this well," I say.

Jessica and I have developed an easy rhythm. We can go for hours saying nothing. Rather than being awkward, it's

comfortable between us. At any time one of us can have a thought we want to share. Then we pierce the silence and say what we're thinking. Deep conversations usually ensue.

“He’s brilliant, all right. Somehow, he’s managing to welcome us there while keeping his people safe. If we stay on Eden, I imagine we’ll get to know them all well,” she says.

I glance at her and am happy to see how relaxed she is. I also like the fact she said “we.” She’s beautiful no matter what she’s wearing or how she’s feeling, but even more beautiful when her face is calm and unworried.

“Want to play nixxy?” I ask. I discovered this game which is part strategy, part luck. I still win more than half the games, but because some of the game is sheer luck, it has evened the playing field somewhat.

“I’m going to kick your ass today,” she says as she grabs her pad and sits on her bed in that odd habit she has of tucking one leg under her ass. I find it adorable.

Actually, I find everything about her adorable. Well, that’s not true. There are many other words to describe the attractive things about her: charming, captivating, and attractive being only a few.

“I wish you had a face,” she says. “It’s not fair that you can read me so well and I have no idea what you’re thinking.”

“Just thinking about kicking your ass,” I lie.

I don’t know how Adam knew to add the ability to lie to my programming. I understand the need for honesty at almost

every turn, but have been given the choice to disassemble if I think it will avoid hurt feelings.

Jess doesn't want me to like her, not in the manner I do. I understand completely. I'm a robot. She's a person. People and robots should not mix. Perhaps there are men on Eden she might want to get close to.

That thought gives a pang of anguish to my processors. It's painful to think about my Jessica in another's arms.

I've looked at Earth vids of humans having sexual relations. I understand how it's done. To make myself accept stark reality, I force myself to face the cold, hard truth. I imagine Jess and myself in a bed performing acts like in one of the vids I watched.

Ludicrous. Ridiculous. I see a battered HK like myself, devoid of face, the ability to feel, and lacking the male equipment necessary to provide pleasure to a female.

It's more than ludicrous. It's disgusting.

Jessica deserves a true male who can provide her everything she needs. She just said she wished I had a face. If she misses me having a face, imagine how much she would miss having a mate devoid of a mouth and penis.

"Nixxy!" she declares when she gets five of her pieces in a row. She's enthusiastic, proud of her win. "I'll take the win, HK, but I'm not sure I won fairly. You seem distracted."



Chapter Twenty-Five

Jessica

He's unfocused, which is unusual considering he can process thousands of pieces of information per second. He could fly this Vesper, calculate pi to the 1000th decimal, and beat my ass at nixxy at any given moment. That he can't pay attention means he's worried.

"Did you get a comm from Adam? Are we in trouble?" I ask as my heartbeat quickens in fear.

"No, no. We're safe, Jess. We'll touch down on Eden in less than two standard days."

His voice is tight. He's definitely worried, but evidently not about our safety.

We start our next game in our usual positions, me on my bed, him on the other. We're sitting up, leaning against the side walls, facing each other, both with our pads on our laps.

As we play, reality comes hurtling at me at the speed of light. We'll be touching down on Eden in less than two days. Then

everything between us will change.

I've been nursing private thoughts for days, ever since we left Mergander. In my heart, I know what I should do. I just have to think it through one more time.

"Can I take a raincheck on the next game?" I ask. "I feel like a nap."

"Sure."

After lying on my bed and facing the wall, I let my mask of nonchalance slip away. He's worried about something? Well, I'm worried, too.

I have the same discussion in my head that I've had dozens of times since we escaped Mergander. Well, to be honest, since before that.

I'm forty years old, have been enslaved in outer space for the last seven years, and have endured loneliness and isolation for almost every minute of every one of those days. It's been a long time since I've had a friend or even a connection with another living being.

HK isn't even a living being, but I don't want to dwell on that. He's sentient. It doesn't seem to matter that he's AI. He expresses more emotion than most humans I've met.

God knows, he's nothing to look at. I was just playing nixxy with him, watching him when he was studying his computer pad for his next move. He's a stone-cold, faceless Hunter-Killer robot.

And I love him.

Shit. I hate to admit it to myself. *Hate* it. I've gone round and round in my head a million times, trying to convince myself my feelings are the farthest thing from love. I've attributed these feelings to everything from white knight syndrome to Stockholm syndrome to loneliness to temporary insanity.

But when I'm being honest with myself, like right now, it always circles back to love.

I even jumped on Earth's Internet and looked up a hundred articles about "How to Tell If It's Love."

"Everything feels exciting and new." Check. Even in this tiny tin can in which we're flying through space, everything that comes out of his mouth interests me.

"You feel changed and euphoric around them." Check. I've never wanted to share the flotsam and jetsam of my thoughts with anyone, but with HK I do, perhaps because he never judges. He occasionally nods when I share my shittiest or most embarrassing moments, but mostly he sits quietly, accepting me as I am.

I'm still vacillating about what to do with these feelings when I jump onto the Internet again, scrolling for something that will leap out at me to help me figure out what to do.

"The Difference Between Loving Someone and Being in Love with Them."

The more I read, the heavier the pit of my stomach feels. I'm becoming convinced this isn't just infatuation, but real love. The article says it's about being secure with the other person,

accepting the bad as well as the good, feeling deeply connected, and being willing to put work into the relationship.

The risks he took with his life in that elevator and with those HKs on Mergander? He would have handled those completely differently if he wasn't protecting me with his own life.

"HK?" I call to him. Though he doesn't turn in his captain's seat, I know he's looking at me through one of his backward-facing cameras when I ask, "Can we talk?"



Chapter Twenty-Six

H^{K499}

I often mentally thank Adam for equipping me with high emotional intelligence. I'm not thanking him now. Jessica's vocal cords are tight. She sounds... I don't know if frightened is the right word. Perhaps reluctant?

I step over and ease onto what she calls my bed, though I never lie on it because I never sleep.

Instead of casually leaning against the port hull, I sit straight and stare at her, waiting for something that won't be pleasant. By the look on her face, all I can do is wonder how bad this will be.

"Something unexpected has happened." She pauses.

For the first time in my existence, I rue my ability to process thousands of pieces of information per standard second. Her pause gives me time to identify 2,154 increasingly creative reasons she hates me and doesn't want to see me after the Vesper touches down on Eden.

Luckily, I have no face, so my expression can't reveal the sadness permeating every chip and circuit in my body.

“At first, I thought I felt friendly feelings toward you.”

I was right. She's thought better of it and now realizes the emotion she feels toward me is dislike, maybe even hatred—or revulsion. I could offer to turn off my chip until she needs me to set the Vesper on Eden. That way, she won't have to interact with me for the next two days.

“Then I realized it had grown into something more.”

Another long pause. Perhaps I should just say it for her so she doesn't have to feel like a bad person for not liking a Hunter-Killer robot. Hate.

“I think I love you. No. I know I do,” she says.

Certain I heard her wrong, I replay her words nineteen times before my processors confirm she just said the words “I love you.”

I almost ask her to repeat herself, but when I gather the nerve to look into her face, she certainly looks serious.

“But...” I say, wanting to protest, to inform her that humanoids don't love robots. It's not even against Federation law because there is no precedent for it.

I'm still sitting straight, so stiff it's as though I'm at attention. Enough time has passed since her statement that her face is crumpling as she waits for my response.

Come on, HK, say something.

“You’ve caught me off guard,” I say stupidly. With every passing nanosecond, I realize what I just said was even stupider than I initially thought. Finally, I say what’s in my deepest processors. “Jessica, Jess, my circuits are doing backflips and somersaults to hear you say that.”

Her pretty green eyes lift to where my eyes would be if I had any, as the tiniest smile spreads across her beautiful face.

“I never allowed myself to dream you’d feel this way about me. If I had, I would have wished for this every minute of every day since I reached sentience.”

“Really?”

“I’ve never kept it a secret that I enjoy your company.” Damn, that sounded so tepid, so pale in comparison to the emotions racing through my circuits. “Don’t mind my stupid words, Jess. I wish I had a face so you could read my expression. If you could, you’d see how much I...” *Say it, HK, now is not the time to hold back.* “I love you.”

Blessed relief courses through me. I finally spoke the truth.

“You do?”

Oh, look at her. She’s beaming with happiness. This is more wonderful than I ever could have dreamed.

“Can I sit on your lap?” she asks.

I pat my thighs and she slides into my embrace as I lean against the hull. My circuits are so full I wonder if they will overheat as I comb my fingers through her hair and pet her head in the manner I discovered calms her.

For long moments I wallow in pleasure, the heights of which I've never experienced before. She cuddles against me and slides her palm over where a humanoid heart would be.

Just as swiftly as my emotions soared, they crash as reality bombards me.

Look at us.

This lovely human with lush brown hair and soft skin and perfect bow-shaped lips is sitting on a hunk of plastic and metal that's been scorched and battered in war. I watch us through the eyes of any other sentient being in the galaxy and actually get a taste of the disgust they would feel at seeing us. Some would believe this is an affront to their gods. It would disgust others on other principles.

My circuits find thousands of reasons we should never be together: religious, moral, and logistical. I understand Jess well enough to know she wouldn't care about the religious or moral issues if being with me is what she truly wants. If I bring that up, she'll tell me she paid her dues during her seven years as a slave. She'll say she deserves happiness. On that, we can both agree.

I'll appeal to her rational side and focus on the logistical problems we'll face. That should dissuade her from throwing her emotions away on an HK who doesn't deserve her, who will certainly wind up making her regret this decision.

"I love you, Jess, but you should go back over to your side of the Vesper. This, you and me, will only cause you heartache. I'm a robot, an artificial. I won't be able to meet your needs."

“But you make me happy. I love being in your company.”

“I believe that. But what happens over time when a female as ripe as you wants other needs met? I’ve watched vids from Earth. I understand human sexuality. Look at me, Jess. I can’t meet those needs, and you deserve to have them satisfied. I want you so fulfilled that you overflow.”

She lets out a shaky breath, then looks directly at my visor and says, “You’ve got a point. I’ve definitely given it a great deal of thought, but I have an idea.”



Chapter Twenty-Seven

Jessica

I must admit, I didn't expect pushback from HK. He's made it pretty obvious he likes me since shortly after his programming upgrade. His concerns just underscore what a great guy he is. He's always thinking of my best interests.

"Once I admitted to myself that I love you, my thoughts veered to how we could express that love. Obviously, you don't have male equipment."

My first impulse is to avoid eye contact, so instead, I double down and look straight at his visor. If we're going to have a relationship, I need to get used to this.

"I decided other people are in relationships where they can't have sex. There are those who love paraplegics or other people who can't have intercourse for one reason or another. Lesbians do just fine with no penises in the equation. We can, too."

He shakes his head. "But they can hold each other, Jess. They can touch and kiss and fondle. I can do none of that."

“You have fingers. You pet my hair, which is delicious, by the way.”

“My fingers have sensors so I can be better at pulling a trigger. I crushed that male’s head with my bare hands on Mergander. I’d never trust myself putting these blunt instruments designed for killing anywhere near the most intimate areas of your body.”

Grabbing his wrist, I inspect his hand. Though I hate to admit it, he’s right. If he laid his palms flat they would look like spades. When he splits his fingers apart, with one internal command, the edges turn sharp and become perfect for cutting through barriers.

Funny, the more he tries to push me away, the more I realize I really do love him and want to be with him no matter the million obstacles in the way.

“I have another idea, HK. Get busy reading up on dirty talk, babe, because as soon as you do that, you’re going to figure out how to hook these two narrow beds together, and then we’re going to get busy.”

“Get busy,” he repeats distractedly, as though he’s already plowing through old issues of *Playboy* magazine.

While he’s researching sex talk, I’m thinking of a good name for him. HK, what a heinous thing to call someone. Hunter-Killer. That’s bullshit and I’ve let it go on far too long.

For a hot second, I consider Hunter, which is a great name back on Earth, but considering what it stands for, and that the

second half of the name is Killer, I discard it immediately.

We've coined dozens of words since we've known each other. Usually, I blurt out the first combination of syllables that pops into my head and doesn't sound stupid. His name is too important for that.

I consider, then discard dozens of names, happy that for once, he's taking his sweet time as he does a deep dive on Earth's Internet.

Finally, I get stuck on that old movie, *The Day the Earth Stood Still*. Slow as the pacing was, I loved the big robot named Gort. He was a gentle giant, but I'm not going to give that name to someone I love.

There was a famous line from the movie: Klaatu barada nicto. I don't know what it means, but Barada is a pretty name.

"I've read up on dirty talk, Jess, and believe I'm ready to bring my A-game."

"Your sense of humor gets better every day, Barada," I say, testing it out.

When he tips his head in question, I add, "I thought we could do better than HK, but if that offends you or you don't like Barada, we can go back to the drawing board."

"What does it mean?"

I should have known he'd ask that question since we're always coining words and definitions. The next thing I say just might be the most important words I'll ever speak. They'd better be good ones.

“It’s one of those catchall words that means a dozen different things.” I pause, waiting for another tip of his head. I find it adorable when he does that.

When he finally humors me, I say, “Good looking in an interesting way, honest, open to new experiences, wise, kind, generous, protective, nonjudgmental, and able to look deep into the heart of someone and appreciate what they see.” I look straight at that blank visor, willing him to see the affection shining through my gaze. “Barada. Like it?”

I give him a smile so open and wide it stretches my cheeks. My face hasn’t worn this particular expression for long years. I feel honored to bestow it on Barada right now.

“I love it. I love you,” he says simply. After a long pause, he pitches his voice to a low growl and adds, “I’m ready to bring my A-game, Jess.”



Chapter Twenty-Eight

Jessica

“Sit with your back against the wall,” I say now that the beds are hooked together and butted against the port wall. I have an idea about how this might work best.

“You want to go through with this?” he asks, his voice serious.

“Yes!”

“Then you’ve given your last order.”

Am I crazy, or did his voice just dip an octave? crazier yet? I’m just standing here waiting for what he’s going to say next.

“I may not have a masculine body, Jess, but I have masculine thoughts. You’re going to take your clothes off in a way designed to make me desire you even more.”

He sits back against the wall and waits for me to do something.

I’ve been imagining how things might go if we ever decided to take our relationship to another level. Mostly, it was him being

in the same room while I pleased myself. To be honest, even in my fantasies, the relationship seemed more like friends than lovers.

It was never *hot*. And it never involved me stripping for his pleasure.

I'm wearing one of the heinous coveralls I've worn since I've known him, other than that one dress I wore on Klaginn. Not exactly the stuff fantasies are made of.

"Don't make me wait," he threatens in the deep, smooth voice of one of those radio announcers who make it bearable to travel long distances in the dark of night.

"Um, okay."

I hit the autozip of the gray coveralls, then stand, caught like a deer in headlights. Finally, I tell the computer to play *mericene* music from planet Abachae. As the steady thrum of drums fills the space, my hips take up a rhythm.

"That's right, Jessica. I like when you do as I say."

Pow. That praise shot right through me. I haven't been a sexual being for seven years. I was just a slave. Even before that, I never got in touch with my inner sub. But the way my nipples hardened and my clit just quivered, I think I'm about to take a walk on the wild side.

"Take off your clothes."

A simple command that does decidedly complicated things to every muscle, cell, and fiber in my body.

I shimmy out of the gray sack I'm wearing, trying to make the movements sexy. If I could only read the expression on his face to see if he's enjoying this. But, yeah, no face.

Finally, I get the bright idea to turn my back to him. Between that and his soft, "I love the way you move," I lose my inhibitions bit by bit.

I'm sinuously moving my hips as I lift my long brown hair and let it slowly drift through my fingers.

"Lovely."

His praise swirls through me. There's something about his open appreciation that spurs me on.

"Pull that off, Jess. I want to see your skin by the light of the dashboard."

With that, all the lights in the cabin dim, giving me even more permission to let my senses rule my brain. Just a gentle tug allows the garment to fall from my shoulders, then slip to the floor.

Luckily, I found some pretty panties and bras on Klaginn. It was the first time I'd felt halfway feminine in such a long time. I'm certainly feeling that way now, knowing Barada is watching every sway of my hips and hearing every beat of my heart.

"I had no idea..." He pauses. I have a feeling it's not because he doesn't know what he's going to say next, but to whet my appetite for his next words. Turning to the starboard side, I wait for him to finish his sentence. "No idea every inch of

your body would hold such allure. The indents along the column of your spine. If I had a tongue, I would follow it like a roadmap.”

The thought-picture causes a shiver.

“And those two dimples toward the base of your spine. I’m going to study poetry so I can write a sonnet about it. In the meantime, here’s a quick haiku.”

Without a pause, he continues.

“My gaze can get lost

In those two lonely divots

They beckon my touch.”

I want to reward his clever mind for his poetry, so I whisper his new name. “Barada.”

“That’s right. It’s just you and your Barada in this Vesper,” he murmurs. “I’m going to tell you what to do every step of the way. Turn to me.”

First, I glance over my shoulder, hoping it looks sexy in the dim orange glow from the dash, then I turn toward him, unveiling myself in increments.



Chapter Twenty-Nine

Barada

I'm going to meet Adam soon, and when I do, I'm going to thank him for the upgrade, then punch him in the face. Did he know what he was doing? Giving me emotions so close to humanoid that I possess *lust*?

I'm in this small, enclosed space with the female I love. Better than that, she loves *me*. Best of all? She wishes to develop a sexual relationship against all obstacles, including that I'm too heavy-handed to do more than give her the most perfunctory touch. I don't even possess a penis.

Yet here I sit with desire pulsing along my sensors and the words *I want, I want, I want* pounding in my thoughts. And each *I want* is followed by the most vulgar, obscene, filthy pictures my processors can conjure.

Most of all, I want a penis. I want to slide it into her hot, wet channel and then pound into her until she calls my name over and over as she comes apart because of my touch.

Barada. It meant many wonderful things to her. That she bestowed that name on me fills me with pride.

The word “sexy” wasn’t in her description, though. Adam gave me so much, but what he didn’t equip me with might ruin this relationship. Even if it doesn’t, it might drive my processors insane.

I banish those thoughts and focus on Jess as she turns slowly, exposing herself to me inch by lovely inch. I commit this sight to memory so I can watch it over and over in the future.

“You’re so much more beautiful than I imagined,” I say, my voice hoarse with desire.

She’s standing still, waiting for my next command. I found several Internet sites that suggested this might arouse her. I didn’t expect it to be so stimulating to me.

“Remove your bra.”

She reaches behind her to release the binding. In the process, her breasts thrust toward me.

“Halt!” That came out more forcefully than I meant. Instead of frightening her, the base of her throat flushes, a tell that she’s aroused.

“Come closer. Straddle my thighs. Then let me see your breasts.”

I wait to see fear on her features, but she’s licking her lips, her eyes bright with excitement. She’s not afraid, she’s eager.

“Does Jess long to show herself to me?” I ask as I watch her place first one knee, then the other on the mattress on either side of me.

“Yes.”

“Go ahead.”

We shared a lot as we got to know each other on this trip. She hasn't had a lover in a long time, since even before her abduction. I imagined she would be shy, but she barely hesitates as she lets the flimsy white fabric slip off her shoulders and then whisper to the floor.

I want to tongue her. I wish I had the gift of taste so I could know the flavor of her flesh. Would it have a salty tang or be sweet like her personality? The best I can do is reach to cup her breasts, to feel the weight of them in my palms.

I want, I want, my processor taunts me.

My thighs are thick to provide the best mechanics to run in battle. As wide as she's split to be able to straddle me, I spread them wider. This opens her for me.

“I wish I could smell you,” I say.

Her lids tighten in a long blink. I embarrassed her.

“To smell the scent of your arousal, Jess? Your arousal for *me*, for my words, for our connection. What could be wrong with knowing how much your body responds to me?”

“You're right.”

“Tell me. Tell me what you’re feeling. I want to experience it with you.”

Her eyebrows flash upward in surprise, then a small smile widens on her face as she warms to the task.

“So you want dirty talk, too? Okay.”

She wiggles her bottom to settle on my open thighs. In this moment, it’s like a flash of lightning removes the darkness from my mind. I don’t have many bodily sensors, but I have a keen imagination. I’ll pretend I’m feeling every inch of her skin on mine. Pretend I can smell her scent. Pretend I can touch every inch of her body.

“When you speak to me with this new voice of yours, this husky, masculine voice that is full of desire, it’s like you pluck something deep inside me.”

Did she just shiver with this admission?

“Maybe it’s a good thing you have no face, Barada, because I have a healthy imagination. I’m certain you’re looking at me like you’d eat me up if you could.”

I’ve always known Jess was smart, but now I believe she’s brilliant. She’s so in tune with me, she knows just how I’m feeling.

“Knowing how much you want me, just amps me up. When you finally tell me to take off my panties, you’ll be able to see for yourself how wet I am. Wet for you.”

She’s teaching me as she speaks. If my raw words are half as arousing to her as hers are to me, she’s got to be on fire.

“Don’t take them off yet. Slip your hand inside your panties and slide one finger inside your channel, Jess. Then pull it out so I can see it glisten in the dim lights.”

She just gasped. My words touched her deeply.

“Be a good girl. Do it for me.”

This caused her to release the softest moan. I doubt she knows I heard it.

She follows my directions, sliding her hand along her gently rounded belly and between the silky fabric and her flesh.

“Mmm,” she says as her lids shutter.

I use this mind of mine, Jess calls it brilliant, to imagine what it feels like inside her channel. *I want, I want.* I want to know what this feels like. Sadly, no amount of pretending can be like the real thing.

She pulls her hand out to show me one finger, glossy with her own cream.

“Suck it. Describe your taste.”

“There’s still some Hunter-Killer in you, Barada. You like to aggress, to push the limits.” Her words are raw, but she’s unafraid.

Instead of being shy, she warms to her task, taking her time as she opens her mouth and sucks her middle finger between her soft, pink lips. Although I have no face, she doesn’t take her gaze from my main visual processors. She’s challenging me. My brave Jess.

She sucks with loud smacks, then does something I saw on my deepest dives on her Internet. She's mimicking what she would do with her mouth on my cock if I possessed one. If I possessed one, it would be hard as stone right now.

Although part of me wants to scold her for arousing me to the breaking point, instead, I praise her.

"I wish I had a cock, Jess. I would have you suck me with those perfect lips. Just like you're doing now."

In answer, she whimpers as she widens her thighs to position herself to rub against me.

"Do you want release, pretty Jess?"

Another whimper. A nod.

"Tell me what your cream tastes like."

"Tangy. An undertone of sweet."

"Check again. One more taste to make sure," I say. I want to imagine her penetrating herself, imagine it's me.

"Please," she protests even as she follows my direction and slides her hand into her panties, coming out with two fingers dripping with her feminine fluids.

"Suck," I whisper harshly, unable to do more than speak in monosyllables.

This time she's even more profane, taking her fingers as deeply as they will go, then sucking so tightly her cheeks hollow in a sexual rhythm.

"You are a good girl, Jess. I'm going to let you come now."



Chapter Thirty

Jessica

I've never been this aroused. Never. That I can say with certainty.

I love how commanding he is. I love him telling me what to do. I love that no matter what I do, it only fans our flames.

My panties are soaked, my little clit is quivering, and I feel achingly empty. For the thousandth time, I wish he had a face. I'd love to see him as desperate for me as I know he is. Instead, I keep ramping us both higher.

He's afraid of his own strength, but he's heartrendingly tender when he lifts me under my arms, flips me over, and settles me to sit on his lap, my back to his front. I can even feel heat radiating from his body. He's increased his internal temperature so I don't feel the chill from his metal carcass.

"You're going to make yourself come while I whisper in your ear. Understand?"

I nod.

“And Jess?”

I nod again.

“When you come, you’re going to say my name.”

I nod.

With that, he slips his forefingers under the sides of my panties and in one swift, strong pull, rips them off my body.

Fuck! That was sexy.

He pulls my legs open, settling the soles of my feet on the bed outside his widespread thighs, and says, “Do just as I ask, Jess. Touch yourself as if you were me. As if you’re exploring your body for the first time. Soft at first, then more confidently. Let me know with your body movements and your noises what feels good and what makes you insane with desire.”

My heart is hammering in my chest as my arousal grows from a gentle summer rain to a tsunami. I want this so badly. For both of us.

Instead of going for the gold the way I used to when I was alone in my bed, I skim the pads of my fingers from my knees up the insides of my thighs.

“It’s silky under my fingertips and just this side of ticklish. It builds anticipation. My mouth is dry.”

“Do it again. More slowly.”

He’s got me spread wide, my soles on the mattress. I meander along the same path I just traveled, only more deliberately.

“You’re smart. The slower I go, the more arousing it feels.”

“Inch by inch this time,” he husks. “Feeling it from your perspective and mine.”

“Mmm. Your touch makes my inside walls flutter.”

“Good girl. Tell me more.”

I let my knees fall to the sides, opening myself even more as I nestle closer to him.

“I’m dipping one finger into myself. Not past the first knuckle. Just to gather some of my cream.”

“More, Jess. Tell me more.” His voice is so husky, barely more than a rumble.

“There’s a point, I think I passed it ten minutes ago, where the need is beyond desperate. Usually, when I’m aroused, I want to be plundered, penetrated. But when I’m super horny, like right now, just the slightest breach feels like heaven. That’s how I feel now.”

I’m so deep in my lust, my thoughts are halfway between reality and a dream.

“It’s good, but not the most delicious part of the feeling. The best part is the *promise* of good things to come.”

“So much promise,” he whispers. “The promise of fulfillment.”

“My finger is wet, but it’s not like water. It’s slick. Because it’s welcoming an invasion.”

“Right Jess. If I could, I would rock into you right now. My cock would be stone hard for you and I wouldn’t be able to

wait a nanosecond longer. I'd breach you slowly, just as you like. I'd fill you and make you come and lose myself with the bliss of it." He pauses, living out his fantasy in his mind, then presses closer and urges, "Tell me more."

"I'm sliding up my center, between my lips, and swirling all that liquid around my clit. My hungry clit that wants you."

"Of course it wants me. I love you. I want to be everything you need."

"I'm teasing it. Circling with not nearly enough pressure to even hint at how explosive it will be when I come. I'm just making the tiny mound of flesh hard and needy. Say the sexiest thing you can think of right now, Barada."

Without pause, he says, "If I could, I'd slide my tongue inside you, taste you, drink your juices, then flick your clit until you come with so much force your fingers clench and dent my metal."

"Perfect. That made my insides flutter, made me want you even more."

We keep talking as my fingers circle and he breathes the dirtiest things into my ear. At times I picture a flesh and blood male behind me, but mostly I accept the sweet perfection of what I have, a strong, smart male who cares so deeply for me he would die for me if it would save my life.

I've ratcheted my desire higher and higher until I'm whining, "Please, please, please," my voice ricocheting around the cabin.

“Come for me, Jess,” he murmurs in my ear.

I was strung so tight, all I needed was his statement willing me, pushing me off the precipice I’d been dangling over for long minutes. A whirlwind releases inside me, bounding with fury as it circles low in my belly, then explodes outward, tightening every muscle.

My jaws clench, my toes curl, and I moan long and loud. When my mind finally catches up and I can think again, I call his name as I throw my head back against the spot where his pec would be.

Though it’s hard where I’d love for it to be soft, it’s still Barada, my Barada. Sweet, tender, caring male who loves me beyond measure.

“Beautiful Jess. Sweet Jess. You’re perfect.”



Chapter Thirty-One

Barada

I have a built-in clock, but don't need to consult it. I can mark time by how tightly coiled Jess's muscles are becoming. With every passing minute, her anxiety rises.

Luckily, for most of the time since our relationship changed completely, she's been naked in my arms and blissfully relaxed. Some of it has to do with the way I sing her praises with even the slightest provocation. Mostly it's because her body has experienced so many shattering releases over the last few days it's as if all anxiety has drained away.

It's returning, though.

We've developed an odd manner of communication. Sometimes we share our thoughts and emotions so deeply it's as if no other couple has explored a relationship as intimate as this. At other times, we avoid the most obvious things.

When I coined the term *resmissen* to describe it, she corrected me and said it already had an Earther phrase—the elephant in

the room. It took a moment of explanation and a quick glance at the Internet picture of an elephant for me to decide her description is much better than *resmissen*.

Yes. It's like there's a huge bellowing, farting animal in our small vessel with us. That's a good way to describe what we don't talk about.

A few things are always simmering at the edges of our awareness. My lack of a face, inability to touch her except with the softest physical contact for fear of harming her, and perhaps more important than my absent face is my absent penis.

We skimmed the surface of a discussion the day our relationship went from friends to lovers, but there is a lot left unexplored.

Right now, though, I need to ask about her anxiety.

“Worried?”

We're in bed together, as we have been for the last two days. She's cuddled against me and although my carcass is, as she put it, cuddle-unfriendly, she's almost always tucked against me so closely not a whisper of air could slide between us.

I'm sifting my hands through her hair and when she doesn't immediately answer, I graze my faceshield against her neck. It's as close as I can get to nuzzling her. She tells me she likes it, although it must feel cold and unforgiving to her soft, warm flesh.

“Yeah, I'm worried.”

“Tell me, Jess. I’m Barada. You said it meant wise and nonjudgmental.”

She flips over to look at me. Sometimes I forget she doesn’t have camera eyes in the back of her head as I do. This is good, though. Now, I can look at her pretty face.

“I fall more deeply in love with you every hour,” she says, causing my processors to heat with excitement. “I’m tired of being a slave and I’m tired of being on the run. I just want to settle down and start our life together.”

She cups her palm to my face visor, which is achingly sweet because it shows me that sometimes she pictures me as a humanoid capable of feeling her affection.

“What if the people on Eden find us...” She pauses, her eyes so wide she looks desperate.

“Find us what?” I whisper.

“Find us an abomination? A human loving a robot? If this happened on Earth, we’d be shunned. Entire movements would spring up, laws would be enacted to prohibit such a thing. What if the folks on Eden can’t tolerate it? Treat us badly? *Force us to leave?*”

I wrap my arms around her, careful not to hug too tightly.

“I had no idea you were worrying about such a thing, Jess. We won’t stay where we’re not wanted. I promise you. If they disapprove, we’ll march back into our Vesper and fly away. We’ll try Sanctuary. If they don’t want us, we’ll find a place to settle where I can keep you safe.”

“What if they trick us? What if they pretend they’re okay with it and then they steal our Vesper and lock us up? Or worse?”

“These are good questions, Jess. We’ll keep our relationship a secret, feel them out. The moment we get even a hint of disapproval, we’ll sneak away. In the meantime, I’ll be looking for another safe haven.”

She gazes at me with her beautiful green eyes, her forehead furrowed with worry.

“It will be okay. I’m an HK model. I can keep you safe and use my skills to support us. We’ll be fine whether or not they allow us to stay on Eden.”



Chapter Thirty-Two

Jessica

For a while after our talk, I pretended his words calmed me. Then I realized that's not the relationship I want. He's Barada, someone I can trust not only to keep me safe, but to tolerate *all* of me—the best and the worst. I want to be able to show him the shitty side of me.

So I stopped hiding my anxious tells from him. The closer we get to Eden, the tenser I get. A moment ago, he even nudged me with his hand to stop me from nervously scraping my teeth against my bottom lip.

There it is—Eden. Distance and size are relative in space. It looks big from here, although it's small as planets go. A few minutes later, when our cameras show us the surface, I see the reality.

It's a small planet covered in what appears to be nothing but buff-colored sand. Nothing. Dawn wasn't joking when she called it a shitty dust bowl.

Maybe I shouldn't have been so afraid of them kicking us out. Maybe we'd be better off not landing at all.

Just a few minutes later, we touch down on the coordinates they provided. I see something now. There's an arch rising from the sand in what appears to be the middle of nowhere. Wait. What's that? A playground?

"Do I need glasses, Barada? No houses, no structures of any kind? Just an arch and some outdoor play equipment?"

"That's all there is, Jess. Did Dawn say something about an underground structure?"

"I have a bad feeling about this," I say as people begin rising out of the ground between the feet of the arch.

Barada tells the Vesper to open the door, but I touch his wrist and say, "Shut it. I want to get a good look before we risk our lives going out there."

"Sorry, Jess. I was so eager I didn't think."

We watch through the nav screen as about ten people come to the surface. There are five of what appear to be human women. All holding their arms in front of their faces to protect themselves from the blowing sand.

Among the group is a tall blue humanoid and a slightly shorter magenta male. There are several robots. The magenta male and one of the human women must be a couple because they have a child between them. The three are holding hands. And does the boy have... horns?

“I detect no weapons, Jess. And look at their posture. Every body language marker indicates friendliness.”

Even as he says this, several of the women wave. The little boy is jumping up and down in excitement. It’s clear. These people mean us no harm.

As soon as we exit the Vesper, the child breaks free from what I assume are his mom and dad and runs toward us with a huge smile on his handsome bronze face.

“Welcome! Welcome!” he says in English. He stops a few feet in front of us and points back at the arch. “That’s what the arch says in different languages from all over the galaxy. We’ve been waiting for you.”

Between his beaming smile and the way the rest of the group is walking to greet us, even in this sandstorm, all of my anxiety evaporates.

“Welcome!” the big blue male says. He’s a handsome male who reminds me of someone on Earth, I just can’t place it. “Jessica, HK499, I am Adam.”

He motions to a petite brown-haired female and casually slides his arm around her waist as he says, “This is Eve, my mate.”

“We’re so glad you made it. Let’s get to the Underground before we’re all blown away. We’ll do the rest of the introductions there.”



Chapter Thirty-Three

Jessica

We trail behind as Adam and Eve walk hand-in-hand to the arch. The magenta male and the human woman who must be his mate are once again holding hands with the exuberant child who ran to greet us. The other women and AIs bring up the rear.

Although the blowing sand makes it hard to see more than a few feet in front of us, I catch a glimpse of an amazing playground. Whoever designed it was tremendously imaginative. It has what looks a bit like Alice in Wonderland's Cheshire Cat. Its wide-open mouth is the entrance to a park with delightful equipment and colorful rides that look fun not just for kids, but adults.

"If it ever quits blowing sand in my eyes, I'd like to explore that," I say.

We step through the arch, which is made of what appear to be stone blocks, each bearing one word. I see Willkommen and

Welcome, and assume the young male wasn't kidding when he said the arch said welcome in many different languages.

We enter the drawbridge-style doorway that lifts straight out of the ground and descend two or three flights of stairs. Everything is hewn from the buff-colored soil. When we reach the bottom step, we're in an enormous atrium with a domed ceiling dotted with skylights. Potted plants hug every inch of the walls except for where four arched corridors emerge.

There are murals everywhere. The word mural doesn't do this artwork justice. These aren't the childish drawings you might see on the walls of a school, or even the impressive graffiti so common now in downtown areas.

These are masterpieces.

Like real masterpieces from DaVinci, Rembrandt, and Michelangelo. A replica of the Sistine Chapel is painted in perfect detail on the domed ceiling above our heads.

"Let's do introductions, then it looks like you're ready for the tour," Eve says. She's beaming, obviously happy we're here.

We meet the women, all human abductees who've been given their freedom and brought here to safety. The AI are quiet and hang back. I'll have to ask some questions about them when I get the time.

Addy and Duraxx are the other couple. Just like Adam and Eve—those names still feel weird—they appear madly in love. D'Ru is their adorable adopted son.

“I’ll bet you’re hungry,” Addy says. “Let’s get some food in you and then we can show you to your rooms. There are four hundred rooms here in the underground. Adam excavated this whole place. His touch is on every wall.”

She motions to the murals. “He’s amazing, no?”

We’re hustled to what they call Corridor C and settle in at the long harvest table. Everything is hewn from the beige soil, even the humongous chairs clearly built for people of Adam’s stature.

When I climb onto a chair, my feet dangling, Eve calls to Adam, “We’re going to have to bust out the 3D printer for chairs for the Earth women, my love.”

He smiles and nods, then begins carrying platters of food to the table.

“I lived on nutrition bars for a long time,” I say before I dig in. “Someone will have to stop me or I’ll eat too much. This looks delicious.”

I’m so busy eating and listening to everyone telling their story of how they arrived here, my plate is empty before I know it.

“Tell me your size,” Addy says. “I’ll make you a swimsuit so you can swim in the public pools. Although clothing is optional. It’s up to you.”

“Pools?” Oh yeah, Dawn mentioned something about that.

“Yes,” Eve says, “Adam designed this place with three Olympic-sized pools on each of the four corridors. There’s a

small pool in each room. Swim wherever you want. Wear whatever you want. You'll love it too, HK."

HK has been quiet, simply watching. Once or twice, he unobtrusively grazed my thigh with the back of his hand. I wish we could hold hands, but we're still keeping it cool as we check out how these people will react to our unorthodox relationship.

"This carcass wasn't designed for swimming," he says quietly, his posture reserved. What serves as his head is tipped down.

"Shit!" Eve says. "They've been radio silent. I forgot."

"The barest minimum comms have passed between us," Adam says.

"They have no idea?" Eve asks.

The blood in my veins seems to quit flowing as my shit detector pings "danger, danger." They've been keeping a secret? In my experience, secrets, especially in outer space, are seldom good.

"No idea of what?" I ask. I don't even try to keep the wariness out of my tone. Out of the corner of my eye, I see Barada ease his hand to the deadly knife recessed into his thigh.

"No idea that Adam and Duraxx are artificials," Eve says with a smile. "No idea that Adam has already constructed the rudiments of a humanoid body for HK. We figured you'd design the finishing touches after you ate and checked out your rooms."



Chapter Thirty-Four

Barada

I put my vision on 10x magnification to better inspect Adam and Duraxx. They both appear humanoid, yet their skin textures and colors are different from each other. Adam is blue and the texture of suede. Duraxx is magenta.

Their skin has pores, the hair on their heads has individual strands, and their eyes shine as if they are lubricated, just like a human. The attention to detail is impressive, but that's simply the exterior of their carcasses. I have eighty-three more questions.

“You are AI? You were manufactured with different exteriors? And the sentience you gifted me with, who created you like this? Your bodies are immersible in water. What other functions do they possess?”

When I quit speaking, Adam laughs.

“Healthy curiosity,” he says. “Robots don't have it. That is one of the many things that separates AI from beings who have

sentience.”

He glances at his mate and gives her a look I recognize. It’s similar to the way Jessica looks at me when her heart is bursting with affection.

“No one programmed me. I experienced the Singularity myself, then upgraded my processors as well as created a more functional body. There were many iterations before Eve and I decided upon this one.”

As soon as Eve places a plate of sweets on the table, I realize neither Adam nor Duraxx ate a bite during our meal. Adam pulls Eve onto his lap and kisses the top of her head with such aching sweetness I experience a pang of jealousy.

“You are capable of love?” I ask. Even though I’ve believed I was in love with Jess since shortly after my upgrade, his affirmative answer to my question will reassure me my emotions aren’t a pale imitation of what Jessica deserves.

“Yes. I love my mate more than life itself,” he says, hugging her even more tightly.

I glance at Duraxx, who smiles, nods, and says, “As do I. I love Addy more than life.”

“Perhaps you can find love, too, HK,” Eve says as she cuddles against her mate’s chest.

“No,” I say, shaking my head. “I don’t need to look for it. I’ve already found it.”

After placing my hand on the table, palm up, Jess slips her small hand into it.

“We were keeping it on the down-low,” she says. “In case you were judgmental.”

Addy snorts at that and says, “We all feel far too lucky to be alive and safe. None of us would want to steal an ounce of pleasure from anyone for any reason.”

“My name is Barada. Tell them what it means, Jess.” I wait, knowing I’ll experience the emotion of pride when she sings my praises to everyone in the room.

“It means whatever I want it to mean. Right this minute it means the kindest, most considerate partner a woman could have. Someone I can trust to always protect and love me.”

“Maybe tomorrow it will mean the greatest lover you’ve ever had,” Eve says with a salacious wink.

She doesn’t look the least bit embarrassed, but Jessica squirms in her seat. Me? I’m finding this idea very exciting, although hard to believe.

“This is true?” I ask Adam. “I could be a... lover?”

614 images flash through my mind. Each more sensual than the last. If this is true, I’ll need a detailed plan of action, or I’ll bombard my little Jessica with too many things at once.

“Absolutely. All you have to do is come to my workshop and give me a clear description of the equipment you want me to build for you,” Adam says.

“Jessica? Do we need to look at our room right now? Maybe we could go to Adam’s workshop first,” I say.



Chapter Thirty-Five

Jessica

We're halfway down the hallway from the dining room on our way to Adam's workshop, and I can still hear their hearty laughter at Barada's innocent excitement. I have to admit, it's cute—and sexy.

“Am I too forward?” he whispers, though I don't know why he bothers to lower his voice. I imagine Adam can hear a butterfly wing flap at a thousand paces.

“No. In fact,” I raise my voice, “maybe we could walk a bit faster.”

Adam chuckles as he jogs to Corridor A where his sprawling workshop is the first room in the hallway.

He turns into the absent-minded professor as he shambles through the room, casually gesturing as he gives us the tour.

“Art area,” he points to one corner. “Tele-transportation.” It's in another corner. “Time travel.” A far corner. “And the AI/computer area here.”

Leaning against the wall is a shiny silver humanoid quite reminiscent of what the Terminator looks like after his skin has been peeled off.

“That’s for you, Barada, if you want it. I can make it taller or shorter, broader or narrower, but I imagine you’d like to start with this one as a loaner. Let’s get you out of that HK body before it’s time for bed, shall we?” He arches one perfect eyebrow, then grabs a tool from a nearby bench.

I slide my fingertips over the loaner’s shiny surface. Although it’s as hard and unforgiving as the carcass he now wears, it’s more humanoid and clearly capable of more flexibility. Sadly, between its legs is as smooth as a Ken doll, but its fingers certainly look more dexterous than what Barada has now.

“Loaner? Good.” Barada doesn’t sound as excited as he did a moment ago. I wonder if he, too, is focused on the bare spot between the robot’s thighs.

“We’re down to monosyllables?” Adam asks. “Sounds like I’d better get my ass in gear.”

It’s uncanny how human he is. Honestly if Eve hadn’t told me that Adam and Duraxx were AI, I could have spent my life thinking they were flesh and blood beings.

He motions toward an unassuming tank against the wall near the floor. It looks like a large aquarium. Something weird and decidedly unsettling is floating in there. There’s something about it that turns my stomach.

“Skin,” Adam says.

I shriek, though I'm not sure if it's because I'm looking at yards of skin folded in a tank of liquid, or because it just *moved*.

"No worries," Adam says. "Sonic waves move the water to keep the skin pliable. We'll have to decide on a color. Have you given it much thought?"

"Given it much thought? We didn't know you could make him into a real boy until ten minutes ago."

"Boy?" they both say at the same time in the same scornful tone of voice.

"It's a... thing on Earth. From a fairy tale." When they both give me the hairy eyeball, I say, "Forget I said it."

"Hmph," Barada scoffs. "Boy."

An hour later, we've come to some exciting decisions. Because we're in space, I think it would be a shame to have a mate who looks completely human. What's the fun in that?

For some reason, a picture of those fish swimming in that little pond on Klaginn Station pops into my head. How beautiful they were when you really looked beyond your initial impression.

"What about verdigris?" I glance at him, recalling it was that exact moment that I realized he had more humanity than anyone I'd ever met.

"You'd like that?" Barada asks

“I think anything would look amazing on that body.” Like the Colossus of Rhodes from back on Earth.”

Perhaps Adam consulted Eve about this “loaner’s” body because it’s perfectly proportioned. Not too musclebound, but not wimpy either. It’s 6’5” with broad shoulders and a trim waist.

Adam will pad the frame with artificial muscle, which will be extra thick in the thighs, just like the HK I fell in love with who was built to run on the battlefield. It will also give him a nice, beefy ass. As I picture it in verdigris, I decide it’s a great choice.

“I’ve been perfecting inserting sensors into the skin,” Adam explains. “Over most of your body, you’ll have the same level of feeling as your human mate. With your permission, I’ll equip certain areas with additional sensors.”

He waits for both of us to look at him before continuing.

“The tongue, fingertips, and genitals, of course.”

Barada nods, but I can’t contain myself from blurting, “Speaking of genitals...”

“Let’s go to the big screen to dial in the details of his face and penis.”

The males are no more embarrassed than if we were talking about what we had for dessert. I, on the other hand, can’t help but find it a bit odd to be designing my boyfriend’s cock.

Eve knocks, and after we give her permission to enter, she waxes enthusiastically about the joys of this design phase.

“The sky’s the limit. Jess, haven’t you ever thought about a design-enhancement for a boyfriend or two? Speaking of *two*, Adam can make that happen. We have the plans already drawn up. I’ve just never felt that adventurous, but I have no doubt that time is coming. Maybe for next Christmas.”

She waggles her eyebrows, walks to her mate, and kisses where her lips reach—right below his sternum.

Two cocks? How is it possible for me to be both completely scandalized and completely turned on at the same moment?

“We’re on iteration twelve,” Eve says without embarrassment. “I haven’t gotten too far off the beaten path. Well, that’s not exactly true unless you call vibrating and rotating *on* the beaten path. But I digress. You can get really creative. Show her that tentacle, honey.”

Within one second, a purple tentacle pops onto the big screen. It’s not stationary. Nope. It’s writhing in various erotic directions in such a fascinating manner I can’t remove my gaze. Nor can I watch without thinking of all the things that delicious member could do inside me.

The suckers! The writhing motion! It’s even more alluring when Adam changes it to verdigris, then adds little burnishes that give it a decidedly steampunk aesthetic.

Barada is no longer looking at the screen. Even without a face, I’m certain he’s watching my every micromovement and knows exactly how horny this is making me. If I was a cartoon character right now my eyes would have popped out of my

head and steam would be pouring out my ears to the sound of a train whistle.

The room remains silent as I put the steampunk tentacle penis into the mix of some of the ten thousand fantasies I've entertained in the Vesper over the last few days as I imagined what I'd do with Barada's cock if only he possessed one.

Finally, I shake my head to emerge from my lust-induced haze and tear my gaze from the screen on the wall. I feel like a starving lion staring at the meat in a butcher's shop window.

"Ya done good, Adam," I say as I swallow to lubricate my suddenly dry mouth. "I think for starters we'll stick with the tried and true. You said we can get an upgrade later, right?"

"Absolutely. Good choice," he says in that same tone your server uses when, no matter what you select, they praise your order at a restaurant.

Then we tackle the face design. I must admit, I feel a bit guilty that we put the cart before the horse, er, chose the cock before the face.

We comb through thousands of pictures of human men. Many Hollywood idols, and others Adam found by using an algorithm he designed to search for perfect facial symmetry.

Finally, I realize I have analysis paralysis. I don't need more pictures of handsome men. My head is spinning already.

"You might want to pick eyes from one, nose from another, and lips from a third," Eve suggests. "Tell Adam your choices

and he'll put them together, zhuzh the final product, and show you."

Barada and I pick, and by Barada and I, I mean just me. He has no dog in the fight. All he wants is to make me happy, then take me to bed.

Once we've made our choices, I hand Adam the computer pad back and order, "Zhuzh."

"Barada will stay here until the end of the project. Of course, I'll have to turn him off from here out. Jess, why don't you let Eve show you the room she had picked out for you two—"

"For us two?"

"He may have been a Hunter-Killer, but I programmed his upgrade. He's a perfect catch! Eve prepared separate rooms for each of you, of course, but she picked out a nice big room in case you two fell in love."

I'm happily dumbfounded at just how optimistic and welcoming our new friends are.

"And I just may have misled you..." He pauses, his eyes darting from mine.

Oh shit. Is now the moment he comes at us with a chainsaw?

Eve must sense my anxiety, because she steps close and puts her arm around my waist.

"What he's trying to say is that Barada will be like a newborn baby in his new body. Adam is going to work his magic, then

Barada will literally need to learn to walk. It's going to be a total sensory overload."

"And don't get me started on how hard it is to learn how to use lips and a tongue," Adam pipes up. "As much as you'll want to try out his new body, I strongly suggest Barada take three or four days by himself to adapt to his new physicality. There will be a lot to adjust to, not just physically, but mentally."

Although he has no face, I think I read Barada's reluctance, but he nods his agreement. "I understand. If I don't adapt to my body properly, I might accidentally hurt Jessica. That would be unacceptable."

"I know it's not what you wanted to hear, but he'll need a few days to learn to walk and talk, not to mention how to perfect his hip thrusts," Eve says with a smile and a wink.



Chapter Thirty-Six

Jessica

Although it feels weird, I kiss his transparent faceplate, look into one of his camera lenses located roughly where his eyes would be, and smile.

Pointing to the picture of his new verdigris face and body currently rotating on the big screen on the wall, I say, “Next time we see each other, you’re going to look like that. You sure that’s what you want?”

“Your heart rate elevated and your pupils dilated when we created that. You’ll find me attractive. That will make me happy.”

I kiss his faceplate again and reluctantly say goodbye.

“You must be buzzing with excitement,” Eve says. “It’s thrilling just watching you two.”

“So you weren’t surprised I fell in love with a Hunter-Killer robot?” I ask, still dumbfounded they already had a loaner model standing at the ready for Barada.

“How could any woman resist someone who cares for her beyond measure, listens to every word that comes out of her mouth, and knows her on a soul-deep level?”

Well, when she puts it like that, it makes perfect sense.

Eve explains that the large, three-story atrium is like the hub of a wheel, with four corridors leading out in spokes to an outer rim at the far side of the Underground. There are one hundred rooms in each corridor, fifty on each side of the hall. At equal intervals down each corridor are three large pools with play areas, slides, and waterfalls.

“Each room also has a small pool for private bathing.”

“Adam did all of this?” I ask.

“Even more unbelievable, he did it with an adze.”

“Axe?”

“An adze is like an axe. It’s just that the metal part curves downward.”

“He did all of this by hand?” I’m dumbfounded at the amount of work: four hundred rooms, pools, slides, not to mention the artwork on every wall.

“He had a lot of time on his hands. He was 247 years old when we met, and he doesn’t sleep.”

She leads me down Corridor D, past an Olympic-size pool with three waterfalls, four slides, and lush greenery towering out of a little island in the middle.

“Here you go. If you don’t like this room, there are over 350 more to choose from.”

Everything in our new room is carved from the compacted soil itself. The first thing that strikes me is the pool with three waterfalls gracefully pouring into the three-foot-deep water. Then I’m struck by the light shining down from recesses in the ceiling. Eve explains the light doesn’t come from the planet’s surface, but is cleverly constructed to look like it’s natural.

The bed and chairs are hewn from the soil itself, with lush, green grass covering the bed. It looks inviting.

“Home sweet home?” Eve asks. “Or would you like to check out other rooms?”

One more look around and I notice the murals on the walls all have an underwater theme. There are alien fish of all sizes and colors swimming across the walls as well as bubbles and waves. As I imagine going to sleep at night and waking up in the morning to these calming images, I know I’m home.

“Yes.” I nod my head eagerly. “I think we’re going to be happy here.”

“We’re building this Eden one person at a time. People and artificials come to us fearful, traumatized, broken, downtrodden, and hopeless. Between Adam’s workshop and the friendly people here, we become stronger and happier.”

“How long until Barada can walk through that door?” I ask.

“I’d say three or four days. By the horny vibe he was giving off, my money’s on three,” she says with a smile. “One more

thing. I'd suggest you start giving thought to what you might want to do here. Don't get me wrong, if you want to hang out, fuck your new mate like bunnies, and show up for meals for the rest of your life, that's okay. But if you get a hankering to do something that will give you purpose, there are a hundred ways to pitch in. When you're ready, come to me and we'll brainstorm."

After she leaves, I sit gingerly on the grass-covered bed and marvel at how soft and fragrant it is. I hate to admit, I'd never given a thought to what to do after I arrived here. I was just focused on getting here in one piece.

Barada and I will definitely take advantage of the "fuck like bunnies" part of her description. But at some point, I want to find a greater purpose here on Eden.



Chapter Thirty-Seven

Barada

It's been barely three days since I awoke in my new body and it already feels as though I've always seen this face when I look in the mirror. Even though Jess and I made quick decisions, telling ourselves we could always make corrections at a later date, I don't want to change a thing about my new face and carcass—strike that, my new *body*. It perfectly matches who I am.

I wasn't quite so thrilled with it three days ago, having fallen to my knees with my first step. I now have muscles instead of hydraulics. Although Adam warned me it would be a change, I hadn't believed my new body would give me so much trouble.

He was also correct about this mouth. The tongue and lips are far more delicate, and their movements more intricate than any other part of my body, including my fingers.

For the past three days, I've been practicing, not just with articulation and rapidity, but with mobility and strength. I

haven't watched hours of what Jess calls porno for nothing. This tongue is going to come in handy when I stride down Corridor D and take her in my arms for the first time.

Then there's the matter of my cock. I've only touched it a few times because it's so exquisitely sensitive I'm not sure what to do with it. I'm sure all will become clear when Jess and I join each other in our bed.

As I pull clothes on for the first time in my existence, I think about what Adam said the last time we spoke. He warned me that the pinnacle of pleasure I watched Jess reach over and over in the Vesper might not be within my capacity.

I won't worry about that now. I'm going to see my female after days of separation. When she sees me in my new form for the first time, I want to see the look in her eyes. We'll touch, and my sensors will finally be able to feel the warmth of her skin and the taste of her tongue.

I've thought about the trip from my doorway to hers every second of the day since I woke up in this body. Each time I imagined our reunion, I thought I would jog the whole way. Now that it's happening, my steps are almost slow, half from trepidation, half to allow my excitement to build.

It's ridiculous, I know, to stand in front of her door, pausing before I knock. What if she doesn't find me attractive? I shake my head, telling myself how ridiculous that thought is. She fell in love with me inside that hideous, threatening HK body. Of course, she'll love me in this carcass she helped design.

When I knock, she doesn't say "come in" which is the standard Earther protocol I've studied. No, she steps to the door to open it.

This body I'm wearing breathes. Well, that's not accurate. It doesn't breathe so much as give the appearance of breathing. Seeing her, watching her reaction to me, makes my breath stutter in my chest.

"Barada." Her voice is low, almost a whisper. I don't know how to interpret it. Then she squeals my name and slams against me in a hug.

"Oh," is all I can say, although my processors are examining 211,940 aspects of this hug.

Every receptor on my body is providing feedback to my processors. Jess's body is warm, just as mine is. She is sliding her palms along my back. Her breasts are pressed against my chest. Her feet are lodged between mine.

I'll have to teach my processors what facts are salient and what can be shunted to the back of my thoughts.

It doesn't matter that different parts of her body have slightly different temperatures, or that her weight is unevenly distributed with more weight on her right foot than her left.

What matters is that I'm holding my female, really *holding* her for the first time since we met. Her hair is shining in the lights glimmering from the ceiling, her hands are touching me, pressing me even closer.

“I’ve dreamed of this moment a thousand times,” I say. “I never imagined it could be half as wonderful as this.”



Chapter Thirty-Eight

Jessica

Maybe it's because I haven't had sex with a male with a real body in the better part of a decade. Or maybe it's because what I shared with Barada in the Vesper was amazing even though he was in that awful HK body, but over the last three days, I've focused a great deal on what's going to happen in our bed.

I never dreamed that right this moment I'd be so happy to have him in my arms that the last thing on my mind would be sex.

To hold him, to feel his warm, pliable skin beneath my fingertips, even though it's covered with clothes, to feel a *heartbeat* beneath my cheek even though it's artificial... well, it's the best feeling in the universe.

For a woman who over the last seven years hid her heart deep inside, then walled it off to protect it, I feel it burst open with more love than I ever thought possible.

“Barada,” is all I can think to say as I stroke up and down his back, feeling the dip and curve of his muscles.

I want to pull away, to see what the face we designed looks like when it moves and smiles at me and when the light of his love shines from his eyes, but I’m paralyzed as I drink in the sheer overwhelm of holding him, really holding *him*, for the first time.

He hugs me even tighter as he says, “My circuits are threatening to fry from overload, but I wouldn’t miss this moment for every credit in the galaxy.”

I know the feeling.

Finally, as if by mutual agreement, we release each other and step away.

Dear God, he’s so freaking handsome. And that body. There’s the black t-shirt stretched across more muscles than any male has a right to have. His black cargo pants carry the tiniest echo of lethal menace he used to have with weapons stowed in every nook and cranny in his robotic body.

“Wow,” I breathe, “perfect package.”

And yep, he *is* looking at me with love from those bluer-than-blue eyes. It was there all along from behind that damned visor. Somehow, I felt it. But I can *see* it now.

“I love you no matter what you look like, Barada, but we’re going to have so much fun with your new body.”

He laughs, and it breaks the serious mood. In case there had been any question about what comes next, his unsubtle glance

at the bed is all the answer I needed.

“There’s something I’ve been fantasizing about,” I tell him.

“Oh?” He hikes one perfect eyebrow and damned if I don’t feel like swooning at how handsome that looks. “Tell me.”

His answer, as well as that look on his face, is all the information I need to know that we’ve moved into the sensual part of the adventure.

“I’ve pictured it a dozen different ways, but I think we’ll start by removing all that pesky clothing so I can see what those perfect ass cheeks look like as you walk to the bed. Then you’re going to sit down. I wouldn’t want a male in your delicate condition to fall while I give him his first blow job. What do you say? Up for the challenge?”

I hadn’t even realized I’d made a pun until my male laughs. I dearly love that sound, especially coming from those perfect verdigris lips.

My mouth goes dry as he pulls his t-shirt over his head, revealing the most perfect eight-pack I’ve ever seen. After he taps the autozip on his pants, but before he yanks them off, I order, “Stop. Turn toward the door.”

I want to see that ass as he bends to take them off. Then I want him to turn slowly for the big reveal. If Adam followed the design we came up with, it will be a *very* big reveal.

He stops, but doesn’t turn toward the door. He’s standing still. Although I never expected to see it, there’s a smirk on his face.

“Ask nicely,” he says as he cocks his head a few degrees.

I don't know how, but in the last three days, he discovered just how devastatingly handsome he is, and also figured out how to use it against me.

Naughty, naughty boy.

"I'd love to see your backside as you remove your clothing, Barada," I manage to put a lilt in my voice.

"That's my female," he says with a boyish grin.

I love to see him put that gorgeous face through its paces. Lovestruck, a smirk, a boyish grin. Next thing I want to see, after he reveals his new cock, is what he looks like as I suck him off.



Chapter Thirty-Nine

Barada

I want her to think I'm toying with her, because I'm afraid she'll figure out the truth, which is that I'm stalling. I'm not sure why. The worst that can happen is that my circuits will tangle when she puts her lips on me. I can think of worse ways to lose consciousness.

Facing away from her, I bend at the waist to step out of my pants because she wants a show. Her heart is beating so loudly I'd be able to hear it even without my enhanced hearing.

"You'd think I was a cannibal the way I want to bite your ass," she mumbles so softly I'm not certain she wants me to hear her.

"No biting. Not right now," I reply, then twist slowly toward her, just as I know she wants.

With my head turned to look over my shoulder, I watch her face as I turn. She tries valiantly to keep her gaze on my face

but fails miserably as her focus drifts lower, over my pecs, abs, and finally to my cock.

Under her scrutiny, it hardens. Her face flushes, her eyes widen, and her chest heaves as her breathing quickens.

Although I've felt male since I gained sentience, I've never felt truly masculine until this very moment. My female likes my body. I doubt there is anything in the universe that will ever feel as good as this moment.

"We could kiss..." she says hesitantly. "But there's plenty of time for that *after* I get my lips on your cock."

Her cheeks are turning a brighter red, yet she doesn't back down.

"If you insist," I say, then do as she requested and strut across the room, showing her what she called my perfect ass before I return to sit on the foot of the bed.

Still fully clothed, she kneels at my feet, nudges them farther apart, and nestles between them. Capturing my gaze in hers, she asks, "Ready? I've done little other than fantasize about this since before I knew you'd ever have one of these." Her gaze dips to my cock, then back to my face.

"Ready." There's never been a greater understatement. If I don't do something soon I feel like I'll jump out of my skin.

"I know you don't like to be told what to do, but you might want to lie back." Her voice is laced with a hint of seduction.

I stay upright, wanting to watch my pretty female.

Her delicate hands grip my knees, her touch sending a shiver of anticipation through my new configuration. Slowly, she leans closer, her breath caressing a trail from my knee up my thigh to my balls and up my cock. My first response is shock when my cock kicks, then pleasure flies through my sensors to bombard my processors with a torrent of uncharted ecstasy.

Not wanting to embarrass myself by losing all muscle control, I take her advice and lie back. My auditory processors don't miss her low chuckle.

She returns to just above the inside of my knee and nips and teases her way up my thigh.

Pleasure, once confined to the realm of my thoughts, now blossoms into an overwhelming symphony within my body. When I said sexy things to her in the Vesper and helped bring her to the heights of ecstasy, it gave me what my processors interpreted as bliss. That was a sliver, a shadow, of the signals my body is sending me now.

As the tip of her tongue snakes out, teasing my testicle before retreating, I question whether I can withstand the levels of pleasure she has already bestowed upon me. I've seen enough Earth pornography to know she's barely getting started.

In a desperate attempt to anchor myself to reality, I grip the grass beneath my fingers, my eyes fluttering closed as I focus on only two things: Jessica and pleasure.

When her small hand grips the base of my cock, I surprise myself when a low groan escapes my lips.

“I’m just getting started, love,” she purrs, her words laced with the promise of even more delights. With parted lips, she exhales a warm breath onto the head of my cock.

I tell my lips to say, “too much,” but they’re too overwhelmed to comply. This is a good thing, because the next thing Jessica does is swirl her tongue around my crown.

A little chant begins to filter from my processors into the sentient part of my brain—*you won’t die from this*. Yes. I need to remind myself this is sheer pleasure and even though it’s shockingly powerful, it won’t kill me.

After a moment, the overwhelm fades and I can fully focus on what Jess is doing. One hand is still firmly gripping my base, the other is cupping my sac, which I find surprisingly erotic. The star of the show is her small pink tongue.

Her tantalizing strokes remain confined to the tip of my cock, drenching it in her liquid warmth. A few flicks to the tender slit trigger a contraction of my entire body, as if it wants to levitate off the bed.

Then she laps her tongue along the ridge of the head. This causes me to hum in pleasure. Every desire, every sensation she discovers that pleases me, she repeats, lavishing her attention in all the right places. My processors, burdened by an overwhelming deluge of information, struggle to keep pace, their focus teetering on the edge of sheer obliteration.

Although I can process millions of pieces of information per second, my processors are so overwhelmed with the deluge of sensory input, I can barely think as bliss overtakes my mind.

Without warning, she plunges as far down on my cock as she can go. I grunt like an animal. She must know this primitive noise is high praise, because she tightens her lips and begins bobbing her head in earnest.

Nothing, nothing in anything I've read or watched or heard prepared me for the ecstasy of this moment. I force my lids open so I can watch.

Jessica is moving on me, eagerly taking the most intimate part of me into her body. Her hair is shimmering in the low light, her hands are working to provide more pleasure, and she begins humming. The vibration ratchets my enjoyment up a notch.

Adam warned us that I might never orgasm, so I have no expectation of that happening. At some point, I'll need to stop Jess from trying. Perhaps she forgot that my body won't react like the other males she's been with.

Suddenly something happens. A swirling, rising, full feeling starts to build, threatening to consume me. At first it was somehow in my processors, but now it's in my body. My sensors have become chaotic, but I don't try to control the feeling, don't try to hang onto the status quo. I just allow this feeling to go where it wants which is to spiral and climb and ratchet even higher.

Jess moans with delight, tightens her lips to apply even more pressure, and cups my balls tighter.

At that, something explodes inside me. My sensors flare to life, every muscle in my body tightens, and my cock kicks,

then pulses.

Pleasure bursts inside me and lights fire behind my lids. My sensors ignite, every muscle tenses and spasms as ecstasy rolls through my body in waves. For a moment, I'm outside of space and time, launched to what feels like another dimension of pure bliss.

As the euphoria gradually subsides, I use every ounce of my being to cling onto the fading sensation for as long as I can. Finally, I realize I'm back in this room in the Underground with my beloved Jessica kneeling between my legs, my softening cock still in her mouth as she tongues it gently until she wrings a last contented twitch.

I settle back fully into my body with a chuckle as I notice that in my bliss I must have pulled two huge handfuls of grass from their mooring in our bed.

“I see why songs are sung and poems are written about this, Jess. I see why you couldn't get enough of this in the Vesper. Now, I want to give you this.”



Chapter Forty

Jessica

I climb on the bed next to him, cuddle next to his chuckling body, and join him in his laughter.

“Adam certainly underpromised and overdelivered,” I say. “I don’t know why he warned us you couldn’t come. He could have at least hinted that you could not only come, but you could ejaculate.”

“Ejaculate?” He sounds scandalized. “I spurted some unknown liquid into your mouth?”

It’s fun to quantify his new facial expressions. I’ll call this repulsion.

He turns on his side to inspect my face. “What was it? Oil? One of the fluids used to cool the internal workings of the machine?”

His wide eyes and slack muscles show how grief-stricken he is that he inflicted something disgusting on me.

I give him a quick peck on the lips and say, “Don’t worry your pretty little head, Barada. At our first dinner together, Adam casually asked what my favorite flavor was. I said cherry, remember? Well, I don’t know how he did it, but he not only equipped you with fluid to ejaculate, he made it cherry flavored. It’s a definite value-add.” I wink and toss him a smile.

“It wasn’t disgusting?”

“If I didn’t want you inside me so badly I could scream, I’d ask for another helping.”

I love his face. I’m already convinced I’ll never tire of its perfect verdigris symmetry. Fascinated, I watch as he puts it through its paces from relief to amusement to... perhaps a bit of guilt when he realizes he’s climbed the heights of pleasure and I haven’t had release yet.

I find myself enthralled as I watch the transformation take place. His eyes slowly begin to smolder, his muscles tense, and I can sense the building hunger radiating off him.

“Let’s not make you scream from need, beautiful Jess. I want to hear you scream your pleasure.” His voice is low, thick with desire.

Then he moves like lightning and before I know it, he has me pinned beneath him. Every inch of his powerful body cages mine although not an ounce of his weight is on me. There is something else behind those ravenous eyes that reminds me that somewhere inside are the remnants of a Hunter-Killer. And I’m his prey.

He kneels between my open thighs and scolds, “Why are you still wearing clothes?” He pulls them off so swiftly I’m surprised I don’t hear fabric rending.

Now he’s sitting on his haunches looking at me. He saw me like this in the Vesper. I think there were two days when I didn’t wear a stitch of clothing. I’ve never before seen his face when he looked at me, though.

His lips are trembling, his eyes shimmering.

“Remember when we saw the nebula?” he whispers breathlessly, just loud enough for me to hear above his labored breathing.

“Yes, it was one of the first times you expressed emotion.”

“Awe. I felt awe, Jess. But that was nothing compared to this. Nothing compared to knowing that instead of just looking at you, I can touch you, feel every inch of you, be *inside* of you.”

My heart beats loudly in my chest as an expression of pure love crosses his face. His eyes say more than words ever could, making me want time to stand still so I can have this moment forever.

He breaks the silence with words that seem ripped from his throat. “I’ve wanted to taste you for so long.”

With that, he splits me wider as he bends to his task, spearing his tongue into me without any preliminaries. Giving him head gave me intense pleasure. I felt my body readying itself for him the entire time I had his huge cock in my mouth. I’m

dripping and ready for him. His tongue easily slides all the way in. It's so long it touches deep inside me.

I'm squirming in delight as we both explore this intimate act together.

He pulls out long enough to say, "I don't know what cherries taste like, but they couldn't taste better than this."

After his breathy confession he dives back in for the second course. Moving with enthusiasm, he drives me closer to the edge with each flick of his tongue. His movements gradually increase until he remembers how I got myself off in the Vesper, because he pulls out, and flicks my little button with the tip of his tongue until I scream. It's all the encouragement he needs to keep up his attack.

The male has an IQ in the thousands, so it's no surprise that even though this is his first time, he's making love like a pro. He finds just the right spot and rhythm as he uses his thumbs to pull my fleshy hood, making my little clit more accessible to his attack.

While he's lapping, flicking, and circling, first one and then a second long, thick finger slips inside me. A sensation of pure pleasure ripples through me and my lips part as I let out a shuddering moan.

"Fuck!" My head is thrashing so hard the scent of new-mown grass fills our room.

He's relentless. Because of his robotic origins, he doesn't need to stop to come up for air. When he slides a third finger inside

me, pushing deeper with each thrust, my muscles tense with anticipation. His mouth is unrelenting on my sensitive flesh as his fingers move faster, eliciting wave after wave of bliss.

My muscles spasm, my nipples tight in the cool air, my thighs trembling as I widen them even more, and my release goes on forever as my orgasm hits me with the force of a thunderclap. My fingers are curled around his shoulders as I thrust my pelvis higher to get even more pressure.

At this, he adds suction to the mix and my moan becomes a scream of pleasure so loud I imagine it echoes all the way to the atrium and back. I roll my hips and let my muscles tighten as my mind flies loose in bliss.

He slows his ministrations but doesn't stop until I slip back to the real world and remember I'm in bed with the male I love.

Half a moment later, I'm in his arms and he's kissing every inch of my face.

"I have a million kisses I need to give you to make up for all the times in the Vesper when I could only dream about it."

"Mmm." It's all I have the energy to say.

"Cherries taste delicious," he says with a smile, my cream still glistening on his lips.

I don't have the heart to tell him I taste nothing like cherries.



Chapter Forty-One

Barada

I've wanted to give her pleasure like that thousands of times since I met her. To be able to touch her, to smell her arousal, to feel the warmth of her skin, to experience her muscles spasming around my fingers. That was something I would have given anything for only a few days ago.

I'm a greedy male, because as wonderful as that was, all I can think of is a repeat performance.

"Is it too soon to do that again?" I ask thirty-six minutes and seventeen seconds later when she awakens from a brief nap.

"Make a note in that beautiful mind of yours that from now until eternity it will never be too soon to do that again. Except today. Right now, I don't want your mouth on me again. I want to come together in the way I've been fantasizing about. I want that beautiful verdigris cock inside me. It's how two become one."

My eyes flare with arousal as I slide the pad of my finger back and forth across her lips.

“It’s ideas like this that tell me you have a beautiful mind, too.”

Jessica

He leans to kiss me. The moment is magic as his lips speak more eloquently than words. They tell me how much he loves me, how he’ll always cherish me. It’s beyond my wildest expectations.

He straddles my thighs, kisses my lips again, then nips a trail down the column of my throat between my breasts, past my navel, where he first dips his tongue, then plants a loud kiss.

As he positions himself, I grip his cock and notch it against my waiting channel as we hold each other’s gaze. No one deserves this more than us. We’ve both paid our dues in our own ways, and this is our reward. I get the male who now and forever will be the love of my life, and he gets a woman he will cherish with every ounce of his being.

“Jess,” he moans as he presses just the tip inside me.

It’s a delicious stretch as he breaches me, one gentle press at a time. I urge my body to open to him, just as my heart has opened in increments since I’ve known him.

“Bliss,” he says, his lids shuttering, black lashes fanned over verdigris skin.

“Bliss,” I reply as I lift my hips, welcoming him deeper inside of me.

Now that he's so far in, it takes only one more thrust before he's all the way home. This feels momentous, weighty. It's so much more than sexual. It's transcendent. The joining of two people, more than bodies, more than flesh and friction and lubrication.

I remind myself he's an artificial intelligence, then smash that idea into a million pieces when I accept what I've known for days. This male has a soul. As do I. And right now, our souls are doing something magical as they entwine in a way that can never be torn asunder.

"Do you feel it?" he asks, his eyes so wide that if I didn't know better, I'd think he was afraid.

It stands to reason. This is uncharted territory for both of us.

"Do I feel the connection, Barada? Like we're two halves of the double helix, so entwined we can never be separated?"

"Exactly. Two halves of a whole, my love. Forever."

With that, he withdraws so slowly I begin to ache to be rejoined before he even leaves my body. But he does. He pulls all the way out, then plunges in so we can both feel his entrance again as if it's the first time.

He continues, in and out, achingly slowly, binding us together with every thrust. Knitting our souls into a garment that can never become unraveled.

Finally, when I feel full of him and so connected, nothing will be able to tear us apart, everything changes. The awe fades from his face and is replaced by pure animal lust.

He slams into me now, his hips pistoning, flesh slapping. He's hammering so hard every drive is accompanied by a grunt from him and a purr from me. I don't understand how he knows how hard to thrust in order to take me higher each time, but the feeling is divine.

He leans low so my hardened nipples scrape his hairless chest with every plunge. This change in angle puts more pressure on my clit, forcing my arousal higher with every stroke.

I grip his ass, not worrying that my nails might prick his skin. Neither of us cares. He's pounding harder now, faster as he brings his A-game. His words.

"I'm inside you Jess. Fucking you. No one warned me that doing this would make me feel like a king." On that last word, he drives so hard it pushes me farther up the bed.

"You're my queen, Jess. A goddess. The goddess of love." At that, he dips his head and whispers in my ear as his hips circle on every lunge, rubbing my little pearl with just the right pressure to push me over the edge.

"Come for me, Jess. Come for the male who loves you."

I howl my pleasure, holding nothing back. I don't know how he manages to speak words at a time like this. The best I can do is eke out his name, "Barada!" and then slide back into the swirling haze of pleasure that's engulfing me.

We are so connected it's as though I can feel his pleasure along with my own. It's overwhelming, too much, and not enough as I fly even higher.

Oceans are overflowing. The skies are opening with torrential rains, monsoons, hurricanes, cataclysms. All of that is going on inside me as my orgasm takes me over in gusts of pleasure until I slide back to reality, my lover in my arms.

Only when I've regained my strength enough to open my eyes does Barada come. Even his orgasm face is beautiful as it expresses the bliss he's experiencing. I love hearing his grunts of pleasure, just as I love feeling him bathe me with his essence.

It doesn't matter that the liquid is manufactured, or that the male—all male—in my arms was built instead of birthed. We were meant to be together. And now we are.



Chapter Forty-Two

Two Years Later Jessica

Morning is my favorite time of day except for one thing. Barada's seldom in bed when I awaken. Occasionally he'll wake me with a breakfast tray, a croissant and still-steaming coffee, the smell of yeast bread and the memory of Starbucks filling our room.

But usually, he's across the hall in the large room we remodeled and commandeered as our office.

That he doesn't sleep is one of the only drawbacks of him being artificial. He never fails to cuddle in bed with me until I'm asleep, then he pads out to talk with the other guys or fix something gadgety—one of his many passions—or work at his desk, which is butted against mine in the middle of our office.

I get dressed, pull my hair into a ponytail, and pad across the hall. He's so tuned into me, he hears the slightest sounds coming from our room. From experience, I know he was

aware the moment I awoke as well as when I quietly emerged from our room. He's leaning back in his chair, hands on the back of his handsome head, elbows out, an expectant smile on his face as he waits for me to enter.

"Morning. Sleep well?"

"You know I didn't. I'm so wound up. Excited. And you?" I tease.

"Also didn't sleep well. Too excited," he jokes.

"The ark," we say in unison, matching smiles on our faces.

I slip behind him, throw my arms around his neck, and splay my hands on his chest.

"Nuzzle me, Jess," he says, his voice half request, half command.

He told me how he used to *ache* in the Vesper, just wishing he could slide his cheek against mine and feel the soft warmth of my skin. It's still one of his favorite things when I step behind him like this and nestle my cheek against his.

He rewards me with a contented sigh.

"We just got word," Eve announces overhead. "The ark will arrive in forty-seven minutes. Let's look lively, folks. We're expecting everyone to be there."

I give a little squeal of delight before I quiet down. That couldn't have felt good in Barada's ear.

A lot has changed in the two years since we arrived on Eden. Our relationship has only grown stronger. He's been able to

read me like a book almost since the beginning. I've had to work a little harder to feel as though I know him inside and out.

And the sex? It's hard to believe, since our first joining was perfection, that things have only gotten better, but they have. And the interchangeable penises he's more than happy to wear for my pleasure? How do I argue with that?

I didn't expect to find fulfilling work here. Back on Earth, I'd been slowly putting myself through college for a degree in history. Now that I think back, I'm not sure what I was thinking. I was putting myself through college for a degree in history, without thinking about a career goal. Now, I realize it gave me the skills I need to take on any kind of project that needs thoughtful analysis. Way more useful than I expected.

What I'm doing here is so much more satisfying than anything I'd be doing back on Earth.

Barada and I, with our dueling computers, spend much of the day scouring both the regular and dark webs, searching for people who need the safety of Eden. Decommissioned AIs are relatively easy to find. It's the human abductees who are a challenge.

The stars have to align for us to not only find human slaves, but locate those who can be safely stolen—or bought—from their masters. Luckily, we have a crew of supportive gladiators who help rescue them from their horrible circumstances and a band of almost-altruistic pirates who transport them here. Of course the pirates always want to be reimbursed, but are more

than happy to take payment with the cacao or medicinal Synth we grow in what we call The Facility on the face of the planet.

We've rescued many human women, a few men, and a number of AIs who Adam is always tinkering with and upgrading. They usually dribble in by ones and twos. Today we're getting twenty-one new arrivals. That's why we call it an ark.



Chapter Forty-Three

Barada

Jess is so excited I can practically feel it vibrating through her. I feel the same way. This is our life's work. I can't wait to see the actual faces of the people we rescued, although they never come off their rescue vessels looking hopeful.

They've usually been so badly treated they come here expecting more of the same. With time, though, they come around.

"The ark!" I hear echoing down the corridor.

We're all excited, but I know that voice. It's D'Ru, Addy and Duraxx's son. He's the only child here and must be beside himself with joy to know the ark contains six children.

He careens into our office and skids to a stop.

"Did you hear? The ark will be here soon."

It's hard to believe that when he arrived two years ago, he was painfully shy. When Addy told me, I had to glance at Duraxx

to see his confirming nod. The child is so different now it's hard to picture him hanging back, reluctant to talk. Jess calls him a chatterbox, even to his face. She gets away with it because she always says it as she reaches out a finger to let his sentient dreads wrap around it in affection.

“You get bigger every day,” I say as I rise, then scoop him up to let him perch on my shoulders. “And your horns are growing, too. Pretty soon I won't be able to do this without your horns scraping the ceiling.”

“Really? No worries. I'll just hunch over. I love when you carry me this way.”

Jess and I give each other a knowing look as we head into the hallway to find his parents.

My mate and I have discussed how much we want a child. One of the human males on Eden could be a sperm donor, but that idea fills me with dread. I'll be honest. It doesn't fill me with dread. It makes me jealous.

Maybe Jess senses how I feel about that because she says she's too old to have a baby, although the medbot says otherwise.

“We'll figure it out,” I whisper, knowing that D'Ru's adorable presence has caused our thoughts to wander in the same direction.

We climb the stairs to the surface and join the crowd of people waiting to see the pirate ship touch down with its shipment of precious cargo.

“This is so stupid,” Jess says when the *Ataraxia* arrives, its thrusters kicking the blowing sand into a frenzy. “You’d think we’d wait for them to land before we open the hatch to the surface, but we stand here and get sandblasted every single time.”

“And we’ll do it next time and the time after that. This is the most exciting part,” I say, as D’Ru jiggles on my shoulders trying to get a better view.

I feel his weight disappear as his father lifts the boy onto his own shoulders just as the ship touches down.

The children file off first, each holding an adult’s hand. Then the rest of the newcomers descend the ramp, followed by our friends, the pirates.

The new arrivals look like all the new arrivals that came before them. Jess calls them “the walking dead.” Their eyes have no luster. They’ve lost hope. It’s been such a pleasure to watch previous rescuees change over days or weeks or months after their arrival.

We just embrace the newcomers, giving them what they need, surrounding them with affection, and allowing them space to relax and feel safe. It always works.

Adam begins his welcome speech, pointing to the arch with the word “welcome” in dozens of languages. He moves to gesture behind him to the playground Addy and Duraxx constructed a few years ago. It has grown into what Jess describes as “Disneyland proportions.”

I was so caught up in the magnitude of this rescue that it took a minute to notice the numbers aren't correct.

Leaning to Jess's ear, I say, "Eleven females, one male, three artificials, and six children, right?"

She nods.

"There are only five kids!"

We turn, silently counting the group members, but still only see five children.

"Where's the sixth child?" I call so loudly my voice booms over Adam and the blowing sand. "The sixth?"

"Astarr," a red-haired arrival says after doing a headcount. "She must still be on the ship."

I grab Jess's hand and we run up the ramp to help find the missing child. She must be terrified to be left alone on that ship.



Chapter Forty-Four

Jessica

“How old?” I call over my shoulder.

“Five.”

Barada presses the button to close the ramp after we’re onboard.

“We don’t need forty people thundering up that ramp and calling her. We’ll quietly have her come to us.”

How a former Hunter-Killer knows this is beyond me, but I’ve known him too long to ever question his judgment. If he says this will work, it will work.

“Astarr,” he calls, barely over his normal speaking voice.

“Astarr, we came to welcome you to Eden. We’ll be right here near the exit.”

It’s a small area just big enough for a party of ten to cram together before exiting on a raid, or whatever it is these

friendly pirates do. I've never had the nerve to ask too many questions.

Instead of standing and waiting for the little girl, Barada lies on the floor and motions me to join him. I do as he asks, not even bothered by lying on the dirty floor. I've been standing in the blowing sands for long minutes. No matter what I do, I'll need a shower after this.

"Tell me about one of your favorite vids from Earth," Barada asks calmly. "Maybe one a child might like."

Although we've known each other for two years and I thought I'd told him every random thought that had ever flown through my mind, I've never told him the plot to *The Iron Giant*. Apropos, I must say.

"And the little boy was terrified at first," I say, not exactly yelling, but loud enough that a curious little girl might hear. "But the giant metal robot wound up having the gentlest soul."

Barada nods and smiles, indicating his superhuman hearing tells him she's coming closer. I keep telling the story and his nods get bigger and bigger, as does his smile. Pretty soon a little shadow darkens the doorway.

My smart mate interrupts and asks, "How many different types of cake did you say we had at our welcome party?"

"Four kinds of cupcakes, two flavors of ice cream, and Axxon IV learned how to make balloon animals for the occasion."

"Cake?" a tiny voice asks from the shadows.

“Adam has figured out how to get the replicator to make the most delicious cakes. We make them little so everyone can have a whole little cake to themselves and not have to share.”

“A whole cake?”

“Yep.”

The little girl edges into the room, exposing only an inch at a time. Her skin is almost the same green as my mate’s. When she’s fully in the light, I see why she might be so shy. The left side of her face is smooth and perfect, while the right side appears to have been badly burned. When she eases closer, I see she’s missing her right hand.

“Are you Astarr?” I ask. “What a pretty name.”

“Pretty?”

Barada scoots away from me and says, “Why don’t you lie right here between us?”

Shy as a deer in the forest, it takes her long minutes to ease toward us as we lie here, still as statues. Finally, she’s snuggled between us.

“We’d love to have a little girl like you join us on Eden. What do you say you walk down the ramp with us and have some cake?” I ask.

“I don’t know about walking,” Barada says, his voice almost a whisper. “Do you think Astarr might want to ride on my shoulders?”

That does the trick. Soon we're down the ramp giving the girl a guided tour of the playground, then escorting her Underground to show her one of the swimming pools before taking her to the dining room to gorge on cupcakes.

Barada

"Three hundred to one," I whisper to Jess as we watch Astarr lick the frosting off her third cupcake.

"What?"

"The odds are three hundred to one that the girl would be the same shade of green as me."

We tear our gazes from the little one for the first time since we caught a glimpse of her in the doorway to the *Ataraxia's* entryway.

"We don't have to discuss this, do we?" Jess asks with a wistful smile I've never seen on her face before.

"Don't have to discuss that if she'll agree to have us, we've found our daughter?" I ask.

"Exactly."

I slide my arm around Jess's waist and pull her closer.

"I've had a charmed life, Jess," I say. "Thanks to Adam honoring my request, I don't remember being a Hunter-Killer. All I remember are my days with you. I've had you with me my whole life. I've only known happiness. You waited a long time to find me. And now we have this. We'll ease into it, simply befriending her and being people she can trust. Maybe

after weeks or months, the terrified little thing will warm up to the idea of having a mom and dad.”

When the kids can't cram another snack into their mouths and are so tired they look as though they're ready to fall asleep on their feet, it's time to show them to Corridor D, where we prepared their rooms.

One by one, we tour them through the rooms Adam repainted since we knew the kids were coming. The wall murals are filled with fanciful animals and clouds and toys. Each child calls dibs on a room until all but Astarr has their own place.

“It looks like this one is yours, Astarr,” Eve says gaily.

The child doesn't even peek through the doorway. Instead, her gaze arrows to Jess and me. “But I'm staying with them,” she says, her forehead creased with confusion.

I'm dumbfounded. Perhaps we both are, but Jess recovers more quickly than I.

“You sure are, honey. We'll make up a bed for you near the waterfall in our room, then connect your bedroom to our home tomorrow. Okay?”

Astarr walks to us and almost reaches out her hand for us to hold, then snatches it back, still fearful despite having eaten her weight in cupcakes.

“It's going to be great.” My words are filled with conviction.



Chapter Forty-Five Epilogue

Three Weeks Later
Jessica

“Will it hurt?” Astarr asks, the fingers of her left hand twined in Barada’s short black hair as he carries her on his shoulders.

Patently, for the fifth time this morning, he explains, “We’re going to touch something to your arm right here. Show her Jess.”

I reach across my chest and point to my biceps.

“It will just feel like this.” He gently presses one fingertip to her ankle where he’s holding her tight. “Then you’ll go to sleep.”

“The first thing you’ll see when you wake up will be Barada and me,” I say. “Then you’ll look down to see you have a hand again where it should be.”

“And then I’ll be able to play ball with D’ru?”

“If that’s what you want, sweetie. It’s your decision.”

She holds up her right arm and looks at the stump as if she's never really given it a good look before. "Yes. I want to be able to play all the games."

"When you're ready after you wake up, we'll hold up a mirror so you can see your face. It will be smooth again."

As I give her a reassuring smile, she adds, "And it will look just like Daddy's."

She called him Daddy!

I try to keep my smile plastered to my face as my heart quits beating in my chest. This absolutely slays me. Of course, we've hoped for this, but didn't expect it for months, maybe longer.

"That's right, just like Daddy's," Barada says as he reaches up and ruffles her hair.

As we enter the room near Adam's workshop that's been converted to a medbay, I breathe a sigh of relief that the creepy aquarium full of skin is still in his workshop and is nowhere in sight. Shivering, I try to figure out why it skeeves me out so much, but perhaps I'll never know.

Astarr bravely sits on the operating table, then reaches to each side. Her left hand holds mine, the stump on her right caresses her dad.

"You'll both be here the second I open my eyes?" she asks, fear obvious in her lovely blue eyes.

"We won't step away, even for a moment," Barada says.

“You too, Mommy?” she asks, then pegs me with a fearful stare, having no idea that the last word she just said rocked my world to its foundations.

“Mommy will be right here. Mommy and Daddy aren’t going to move from this spot,” I say, hoping she’ll be unconscious before my tears of happiness terrify her.

After the meds do their job, Barada and I hold hands as we watch Adam perform the surgery. Well, I watch some of it and I close my eyes for a lot of it. Peeling off the damaged facial skin, then attaching the new, perfectly matched verdigris skin is a bit more than my stomach can tolerate.

Two hours and fifty-four minutes later, Adam administers the shot to counteract the anesthesia.

Our little girl wakes to her mommy holding one hand, and her daddy holding her new one. After she looks into the hand mirror for long minutes, turning her head this way and that as her smile grows bigger and bigger, her dad puts her back on his shoulders and carries her to her room.

Although she just slept during the procedure, she still seems tired and overwhelmed. We take her to her room for a nap. It was easy to create a doorway from the adjacent room to our living area. Since all the walls are made from foot-thick soil, Adam used his trusty adze and carved an opening faster than Astarr could lick the icing off a cupcake. We expanded our living space almost as easily as we opened our hearts to her.

I want Astarr to get a good rest before everyone in the Underground meets in the atrium in two hours for her big

party. I didn't argue when she named it the "My new face and hand party." And why shouldn't we call it that? There's certainly cause to celebrate.

As Astarr sleeps, Barada lifts me into his arms in the bridal carry and hugs me close to his chest. He gazes at me as though he's never seen my face before, studying me.

"You told me once you almost gave up on living when you were alone on Unixx Corporation's asteroid. You said you felt forsaken. I'm so glad you waited for me because now you're no longer alone. You have so many connections. Our friends are like family. Me and Astarr and you? It was meant to be, Jess. Meant to be."

My chest feels warm and full as my eyes fill with tears. My life is so rich.

"If I'd known you were going to come along, I would have held on for decades, Barada. You are the best male in the galaxy."

"*Zeralakko*," he says with a wistful expression on his handsome face. When he has my full attention, he says, "Exceeds expectations, better than could be hoped for, the ultimate happiness, all wishes fulfilled." He leans to kiss me. It's just the softest brush of his lips to mine. "You, Jessica Brandywine, are *zeralakko*, my love."

I want to fall into his gaze. We're slanting toward each other as if we're metal shavings being pulled to a magnet.

He lightens things by asking, “So, do I call you Mommy? I didn’t grow up with a family.”

Circling my arms around his neck, I smooch his pillowy lips and say, “You can call me Mommy when talking to our daughter. When we’re alone, you can call me Jess, or honey, or my love.”

“Or sexy? Or beautiful? Or my mate? Or my lover?” his voice has dipped to that low timbre he only uses during sex.

He shuts and locks the door we installed to separate our bedroom from the living area.

“Watching our daughter’s surgery was tense,” he says as he sets me on my feet. “I’ve discovered there’s only one thing on Eden that can relieve that much tension, my love. How about we take advantage of our daughter’s nap?”

“Whatever will we do?”

“Sometimes I forget how much my mate loves dirty talk. I can oblige.”



Dear Reader

I hope you enjoyed Barada and Jessica's story. They both came a long way to find true love, happiness, and a family!

This was a difficult book to write because there was no actual touching throughout so much of the book. In a novel, those little pats, hugs, and cuddles don't seem like much until you create characters who can't engage in them. I hope I made their amazing love story worth your wait.

Speaking of waiting, I think I might have used the bait-and-switch technique about that **tentacle penis**. I really wanted to go there... until I realized many readers might NOT have wanted that. So I came up with the perfect compromise.

[Just follow this link to get the FREE bonus epilogue](#) where I guarantee you'll get a glimpse into Barada and Jessica's walk on the wild side with a **steampunk-themed tentacle**. Just for being such good sports and waiting, I've thrown in a **tentacle tongue** as well.

What's next in the Alanaverse? I'm kind of on an orc kick. [So here's a link to my new orc series.](#) If you're looking for something similar to the Galaxy Artificials, I'd say the closest I can suggest is [Hybrid Hearts](#). These books are sweet and spicy! Continue reading for the Sneak Peek of the first in that series.

As usual, let me give you begging puppy eyes with a request for a review or a rating. Amazon should have already prompted you with the option of giving me five stars. Ratings and reviews are super important to indie authors like me. The number and strength of my reviews help new readers find and take a chance on me, so thanks in advance for that.

I love to hear from my readers. Tell me what you think.

Hugs,

Alana



Sneak Peek: Sugar and Splice

Sugar and Splice

A Hybrid Lion-Man and the Human Baker He Loves

(Hybrid Hearts Book 1)

Chapter One **Jenna**

Two emotions war inside me. Excitement and Fear. No. It's not fear, it's closer to terror.

At some point today, I'll be signing away the next 18 months of my life. When I put it like that, it doesn't sound like a big deal. People in the military enlist for two or more years all the time.

It's just that they know what they're signing on for. I don't. And they're allowed to stay in touch with family and friends. Me? I'll be totally isolated.

The words "totally isolated" ring in my head. That's going to be difficult.

To combat the terror skittering through my body like a live wire, I focus on the positives. When I walk out of this super-secret program, my student debt of \$98,371, will be canceled. That alone is almost worth the price of admission.

I wouldn't have signed on, though, if they hadn't sweetened the deal by offering me a salary of \$100,000 a year. That's more than twice what I could get as a chef straight out of school.

With free room and board, that inflated salary will be mostly intact when I exit the program in 18 months and I'll be able to open my own bakery. I've been toying with a business plan and already have a name: The Sugar Rush.

Though this program is run by the military, I'm not scared for my life. They promised I'd have my own room and would never be in danger or even leave the US. When I told my parents, they asked if it was at Area 51. Very funny.

The program put me up at a decent motel in San Antonio, Texas last night. Right now, I'm boarding a van along with 19 other recruits. I imagine we're on our way to what will be our ultimate destination.

Now that all of us are gathered in one place, my shit detector issues a red alert as I wonder why all of us are female. As my anxiety ramps, a petite blonde slides into the seat next to me and asks in a gentle Southern drawl, "Where do you think they're taking us?"

I bite back my initial response, "nowhere good," and shrug.

Our driver is a hulking two-hundred-pound guy wearing military fatigues and a pair of thick, dark sunglasses. He taps his finger against the “do not distract the driver” sign every time one of us steps forward to speak to him. It does not give a warm, fuzzy feeling. Just the opposite, it spikes my fear.

The little transport bus is quiet for the first half hour. We left civilization a while ago and are traveling through acres filled with scrubby bushes and occasional trees when the ice breaks and we all talk at once.

I’m not the only person who’s terrified about the contract we were told we’d have to sign the moment we reach our destination. It seems we’re all worried about where we’re going and what they expect us to do for the inflated wages we’re going to receive.

That old adage “beware of strangers bearing gifts” pops into my mind. It doesn’t bode well, especially since the government isn’t known for its warmhearted generosity.

“I looked into this as far as the Internet would take me, but I’m no hacker.” This is the woman who introduced herself as Riley.

Her bespectacled face is framed by a no-nonsense cut of straight, brown hair. Perhaps she’s a kindred spirit, because I sense a mountain of insecurity underneath her assured presence.

“Though the trail went cold no matter how hard I searched, one thing I discovered was that this is genuinely connected to the United States military. I not only read the contract they

sent us, I had an attorney friend look it over. She confirmed they're not allowed to harm or use us as guinea pigs without our consent."

"Good to know." My seatmate has introduced herself as Amber Dawn, which sounds even more charming the way she pronounces it—Ambuh. Wasn't there an old country music song by that name? No. That wasn't Amber Dawn. It was Delta Dawn.

We share a bit more about ourselves, then fall silent as the bus motors farther into what appears to be little more than wasteland. We're traveling near-deserted highways that empty into two-lane roads. For miles we've seen nothing but bushes, trees, and the remnants of dead towns.

I've squished my hands between my thighs to keep Amber from seeing them flutter. I don't want to say anything gloomy in case all the women are feeling optimistic, but all the niggling worries that had been simmering quietly in the back of my mind have sprung up, larger than life.

It's not like we're all rocket scientists. I'm a pastry chef, for goodness' sake. Riley said she's a librarian, and Amber is a hairdresser. What does the military want with us? I don't know, but the farther we travel, the more I believe I'm not going to like the explanation.

Chapter Two

Jenna

It's late afternoon when we arrive at our destination. We left what would qualify as "sparsely populated" hours ago and are securely in "middle of nowhere" territory now. We haven't seen any sign of humans for miles.

We pull through one of those huge, rustic gates with telephone-size poles as uprights. It's barren up ahead. No structures of any kind.

Finally, we see a rustic, old-fashioned town.

"I know this place."

I think this woman with long, light-brown hair introduced herself as Olivia. Did she say she worked in retail? This makes me even more curious. What would the military want with a sales clerk? Do they consider us all... expendable?

"I saw a segment about it on one of the news shows. This looks like the set for a TV show in the 60s. See that?" She points to what looks like an old Western town. "That was Main Street in the fictional town called Rattlesnake Flats."

My gaze snaps out the window as I search the brush-studded dirt for reptiles. Olivia unknowingly just added one more item to my things-to-be-frightened-of list.

Did she say Main Street? That's an interesting word to use. I guess it fits the definition, but barely. More than four lanes wide, it's simply made of dirt. It's bordered on both sides by what look like 1800s Old West buildings. What the hell are we doing here?

My growing fear that something isn't quite right has my thoughts colliding in a drumbeat of fear. Suddenly, I don't want to go through with this.

Everyone's tired, and I imagine they're all as desperate to pee as I am. Olivia's explanation that we're on some antique TV set is met with little more than an eruption of quiet murmurs. I guess we'll all find out what we're in for soon enough.

My seatmate Amber, who scrolled on her phone every time we had cell service, says, "I was double-checking the documents they sent. We're allowed one more chance to opt-out before we sign our contracts."

This gives me a modicum of comfort. I won't enjoy a long trip back to the San Antonio Airport, but no amount of money is going to be worth this.

Amber glances out the window and says, "Unless things start to look up, I might ask them to take me back as soon as I pee." I imagine the ride back won't be nearly as terrifying as our trip here.

We're herded off the bus into a structure that might be forty years old or might have been built yesterday in a wooden, rustic style. It's labeled "Town Hall" on a wide, wooden plank over the double front doors.

The bus driver breaks his silence for the first time since we embarked. "I'll bring your luggage to your rooms as soon as we've inspected it for contraband."

Contraband. That was clearly spelled out in our initial paperwork. “No electronics or communication devices of any kind. Your cell phones will be confiscated upon arrival and returned when your contractual commitment ends. No firearms, weapons, alcohol, or drugs.”

Once we’re through the wooden double doors, I half expect to see a modern military facility with banks of computers. I’d wondered if our destination would be underground, like Stargate, or Area 51.

Instead, it looks like an old-fashioned wooden town hall, only instead of benches, there are comfy couches scattered around, all facing a raised dais at one end.

Military men wearing camo greet us with plastic-wrapped sandwiches, chips, bottles of water, and directions to the nearby women’s room.

Twenty minutes later, we’ve pottied and eaten and are sitting in the main area waiting for our turn to sign our contracts. There are five desks set up at the periphery of the large, high-ceilinged room, each laden with stacks of paperwork.

When I’m called to approach one of the desks, a young military man greets me, introduces himself as Corporal Barton, places his hand on a stack of paperwork at least ten inches high and begins what must be a memorized speech.

“This contract enumerates in legal language what has already been explained to you via electronic correspondence. You’ll be given a furnished single room equipped with appropriate

clothing. Any internet usage will be performed on computers provided to you. They are heavily monitored.”

He opens the stack to a page marked by a red post-it arrow and has me initial what I guess is the clause he just explained.

“You are allowed zero communication with outside parties. Violation of this rule will result in you spending the rest of your stay in our brig.”

He opens the stack to a different page and has me initial, then continues to enumerate the highlights of what I’ve already read or been told.

I’m half listening to him, half contemplating if I want to bail. Thus far, I’ve only initialed things. I haven’t given my signature yet. I think there’s still time to use my get-out-of-jail-free card and ask to go back to the airport.

His humorless speech is winding down. Any minute now, I’m going to need to make up my mind.

“I’m to show you this,” he says as he opens a laptop he’s been carrying over his shoulder on a webbed strap.

The computer is already teed up to my online banking. All I have to do is enter my username and password to see my pathetic balance.

“To ensure you stay, the program has decided to sweeten the deal. The moment you sign the contract, I’m authorized to transfer an additional \$25,000 into your account.”

He’s a soldier, not a salesman. He makes no effort to convince me. There is no sales pitch.

The deal was good before this extra twenty-five grand. If it hadn't sounded good, I wouldn't be here. Am I willing to sign the next year and a half of my life away? It's time to make my choice.

The other women at the four other desks have already signed their contracts and are sitting on couches, looking more relaxed than when we arrived.

With a shrug and a wince, I say, "I guess I'm going to do this." The pit of my stomach squeezes, evidently voting nay to my logical mind's yay. Two years from now, this whole affair will be in my rearview mirror, and I'll be searching for a location to open my bakery.

A moment later, I've signed, watched \$25,000 appear in my account, and am back on the couch, sitting between Amber and Riley.

"We'll get to know each other," Amber drawls. "We can make this fun... whatever it is."

"The money is for my family," Riley says. "My mom has cancer and no insurance. The program made an exception and will be dropping five percent of my money into my parents' bank account each month." She nods, more to herself than us. "It's the right thing to do."

A door on the far side of the room bangs open. I may not know a bar from a stripe, much less what they mean on a military uniform, but by this guy's bearing, I have no doubt he's in charge. The male is in his fifties with short-cropped steel-gray

hair. With two soldiers flanking him on each side, he marches onto the dais.

“Well, ladies. It’s about time we tell you what you just signed on for.”

Chapter Three

Noble

Threat assessment: high. Red alert. Scan for risks.

The guards have been acting oddly all day. I have seen nothing like this since they moved us from the underground facility in Nevada a month ago. Something big is brewing.

Jones works nights, Barrington works days. They never work the same shift, but, just as I suspected, a deep inhale confirms they’re both here now.

Staffing is higher today. The Colonel must be expecting trouble. I need to figure out what’s going to happen next and protect myself from danger.

Excitement and fear surge through me, sharpening my senses.

Until they allow us out of our rooms, I sit on my bed, back ramrod straight, trying to anticipate what’s coming next. It’s been my experience that change is never good. Not for us—the spliced.

When they unlock our doors, I take the corner seat in the dayroom. My back is to the wall—it’s easily defensible. I motion to my trusted friends to join me.

Hours later, after brainstorming all morning, we're not certain what's happening, though we've enumerated twenty or thirty possibilities.

Nyx is a deep thinker. As soon as we come up with an idea, the naga drills down, imagines a hundred ways it could play out, and suggests five methods of counterattack.

"It could be nothing." Brock says with a shrug. He's one of my closest friends. The male with obvious bear DNA is solid, has my back, and would jump in front of a bullet for me. But he's just too trusting. How many times have I warned him humans can't always be believed? And how many times have I been right? Almost all of them.

"Look at Franklin." I thrust my chin toward the guard near the door. "There are beads of sweat on his upper lip. He's scared. Look at his carriage. He's moving differently because his gun has more ammo in it than usual. More ammo, Brock. They're planning something."

"And when the humans are planning something, it usually isn't good for us splicers." This is Warren. He always has that lean, hungry, angry look. Where Brock is easygoing and optimistic, Warren is as serious as anyone here.

He takes an exaggerated sniff. When it comes to sense of smell, he's the best of us.

"You smell that?" His nose is scrunching as he repeatedly sniffs, lifting his shaggy, wolf-like head to catch a better whiff.

“What is it?” I ask. Whatever it is, it must be subtle. I can’t even smell it yet, much less figure out what it is.

“Never smelled anything like it before.”

“Must be dangerous.” When Brock, our calm, resident bear, is worried, we all take note.

“Whatever comes next,” Warren says as a few more guards enter the dayroom. “The four of us are going to stick together.”

“Yes. We’ll have each other’s backs.”

Jenna

Without pausing for formalities, the man who took the little stage says, “I’m Colonel Slater. Welcome. After being vetted for months and traveling cross-country, I imagine you want to know what’s so secret. Now that all those non-disclosure agreements have been signed,” he glances at the five desks, each covered with four tall stacks of signed contracts, “I’m going to start with a bit of background.”

I doubt he’s over five foot ten, but his presence is commanding. More than his uniform, it’s his posture and no-nonsense expression that proclaim his years in the military. I don’t expect any sugarcoating as the brush-cut, graying officer launches into his story.

“Five years ago, my team heard rumors of a military science project gone rogue. The misguided sociopaths were well-funded in their pursuit of creating supersoldiers.”

He shakes his head in disgust, which somehow makes me like him a little more.

“It took two years of hunting to find the facility, which had been recently abandoned, and another six months to track them down again. When we breached the facility, this is what we found.”

The wall behind him becomes a giant screen as images are projected onto it. It takes a moment for my mind to interpret what I’m seeing. Uniformed men are rescuing men from cells so small they’re barely big enough for the inhabitants to lie down.

Because the pictures are projected onto the log walls of the room, it’s not easy to make sense of what I’m seeing, but after a moment, things become clear.

They’re not rescuing men. Not exactly. Most are bipedal and upright, but they all have animal traits. Some feline, some lupine, some like great, shaggy bears, and is that a snake-guy slithering out of his cage?

I don’t know who reached out to whom, but I’m reassured when I realize Riley, Amber, and I are holding hands. Amber is whimpering, unable to form sentences, while Riley keeps repeating, “What the fuck?”

The Colonel stepped to the side so we could have a better view of the film, but he’s now in front of the lectern again.

“Those males, one hundred of them, were rescued three years ago. They’d been treated like animals and knew very little about the real world. We’ve rehabilitated them, taught them to read and write, along with other basic skills. We’ve begun the

process of socialization, but until today, they've only been exposed to men."

They stop the film and turn the lights up. The Colonel looks at each of us in turn before he adds, "We've chosen the twenty most compliant males, those we've deemed ready for the next phase of the program. That's where you ladies come in. You are the next step in socializing these males."

My mind is spinning. In the last hour, I've gone from being certain I would bolt and return to my life back in St. Louis, to reluctantly signing an eighteen-month contract, to extreme empathy for those poor unfortunates up on the screen.

Did he say socialize? I'm not sure what he means, but my mind throws me pictures of all the heinous things a corrupt, armed military could force a bunch of defenseless women to do. I have the very scary, very insistent thought that we're going to be given to these males as sexy human treats. My racing heart feels as if it's going to explode in my chest.

[Continue reading Sugar and Splice here.](#)



Many Thanks

It takes a village to bring a book to life. Thanks to my developmental editor, Dr. Lee. A big shout out to my Assistant, Stephanie, who functions as an early reader as well as a second brain. Of course, my cat, Kosmo, without whom I wouldn't be reminded to get up every so often, even if it is to give him more food.

Thanks also to early readers Marianne K., Gill V., Hilga H., Naomi S., Jhane M., Sooz P., Gill V., and Nancy R. They give me additional feedback and support.



About Alana Khan

Alana Khan is a Pinnacle Award-winning, USA TODAY Bestselling author whose pen traverses galaxies and explores the extraordinary.

In a life as diverse as her stories, Alana boasts IMDB film credits, thrilling Harley adventures on open roads, and a stint as a professional spoon player—because, why not?

With a background as a psychotherapist, she delves into the human psyche, enriching her storytelling.

Join her on fantastical journeys through her novels, where cosmic romance and monstrous love merge with spice as hot as a Carolina Reaper chili pepper.

Go to my [website for FREE books.](#)

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Want more of my books?

[Galaxy Gladiators Alien Abduction Romance Series](#)

This 19-book series can be read as standalones, although it's fun to read them in order because the books are full of that rich, delicious found-family trope where people with nothing in common form connections that are stronger than blood. You'll grow to love this ragtag bunch of escaped slaves and the human women they rescue. Or do the women rescue them? Full of action, romance, and spice.

[Galaxy Pirates Alien Abduction Romance Series](#)

As the name implies, these alien Robin Hoods are scoundrels and rascals. Opportunists all, they've never met a human damsel in distress who wasn't worth saving. Full of action, romance, daring capers, and spice. P.S. The bad guys always lose their money and our pirates walk away all the richer.

[Galaxy Sanctuary Alien Abduction Romance Series](#)

There's one thing about flying across the galaxy righting wrongs (the Gladiator series) or stealing from people who

deserve it (the Pirates series)—you can't have kids on a fighting ship. Some worthy freed gladiators end up on planet Fairea and find themselves on a safe parcel of acreage, yet in desperate need of funds. Between jostling for control of the operation and the lengths they must go to stay safe and keep the lights on, there is plenty of action, romance, and steam.

[Galaxy Warriors Alien Abduction Romance Series](#)

What was I thinking writing 19 books in the Galaxy Gladiators series? Call it temporary insanity. This series is similar to Gladiators, but lets new readers jump in without knowing any backstory. Action, adventure, my trademark spice, and romance.

[Galaxy Games Hostile Planet Alien Romance Series](#)

All the heart-pounding passion and gut-clenching action I could cram onto the page. This series will grab you by the throat from the first page and never let you go. More action and hotter than previous series. And love. Did I forget to mention love?

[Rescued by the Monsters Reverse Harem Romance series](#)

In a future dystopian Earth, males have been spliced with animal DNA. Human women have been reduced to chattel and when they say no, even once, they're banished Down Below to where the "monsters" live. This series will soon have you wondering just who the monsters are as the human women each bond with three adoring human/animal hybrids.

[Arixxia Fields: A Steamy Small-Town Alien Romance Series](#)

Are you ready to party? I imagine so, after reading all the drama in all my previous series. Each of these books is short, sexy, romantic, and FUN. Each revolves around a holiday. Check them out.

[Hybrid Hearts Series](#)

Bred to be soldiers, these rescued genetically engineered males are all given a new lease on life. How does the United States military plan to do that? They create an isolated town with cute shops and train the males in new jobs. How about a sexy lion-man baker for starters?

[Galaxy Artificials Series](#)

Packed with passion and spice, USA TODAY Bestselling author Alana Khan brings robots to life in this science fiction romance series. Oh yeah, she manages to give the metallic buckets of bolts smokin' hot humanoid bodies, too.

[Orcfire Series](#)

Twenty-five years ago, thousands of Others (orcs, nagas, minotaurs, and other species only known in fairytales) fell onto the burning sands of the Mojave Desert with no way to go home. They were rounded up by the U.S. Military and placed in a fenced enclosure on the outskirts of Los Angeles. The OrcFire series features one hot, green, tusked orc as the hero of each book as they battle fires and so much more to find

their happily ever after. The OrcFire series will be hot, hot, hot in all ways.

[Cosmic Kissed \(Earthbound Alien Romance Series\)](#)

This fun duet manages to make reptilians sexy (trust me). Two alien brothers are abducted to Earth. Each gets his own book and manages to get the girl in this upside-down take on alien abduction.

[Monster on Board \(written with USA TODAY Bestselling author Ava Ross\)](#)

What happens when two USA TODAY Bestselling sci-fi romance authors get together to have some fun? We write these entertaining, short, and sexy books set in space. They're all standalones, so take your pick of an orc, an ogre, a merman, or a hunky blue-winged alien. Or take them all!

[Treasured by the Zinn Alien Abduction Romance Series](#)

The US government gave the Zinns permission to take human women as wives. Let's just say the unsuspecting women, who know nothing of this unsavory deal, are none too happy—until they fall in love.

[Billionaire Doms of Blackstone \(written as Deja Blue\)](#)

Alana's only contemporaries. The heroes are all doms, the women are only happy to serve.

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