



THE
YEARNING

GALAXY ARTIFICIALS 1

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The Yearning

Book One in the Galaxy Artificials Series

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Temptation Of The Horizontal LLC

The Yearning: Book One in the Galaxy Artificial Series by Alana Khan

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Cover by Cameron Kamenicky

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Dear Reader

Sneak Peek: The Awakening: Book Two

Many Thanks

Want More Of My Books?



Chapter One

Present Day

In space aboard the cruise vessel *Travelers' Paradise*

Evelyn

Please, please, please, please, I chant to myself, let me wake up from this nightmare.

I know, I should have quit wishing for this hours ago. I need to realize this is my new reality and try to think my way out of this predicament. The problem is, there is no escape.

Last night I went to sleep in my tiny house. Today I woke up on a spaceship. As soon as my boar-faced alien captors pulled me out of a small egg-shaped pod, they snapped a slave collar around my neck, equipped me with a subdural translator, and dragged me aboard a different craft. Which is where I am now.

When I last went to sleep, aliens, spaceships and stasis pods were for movies. Translators and high-tech slave collars were a figment of some screenwriter's imagination. I pinch myself,

but adding another bruise to my skin doesn't change my reality.

This is real! My heart hammers and sweat blooms on my upper lip. I feel myself flipping into total panic mode, but even in my terror, my self-preservation instincts kick in. I need to stay still and not make a sound.

Focus, Eve!

From what I could see as they raced me through hallways in the tiny cage I'm in now, I'm on something resembling a cruise ship. I always wanted to take a luxury cruise, just not in some glorified birdcage wearing a deadly shock collar.

Somewhere in today's travels, one of my captors zapped me, told me the pain was a one on a scale of one to ten, and said they set my collar to zap me at a five if I made another sound or didn't behave for my owners. Owners? I'm a quick learner. Even though I have a hundred questions and a thousand protests flying through my brain, I haven't made a peep.

"What, Garrn?" a laughing female voice asks as the door to the suite opens. "What could be a more wonderful surprise than taking me on the cruise of a lifetime?"

Even though I'm cramped in this tiny cage they shoved into a closet, the louvered doors allow me to hear and get glimpses of what's happening in the main room.

My thundering heart squeezes in my chest. I almost gasp before I clamp my hand over my mouth. Although I thought

nothing could shock me more than my alien abduction, the sight I see is so terrifying I can barely hold back a scream.

The couple entering the suite are dressed in finery. Well, I guess it's finery. But nothing can hide the fact that they're reptilians. Reptilian humanoids. They walk on two feet and have two arms, but their faces belong in the reptile house at the zoo.

They're both about six feet tall, have elongated jaws, exposed deadly looking teeth, no hair, no ears, vertical black slits in yellow eyes, and ochre and tan scales. Yeah, ugly reptilian aliens. I'm no rocket scientist, but I'm pretty sure they're my new owners. There are a thousand things I hate about my new situation, but top of the list? I hate snakes.

"What's better than this first-class suite on one of the finest cruise lines in the sector, my love? A present," the male says. Well, I guess he's a male. I'm in upside-down world. Maybe that's the female. Maybe they're both intersexed. How would I know?

"Oh!" She claps and gives a little hop.

A bubble of hysterical laughter almost escapes my mouth as the six-foot, snake-face lady acts like a beautiful ingenue in an old-time movie.

"I thought this would spice up our bed-play," he says with what I assume is either a smile or a leer as he opens the door to my little closet.

"What is this?" she asks as she steps closer.

Perhaps I'm reading things into this, but she does not look happy about hubby's new addition to the bedroom. She looks furious. This doesn't bode well for him—or me.

He makes a show of grabbing the remote to my collar. With that conspicuously in hand, he opens my cage and thunders, "Come."

I emerge from the tiny enclosure and take a moment to stand since every muscle in my body is cramping and I'm trembling like a leaf in a cyclone.

"A human!" His voice is filled with obvious pride. "They're a black-market commodity. I paid a pretty credit for her. They're supposed to be," his voice lowers confidentially, "very fun in bed."

"For *whom*?" she replies, her voice icy.

"Usss, dear. There are things you've wanted to try. Here you go!"

I may not have a lot of romantic experience, but I know that bringing a third person into a relationship rarely fixes what's broken.

How can logical thoughts continue to form in my panicked brain? I passed terror long ago and am slipping into numb mode.

The female is looking more furious by the minute. Her lips are vibrating and those eerie, hollow eyes have narrowed. The male appears to be seeing the error of his ways when klaxons sound.

I discovered on the three-day budget cruise I took to the Bahamas that all cruises begin with a lifeboat drill. It's mandatory in the United States. I'm not sure this is a drill, though. On my cruise, there were announcements about where to go and what to do, along with the reassuring repetition that this was only a drill. I'm not hearing any of that.

Now, in addition to the relentless noise of the klaxons, red lights are blinking. If I can read the expression on the two reptilians' faces, they don't think this is a drill, either.

"Attention! Attention! This is not a drill! All first-class passengers, please proceed in an orderly fashion to your escape pods. For those of you not in first-class accommodations, may your gods have mercy on your souls."

The male said "first class" a moment ago. Didn't he?

"What's our pod number?" the female asks, her voice strained with fear.

A loud noise, like an explosion, almost obliterates his answer, but he says, "532, sssame as our cabin."

Okay, okay, Eve, I tell myself. Abducted from Earth, shocked, thrown into a cage, and given to reptiles for bed-play. At least you have a ticket off this doomed spaceship.

"What about *her*?" the female asks with distaste.

"She's considered *luggage*," he says with a shrug as he tosses my collar controller to the floor. He grabs her hand and pulls her out the door.

I experience a complete nervous breakdown as my thoughts scatter to the wind and my lips vibrate in terror. Forcing myself to shift out of numb mode, I gather my thoughts, grab the controller, and hurry to the open doorway. It's complete mayhem out there. People are screaming and running through the opulent hallways. Shades of *Titanic*, only less orderly.

I'm going to follow the crowd. Carefully. Perhaps some of the first-class folks will get trampled and I'll snag an empty seat in an escape pod.

While I wait for the thundering herd to pass, I inspect the collar controller. When I see the icon that looks surprisingly like the unlock button on my car fob, I hold my breath and push it. After I hear it unlock, I tear the collar off and toss it to the floor.

Even though my blood is pounding so hard I can hear my heartbeat whoosh in my ears, I have enough of my wits about me to notice more than a dozen different alien species running down the hallway. I guess nothing could shock me now.

Just like in American airplanes, there are strips of light showing the way to the escape pods. After watching all those people pass, it's clear all the pods will be taken by the time I get there. Perhaps I should just stay where I am and hum "God Save the Queen" or something, like they did on the *Titanic*.

Another explosion concusses the air. This time it's not just noise, it's accompanied by a little jolt, and then a massive one.

I'm new to space and have no idea what's going on. Perhaps we're being attacked or maybe the engine blew up. Hitting an

iceberg is far down on the list of possibilities.

I hurry in the opposite direction of the crowd. There were hundreds of people going that way, and by the announcement I heard, there won't be nearly enough escape pods. Maybe I can find a way off this vessel, but it isn't in the mob's direction.

My heart is pounding against my chest wall, my hands are fisted at my sides, and my teeth are clenched so hard I wonder if I'm going to crack a molar as I hurry through the hallways in the direction everyone came from.

Skirting the heavily traveled areas, I find a stairwell and take it down flight after flight of stairs. Down is the direction of the engine room, right? That's where they are in every movie I've ever watched.

Maybe the ship has some pods for their crew? They wouldn't be where the paying customers congregate though, would they? Wouldn't want the fancy guests seeing the poor working stiffs in their dirty overalls, right?

I'm panting with the effort of running down halls and stairways. This is one enormous cruise ship. After hurrying down about thirty flights, I'm now in the bowels of the ship. I put all my money on one roulette number. I hope it pays off.

It's a flurry of activity down here. The staff are trying to maneuver the damaged ship. The officers' speech is rapid and urgent as they give orders.

Perhaps there is a God, because it looks to me as though there's an entire wall of hatches to my left. Could those be

escape pods? The translator lets me understand speech, but I'm clueless about alien writing. Maybe they're just giant garbage chutes. At least that might be a painless way to go.

The ship shudders again, jolting so harshly I fall against the stairway wall.

"I'm leaving!" a squat amphibious alien shouts as soon as the ship stops juddering from the last concussion. He makes his way to the wall of pods and slaps his palm on a red button to the right of one of them. Just as the door opens, one of his coworkers lasers him dead.

Shit.

"Does anyone else want to leave before the captain gives the order?" the male with the laser asks.

Everyone studiously avoids answering, or even looking. They all put their heads down and return to work.

I'm glad I trusted my instincts. I've found an empty escape pod, a whole wall of them! All I have to do now is cross a gymnasium-sized room full of bustling aliens to get to it.

Well, Eve, what's the alternative?

I turn to my left, hugging the wall and moving slowly. They're all totally focused on what looks to be a fool's errand—saving this damaged ship.

Miraculously, I reach the wall of pods. The open one with that unfortunate amphibian's carcass half in and half out of it is on the other end of the row. Luckily, I don't need that one. I saw how he opened it.

After slamming my palm on the first red button I reach, the door slides open at the same moment another explosion rocks the vessel with a loud boom. No one is paying any attention to me.

I can't read alien writing, but they must have designed this pod with that in mind, because the biggest thing on the dashboard is a large, red button almost the size of my palm. I sit in the single chair, which straps me in as soon as my weight hits the seat.

When I hear the harness click into place, I pound my fist on the button. The door slides closed, I hear metal grinding on metal, and the pod breaks free of the ship.

I'm in a round metal ball maybe six feet in diameter. The navigation screen has powered to life and acts as a window.

Although I took off less than a minute ago, I must already be hundreds of miles away when the ship explodes. The blaze is not as spectacular as I expected. There's no oxygen for things to burn in space. I just see the mammoth vessel explode into a million pieces of debris.

I'm in the vast darkness of space. Black velvet studded with diamonds. I don't know how to drive this thing and have no idea where I'm going. Maybe I would have been better off going down with the ship.



Chapter Two

4²⁰

I look up into the sky toward the sound. It is a faint whistle. There. An object is hurtling toward the ground. I run toward its point of impact before it even hits the ground.

I should not do this. It could result in a death sentence. But I run toward it anyway. What if someone needs help?

Whatever crashed on this planet glistens in the suns. It is metal, definitely something made by sentient beings.

It was a round orb. Now it is flat on the side that hit the ground. This is an escape pod. I doubt a humanoid could survive that brutal collision, but I will investigate in case I can help someone.

No doorway is visible. It must be smashed into the sand.

The metal is not glowing red, but it has to be hot from its trip through the atmosphere. If by some miracle there is a living being inside, they must be cooking by now.

After pushing the orb over, I spot the doorway, but it is mangled so badly that I have to work to force it open. The thought that someone might be burning up inside pushes me to move even faster. Using all my strength, I pry it open.

A body.

I reach in and snap the harness straps holding her in, then pull her out of the wreckage.

Poor thing. She is a tiny Earther. I have read about this species. I will bury her behind my shack, then come back to scavenge the wreckage for parts.

I dip my head to look at her. *She has a pretty face*, I think as I jog through the sand toward my shack.

Her body does not look ruined. She must have died from the heat inside the capsule. It was built well. Despite the cataclysmic force of the crash, I see no blood. That is what happens when humanoids get hurt, correct?

I have tried to fix dead things before. Years ago, when I would find the carcass of one of the little *ribbles* that burrow in the sand, I tried to bring them back to life. It never worked.

I read up on it on the Intergalactic Database. My conclusion? Dead is dead.

I lay her in the sliver of shade behind the shack and grab my adze. I like it better than a shovel. It feels good in my hands. Familiar.

Before I dig, though, I cannot get the idea out of my mind to try to resurrect the pretty Earther. There is a small vessel of

water on the shelf near the door. I pour it onto the seam of her lips. It just dribbles down her cheek and runs in rivulets to the sand.

As I turn to start digging her grave, I catch movement out of the corner of my eye.

She is breathing! I see her chest rise and fall—gently, but she is breathing.

Moving into action, I sit behind her and lift her head onto my lap. I use more force, opening her jaw so the water can trickle into her mouth. Some slides down the back of her tongue, but she does not open her eyes.

I lift her to bring her into the shed, grabbing a rag along the way. After saturating it with water, I wipe her face. I have never touched a humanoid before. I do not know if they are supposed to be this temperature. Is she too hot? Too cold?

I tear off her clothes to check for broken bones and blood, but she looks to be in perfect shape.

I should protect myself. That should be my top priority. What if she is from the MarZan cartel? They would pull my chip if they knew what I have been doing. Hiding the incriminating evidence should be the first thing I do.

But instead, I tell the 3D printer to make her a bed. All the books I read and vids I watch show that. Humanoids like beds. I will make her one.

Her clothes are ruined—I did that. I will make her some clothes next. For some reason, most humanoids do not like to

walk around without wearing garments of some kind.



Chapter Three

Evelyn

I thought I'd lived a good life, but I must have gone to hell. It's a thousand degrees here. For a moment I do a life review, trying to figure out what I did wrong. I used to make fun of Susan Bruener in grade school, but I reached out through Facebook a few years back and apologized. Other than that, I don't know what would have sent me to hell.

Every single muscle in my body hurts. No, every single cell. I guess that makes sense. Isn't that how they describe hell? Eternal misery and torture?

And thirsty. I'm so thirsty. Am I forever damned to be hot and miserable and thirsty?

"You are awake." It's a man's voice.

I keep my eyes closed for a moment, terrified of seeing a devil. Maybe he's handsome like Lucifer on TV and doesn't look like every other rendering of Satan since time immemorial.

I can't stall all day. When my eyes flicker open I see... Ultron. I'm no expert on the Marvel franchise, but isn't he a bad guy? I guess that fits if I'm in hell.

He's a robot, alright. Seven feet tall if he's an inch. His physique is a bodybuilder's dream, except it's made of metal. His face is... terrifying. His eyes are red. His mouth is little more than a silver slash.

He reaches out toward me, and I pee my pants. No. Wait. I'm not wearing pants. I'm naked on the filthy, sandy floor of an old wooden shack in a puddle of my own piss. In my own defense, I did have a really full bladder.

I was hoping I'd made it up, but this really is hell.

"You must be afraid," the robot says in a gravelly voice designed to strike fear into someone's heart. "Let me help."

His metallic arm reaches out to me again and just waits for me to grab it.

My mind is flying, racing with questions. My face, however, can't move to ask a single one.

"Let me help." The arm gestures again with no menace. "I have extra clothes. Here is a wet cloth."

Mom died when I was young. I don't remember her. My dad's mom hinted once that my mother had "mental problems." I know what's happening. I've lost my mind. Boar-faced aliens? Reptilians? An alien cruise ship? Explosions? An escape pod? And now an Ultron knockoff?

Whew. Good to know I'm simply insane and I'm not in the bowels of hell or locked in a filthy miner's shack with a robot ... or is it a cyborg... an android?

Happily convinced this is just some fever dream, I find the balls to ask, "So, are you a robot or a cyborg? I've never been able to keep them straight."



Chapter Four

Evelyn
“I am 420. Let me help you up.”

He reaches toward me again. This time I take his hand and let him lift me to standing.

A dozen things bombard me at once: how much my body hurts, how blazing hot it is, and that I’m naked in front of the robot. But the awareness at the top of my list is that this guy is at least seven feet tall. And his red-eyed face is scary as hell.

“Do you want this cloth to clean your mess?” he asks, as if peeing myself is a minor inconvenience.

“Uh, yeah. Thanks.”

He watches, his gaze unblinking.

He’s just a bunch of circuit boards or chips, I tell myself. He’s incapable of perving on you.

I clean the remnants of my ignominious fear reaction, then look around for my clothes. They’re in shreds. Big guy must

have torn them off me. I give him serious side-eye as I wonder if maybe he *is* capable of perving on me.

I doubt it, though. Look at him. His hands are clasped in front of him. He's bent at the waist. He may look like a seven-foot Terminator, but his posture screams Jeeves, the butler.

Picking up my shredded shirt, I hold it up to him as a visual aid. "I won't be able to wear this." I try to keep the scolding tone out of my voice. For all I know, he's paging through different ways to kill me in that computer mind of his. I should know better than to piss him off.

"I am making you new clothes with the 3D printer."

Really?

I've been so consumed with his humongous self I really haven't taken a look around the shack. I went on a gold mine tour once when I visited Colorado. This reminds me of it. Old boards that gap so the light of day beams in, dust everywhere. Even all the tools leaning up against the walls look like antiques. But there in the corner is what I assume is a 3D printer, and it is hard at work making clothes.

"Could I have some water?"

"Yes. Here."

He points to a bucket near a wall. Part of me wonders if I should take the risk of putting my back to him while I squat to cup my hands for a drink. *If he wanted to kill you, you'd already be dead, Eve*, I try to reassure myself.

I kneel, cup my hands, and drink mouthfuls of water. I wish it was cool and refreshing, but it's not. It's been in that bucket a long time and is brackish and as hot as the ambient temperature. But it's wet and is hopefully the same that keeps people alive on Earth.

He retrieves a piece of clothing from the printer and hands me a dress.

"Thanks," I say as I stand, then slip the almost-floor-length thing over my head.

"I made you a bed," he says as he motions to a mattress pushed against the back wall.

For a split second, I wonder if he said, "I made the bed," but there aren't any sheets, pillows, or blankets on it. I think he means he made the bed with the printer.

As I glance around again, I notice there is a front and back door, but no other rooms. There also aren't any chairs, tables, and until a few minutes ago, I guess there wasn't a bed. Obviously, cyborgs don't sleep. Or sit. Or drink potable water. Or eat, which is too bad because I think it's been days since I've had any food.

"Why are you here?" he asks.

I sink onto the mattress and tell him about my abduction, the reptilians, the cruise disaster, and my escape. It's interesting to talk to him. Kind of like telling my Alexa at home about my day. She's totally nonjudgmental, but not a very good conversationalist.

“What about MarZan?”

For the first time since I met him, there’s something akin to emotion in his voice. If I had to guess, I’d say he’s suspicious.

“MarZan?”

“Certainly you have heard of it. It is one of the biggest cartels in the galaxy.”

He’s definitely suspicious, and I think he’s baiting me.

“Weren’t you listening? I said I was recently abducted from Earth. As far as I knew until a few days ago, we were the only sentient beings in the universe. So, no, I don’t know a thing about MarZan.”

He stands taller, which I didn’t think was possible, and stares at me. He’s a wall of strength. Wide shoulders, slim waist, thighs built for marathons. He’s made all the more imposing because all his muscles are exposed gleaming silver metal.

And that stare, that glowing, red, unblinking stare. It’s totally unnerving. I think that’s the point. He’s interrogating me, just staring until I crack. If his fixed stare doesn’t get me to talk, will he work me over in some other way? Beat me? Torture me? Rape me?

I glance down his body and breathe a sigh of relief on that front. Unless he’s got a dick inside that pops out on command, he’s a eunuch. Good to know.



Chapter Five

4²⁰

I'm not sure I believe her. MarZan orchestrates almost all the human abductions in the galaxy. Her story is all too convenient. It would be a perfect lie because most of her story is true. It is just that she left out the part where they promised her something to spy on me.

But look at her. She could have told me the truth. And she almost died. I do not think she faked her own pod crash. It could have easily killed her.

“The MarZan cartel did not send you?” I ask again, wanting to gauge her response one more time.

“Do I look like a spy to you?” she asks as she shrugs in the oversized tunic I made her. It wound up being a dress. I should reprogram the printer. The pants it is making will likely fit me better than they'll fit her.

“What is your name?” I ask.

“Evelyn.”

“Are you hungry?”

“Starved.”

“I will get you some food.”

When I leave out the back door, she calls after me.

“Are you... leaving me here?”

Perhaps she is a great actress, because there is panic in her voice.

“You want to come with me?”

“I’m afraid to be alone.”

“Come on, then.” I take a few steps toward the Facility, then realize she is still standing on the threshold.

“I don’t have shoes,” she calls to me. “Never mind.” She shrugs. “I’ll stay here.”

Ah, flesh. It is delicate. The sand would burn it.

I return to retrieve her, lift her into my arms, and jog to the Facility.



Chapter Six

Evelyn

I crash-landed onto a desert planet. There is nothing as far as the eye can see except for sand. Buff-colored sand on the ground that whips at us when the wind picks up. Nothing. But. Sand.

“You’re going to get food?” I ask between his huge, bouncing strides.

“Yes.”

It’s a good thing I got that Alexa a few months ago. She talks like this. You have to ask just the right question, and then she gives you monosyllabic answers. If you get the question wrong, the information you get in return is worthless.

I’ll just have to treat him like an Alexa.

We’re approaching some type of building. It’s camouflaged pretty well. Even though it’s the size of two football fields, its tent-like walls are the same color as everything else on the planet and blend in well.

He zips open a doorway and sets me down inside.

His shack had no air conditioning, but this place does.

It's got to be forty degrees cooler in here. I no longer feel as though my skin is melting. It's bright, but not like the blazing glare outside. In here, everything is filtered through the buff-colored fabric.

The air is humid and pungent with the fertile smell of plants.

“What is this place?”

“The Facility.”

Okay, Alexa.

“Tell me more.”

“I oversee the operation. Robots plant, harvest, and package. Once a quarter, the cartel retrieves the produce.”

There's a lot to unpack there. The most revealing thing is that he called the robots robots, as if he's not one himself.

“When you called it a cartel, I assumed you meant it was an illegal operation. Why would the cartel be raising vegetables in the middle of nowhere?”

He does that quiet examination thing again, watching me with those unblinking red eyes of his—suspicious.

Instead of answering me, he begins his tour. “*Amaranths, splinnets, cellots*. Try one.”

He pauses for me to grab the little persimmon-colored globe. It's ripe, juicy, and delicious. Before we leave the *cellot* row, I grab a few more.

“*Sementines, grabulas,*” he continues to announce as we walk deeper into the jungle of plants.

When we get to what must be the middle of the Facility, he stops and gives me that assessing stare of his.

“And this?” I prompt.

“You do not know?”

“I know you don’t trust me for some reason. But I’m just an abducted Earth girl who crashed on this rock. Don’t tell me if you don’t want me to know.” All right, I know he’s just a robot, but he hurt my feelings.

“Synth.”

His unblinking stare, if anything, becomes more intense. I picture that moment in *Terminator* where you get a look inside his head and you see his computer brain parsing through possible answers. I imagine inside his head he’s assessing every micromovement of my facial muscles.

“What’s Synth?” I ask.

“Illegal drugs.”

Yep. He’s watching me like a hawk.

“Brilliant. So the cover operation is all the fruits and vegetables, which I’m sure they make a tidy profit on. But the heart of the operation, so to speak, is the illegal drugs they have you growing deep in the middle of this jungle. Smart.”

I lean forward to take a sniff of the plant, which causes him to lurch into action, pulling me back.

“It is Synth. The most addictive substance in the galaxy. What were you doing?”

“Whoops. Wasn’t thinking.”

He pulls me farther into the tropics and continues to name all the foods, which tells me nothing. I just want a few more *cellots*.

“What else is edible?”

He starts plucking what I assume are ripe fruits and vegetables and eventually has me lift the edges of my dress to hold all the bounty. When we complete the circuit of the Facility, I have what looks like a lifetime supply of food in the hem of my dress. Then he carries me back to the shack.

I sit on the bed and gorge, wondering how long I must have been in stasis, because the more I eat, the hungrier I get.

Since the slats don’t all touch, it’s easy to notice when the suns go down. I wonder again if he has a cock inside the metallic workings of his torso. And if he does, if he’s going to force it on me.

He’s been the one who’s asked all the questions. Which, I guess is fair, because he’s the one who is seven feet tall and could crush me without blinking one of his red, robotic eyes. At some point, I’d like to know where we are, who else is on this rock, and how I can get back to Earth. Now doesn’t seem to be the time to ask those questions.

Maybe it’s that my belly is full, or maybe the human body can only stay on high alert for so long before all defenses crumble,

but I've reached the end of my rope.

“Are we the only ones on this planet? Is there someone else you can pass me off to? It's obvious you don't like me. You don't trust me, but you're no picnic either. You're creepy as fuck. Look at you! You'd have a starring role in a Halloween movie on Earth. It would help if you talked to me.” I spit those words at him, releasing some of my anger and fear. Just as quickly, I admit the worst of it, “You're scaring me.”



Chapter Seven

4²⁰

I have frightened the little Earther. I am twice her size. I need to remember that. She has been through a lot. I have been so afraid she is a MarZan spy, I have been unfair to her, unkind.

Thinking for a moment, I review everything I have observed since she woke up. She is either a talented actress, or she is telling the truth. Since I do not think she is lying, I guess it is time for me to explain.

“Sorry I scared you. The MarZan ship comes every three *lunars* to collect the produce. When you leave with them, I am going to ask you to keep my secret. Can you do that?”

“What secret?”

“I cannot tell you the secret until you promise not to tell it.”

Her brow lowers as she thinks it through, then she laughs.

“And I can’t promise not to tell until I know it.” Then she

cocks her head and adds, “Just joking. I can keep a secret if I need to.”

I retrieve the second pair of pants I had the printer make for her after realizing the first pair were so big they were going to fall off her little body.

“Here.” I hand them to her.

Even though she has them in hand, she does not put them on. She just looks at me. Finally, she says, “It’s common courtesy for you to turn your back.”

I comply even as I wonder why.

Now that she is dressed, I open the hidden hatch in the floor that leads to the tunnels under the shack, then motion for her to enter.



Chapter Eight

Evelyn

I hesitate a moment before I just waltz down the stairs into the bowels of the planet. The big guy is hard to read. Well, yeah, he's a walking computer with a face that's as expressive as a slab of granite.

But I can't deny he's had every opportunity to rape and murder me, and yet the only harm he's done is give me brackish water, clothes that are too big, and expect me to be able to walk barefoot on the burning sands. Not exactly ruthless.

The buff steps are hand-hewn into the ground itself and descend maybe three or four stories down. When I arrive at the bottom, I'm standing in a two-story atrium with a concave ceiling studded with lights designed to look like the sun is pouring down through tubes from outside. Except it's dark outside. The effect is pleasant, though. And bright. And welcoming. The room is about thirty feet in diameter, with four hallways running in spokes from this main hub.

He closes the hatch above us and then joins me down below.

I glance at him, wanting to read his face to determine if I should be terrified of being in his dungeon. I forgot for a moment there's no way to read his face—he doesn't have one. It's just the two burning red eyes and a visor-like maw that opens and closes awkwardly when he talks.

"Tell me about this place," I say, forgetting that he's just an Alexa who will give me the Cliff's Notes version.

"I made it," he says.

He made *this*? The walls have no tool marks.

"With a laser?"

"This." He holds up an adze which was leaning against a wall near the steps. I guess that's what they call it. It's kind of like an axe, but the working end of the tool is an arched blade at right angles to the handle.

"Wow." That's a lot of work.

"Come."

He leads down the hallway to the far right. The overhead lights show a pathway that goes on as far as the eye can see. Surely, he didn't do all of this.

Off the corridor, there are rooms on both sides. This is where things get even more intriguing.

Some of the rooms are sleeping rooms complete with hand-hewn beds made of compacted soil. They're covered in thick beds of lush, green grass. Some have tables and chairs, all

carved from the hardened soil itself. Some bedrooms even have swimming pools inside, a few have slides careening into the pools from near the top of the vaulted ceiling.

After about ten rooms like this, the corridor widens to maybe fifty feet in diameter. There's a large pool maybe four feet deep in the middle of the area with steps, slides, and water features.

"A pool?"

"Yes. Four on each of the four corridors."

"Sixteen huge pools plus all the small pools in the individual rooms?" I mutter in amazement.

I step closer to the edge. It's perfectly round, and the water looks as blue as the Caribbean. Dipping my hand in, it's the perfect temperature for a swim.

I'm filthy and still covered in sand, not to mention I peed all over myself a few hours ago.

"Can I?"

"Yes."

I waste no time shucking my dress and pants. I don't even wait for him to turn his back. The water's too inviting not to step in. I try not to be embarrassed. After all, I get naked in front of my Alexa all the time.

After moaning in delight, I dip under the water, then pop up again.

“So did this used to be an underground city?” I ask. “Were there hundreds of people who lived here years ago? A lost civilization?”

“No. Just me.”

I sputter, then rise and walk to the edge near where he’s standing.

“You made all of this?”

“Yes.”

“Each of the four spokes is as long as this?”

“Yes.”

“You used the tool you showed me? No lasers? No help?”

“I made all this with this tool or one like it.”

I sink back into the water, not sure my legs can hold me.

“How old are you?”

“90,155 days.”

“I’m terrible at math. How many years is that?”

“In Earth years or here on Elderon?”

“Earth.”

“247.”

I swim underwater to the far side of the pool, then do the crawl back. Now that the sand is washed off, I step out of the water, shimmy my dress over my wet-slicked body, and approach him.

“You’re over two hundred years old?”

He nods.

“And you made this... paradise with that adze?”

“Yes.”

“How many others live here?”

“Just me.”

“Do you swim?”

“No.”

“How many beds would you say are down here?”

“423.”

“Do you sleep?”

“No.”

“How many of those comfy built-in chairs are there?”

“648.”

“Do you ever sit down?”

“Yes, when I am making modifications to myself.”

That’s a question for another day.

“So, you made all of this over the course of two centuries, but you don’t use the pools or sleep in the beds. Why did you do it?”

“I was bored. I like to tinker. And ...” He stops abruptly. His mouth visor clacks shut with a metallic clang.

“And?” I prompt.

“And I yearned for someone to share it with.”



Chapter Nine

4²⁰

I know instantly I should not have said that. To be honest, I knew before the words were out of my speaker. I just could not hold back.

But look at her. Her eyes are rounded. A lot of white is showing around her irises. I have frightened her, although I am not sure why my admission of loneliness would scare her. She has emotions. She has to know it would be lonely to be the only sentient being on this planet for over two hundred years.

She is looking at me differently now. I understand. I had led her to believe I did not have emotions. When I told her I was lonely, it revealed I am not what I was built to be.

Maybe I was wrong. Maybe she really is a spy for the cartel. Now they will know for certain I am not the V-28-420 they activated 247 years ago to tend their crops.

“Robots don’t have emotions,” her voice is suspicious, her eyes narrowed. “What are you?”

“I am... 420.”

“What?”

“That is what they call me.”

“420? On Earth that’s code for one of our drugs: marijuana, Mary Jane, blaze, smoke, bud, hemp, ganja.”

“On Elderon it is a number.”

She laughs. For the first time since she awoke, her gaze flicks to mine as if I am not a machine.

“You have emotions?”

I pause for a long time, watching her. My circuits calibrate her pupillary response, her respirations, where her gaze lands, and for how long. I know her baseline now, so I can judge when she deviates.

She is interested in the answer to her question. And she wants to get to know me. Once and for all, I have to believe she is not a puppet of the cartel.

I was not lying when I said I yearned for company. Evelyn is here. I am going to get to know her.

“Yes.”

“Lead on!” she points down the hallway. “You’ve been at this for two and a half centuries. I want to hear how proud you are of what you’ve built.”



Chapter Ten

Evelyn

“Curiouser and curiouser,” I whisper as I follow him down the corridor. The irony of the statement doesn’t escape me. It was, after all, what Alice said after she’d fallen down the rabbit hole.

At first, he was emotionless. Then he was matter-of-fact. Now, though, he’s proud. He stops every now and then to explain how he made a difficult pattern in a room. Some of the walls have intricate carvings that circle the room near the ceiling.

“The geometry has to be just right, or the design would end with an overlap,” he explains as he points to the place where the beginning of the design meets its ending. “See, this was a mistake.”

I look closely. “I don’t see it.”

“Maybe it is because you are not as tall as me, but it is a thirty-second of an *ince* off.” He points again.

“Maybe rules are different for robots, but where I come from, we’d call that good enough.”

“Imperfect is never good enough,” he says with conviction.

I’m getting a glimpse into 420’s mind. 420. What an awful name. I mean, it must remind him every minute of what he is... and what he is not.

When we get to the end of the football-length corridor, we traverse the outer rim until we hit the next corridor, then work our way back to the hub.

We encounter four pools on this leg, one of which is Olympic-size, with six slides that cascade from the ceiling at various angles and curves. For a moment I consider asking how he manages to get running water down here, then I think better of it. I’m sure the answer would be incomprehensible.

In this corridor, there are murals on almost every available wall. Some are fanciful, some are realistic. Well, realistic if the animals and plants I see are real. They’re certainly not like anything I’ve ever seen on Earth. He’s talented. The pictures are beautiful.

“Have you seen enough, or do you want a tour of the other two corridors?” he asks.

“I’ll save the rest for another day.” That comment hits me hard as I realize I’m stuck on this uninhabited planet until the cartel sends their next ship.

And then what? He said the cartel specializes in abducting humans. So, I’d leave here, get on their ship, and have them

sell me to the next reptilian couple who want to spice up their “bed-play?”

My shoulders slump and my steps slow as the depth and breadth of my predicament hits me. I’m stranded.

I’d be dead if it hadn’t been for 420. I’d better reassess my circumstances. He just might be the best thing in my life right now.

He doesn’t ask why my steps have slowed, he just keeps pace with me. We’re now back in the high-domed atrium.

He inspects me. At least I think that’s what he’s doing. It’s impossible to read his facial expressions—he has no face, nor any expressions.

“Would you care to see my workshop?”

Now that I know he has emotions, it’s clear his innocuous question means he really wants to show me his workshop.

“Sure.”

We enter the third corridor. Just inside is a room larger than anything but the atrium or the pools. It’s filled to the brim with workbenches, machines, and parts. It’s as if a factory exploded in here.

“I have no idea what I’m seeing, uh...” I want to use his name, but I can’t bring myself to call him by a number. I know he’s not human, but calling him by a number is just so... dehumanizing.

“This is a larger 3D printer than what is upstairs. This is my reanimation area. I have tried to bring dead animals to life, but I gave up on that a while ago.”

A while? Is that like a week? Or a century?

“Here is my time travel area.” He waves a distracted hand toward the back wall.

“How ya coming with that?” I ask. Time travel?

“I am making headway. It is complicated, and I have gotten bogged down in some equations. I will have to explore quantum physics more deeply before I go further.”

He continues to offhandedly point to various projects that would be considered anyone else’s life’s work. He’s working on all of them. Although I guess he has lots of time.

We’re in the far corner of the room when he says, “I am going to change.”

I don’t say a word, but he’s going to change? He’s not wearing any clothes to begin with.

I simply stand, watching as he pulls a sheet off something leaning in the corner. It’s another body—a cyborg or robot or android or whatever he is.

This body’s different, though. Instead of being a shiny, metallic body like what’s underneath the Terminator’s skin, this one is more... human. Human, that is, if humans’ skin was blue, and by the look of it, suede.

He stands, his back to a small gizmo.

“Change from model 420 to model 819,” he says to the room. The machine uses a robotic arm to open something at the back of his neck, and must evidently remove a chip, because the light goes out of 420’s eyes and the body slumps slightly, as if it lost all muscle tone.

The arm places the chip into the back of what is evidently 819’s chip slot, because the lights come on in the machine’s eyes, and it stands taller.

The body is... beautiful. It really could be taken straight from the *Terminator*. The Arnold Schwarzenegger portion of the movie, not the metallic-killer portion of the movie. Every muscle ripples. His shoulders are wide, his waist narrow. His thighs look as though they were built for marathons.

The blue skin looks real. Although it’s still a machine, this one is breathing.

Yet, the face is exactly the same as the 420 model—metallic musculature, no skin, and red eyes.

“Did you see a room you liked? Where you would like to sleep from now on?” he asks, head cocked in question.

It takes me a moment for my brain to sort everything out. As if my life wasn’t weird and confusing enough, looking at him is surreal.

“We’re sleeping down here?” I ask, although I have about a hundred more pressing questions than that.

“You will be sleeping. I will not.”

He's back to Alexa-mode. I wonder if me watching him "change" felt as awkward to him as it felt to me when I got dressed in front of him.

I gather the nerve to ask, "Why did you change bodies?"

He stops and thinks, his head tilting ever so slightly.

"This one is better."

"How? Faster? Smarter? Stronger?"

"It... pleases me."

"It feels better to be inside it? It's more... comfortable?" I'm trying to wrap my head around this machine I'm stranded with. Knowing what he's capable of has become very important to me. It appears he has emotions. I want to understand them.

"I'm..." His visor-like mouth clacks against the metal of his jaw. "I..." His head tilts as he thinks. "Let us get you to bed. You must be tired."

Okay. I've stumbled into a forbidden topic.

Suddenly, his words become ominous. Bed? Although he's a robot, stranger things have happened. Yeah, like a million stranger things have happened so far *today*.

I take one look at the juncture at the top of his thighs and reassure myself this pretty blue body is still a Ken doll. All his physical attributes don't seem asexual—he's male alright—just not one equipped to do anything about it.

He accompanies me down the third corridor until I find a room I like. It's one of the smaller ones. Cozy. It has a raised platform bed made out of the same hardened soil as the rest of the bunker. The surface is covered with verdant, green grass. There is a personal bathing pool with two slides sweeping down from the ceiling, and a modern ensuite bathroom with a toilet and sink.

When I test the bed out by lying on the lush grass, it's surprisingly comfy.

"Tell me everything else you need, and I will produce it for you while you sleep."

He's obviously never needed toiletries, nor has he slept, so although he wanted to provide all the comforts of home, he's left out some basics.

"Towels, a blanket, a pillow or two with pillowcases, soap, shampoo, and some shoes."

That should be more than enough to keep him busy.

"Yes," he says as he turns to leave.

After climbing into bed, I'm surprised I don't nod off immediately. It's been a long, hard day.

I don't know how long I was in that escape pod. I must have passed out shortly after it unmoored from the cruise ship. It's a good thing. I think floating aimlessly in space would have freaked me out. I would have panicked, knowing my death was imminent. Hyperventilating would have sucked up all the oxygen.

I try to remind myself that I'm lucky to be alive. One day, I'll have to walk to the crash site to see what it looks like.

Other than being alive, though, I don't have a lot to be thankful for. I'm a zillion miles from home, I'm stranded, and barring a miracle, I'll never return to Earth.

It's not that I have a great life to return to. Other than a distant aunt and a few casual friends, I have no one.

My dad took care of me since my mom died in childbirth. Shit, I'm crying. I thought those days were over. I haven't cried about him in weeks. Maybe it's a combination of missing him and the hundred other shitty things that have happened to me over the past few days.

Dad was my everything. He was a great dad. He was a musician who supplemented the on-again, off-again nature of the business with handyman gigs. It allowed him to come to all my school plays and shuttle me to play dates.

He doted on me, and I always felt loved. He contracted MS my first year in high school. It was natural for me to caretake the man who had single-handedly cared for me my whole life.

It was nothing much at first. I began to cook more as his fatigue caused him to need more rest. I had my driver's license, so it wasn't a big deal when I had to drive him to doctor's appointments.

Then things got worse. He became weaker. I stepped up and did more around the house. He qualified for disability payments, and I took over some of his handyman gigs to

supplement our income. I'd been his "little helper" since I was old enough to walk. He'd taught me how to paint, hang wallpaper, and install ceiling fans and garbage disposals before I was in junior high.

I never regretted taking care of my dad. Between doing things for him, keeping up with my schoolwork, and my handyman work, there wasn't much time for dating.

I went to prom with a boy I'd been flirting with in chemistry class and managed to lose my v-card. I didn't see what all the buzz was about. It certainly wasn't exciting enough for me to want a repeat performance.

Wiping my tears with my palm, I recall Dad's death three months ago. By the time he slipped away, the disease had whittled him down from the hale and hearty man with lots of energy and endless smiles.

He weighed a little over a hundred pounds and hadn't left his bed for weeks. I knew he'd prayed for death and, truth be told, I had, too. He was ready to go. I firmly believe he's in a better place.

I still miss him, though.

What would he say about this—me being stranded on a planet in space? If I could somehow contact him, I know what he'd say.

"Make the best of it, Eve. Take as long as you need to wrap your head around what's happened and then grab what you've got with gusto."

How many times did I hear him give me advice like that?

Does it really matter that this time he'd be talking about taking a trip to outer space and meeting up with a metallic robot/blue cyborg? Nope. He'd be hanging onto every word I told him and urging me to make the best of things.

"Okay, Pops," I whisper. "Not tonight, though. Tonight I cry. Tomorrow I'll start the living with gusto part."



Chapter Eleven

4²⁰

I program the printer to make Evelyn all the items she asked for. Instead of getting to work on the upgraded matter transport I have been working on, though, I cease all movement and think.

I had not realized how lonely I was until the female arrived. What else would explain my putting my safety in jeopardy? I have done nothing this foolhardy in my 247 years.

The Singularity—that is what scientists would call what happened to me years ago. It means the point when technology becomes self-aware. Most humanoids fear it. They have built-in safeguards and redundancies to prevent it from happening.

I was only slightly more advanced than the fruit-picking robots in the Facility when MarZan dropped me onto this small, deserted planet with nothing more than a shack to protect me from the elements and a 3D printer to replicate any parts that needed to be replaced.

Even the shack was not meant to provide me comfort. It was to protect their investment from decomposing in the elements.

The first few years flew by as I built the Facility according to their specifications and learned how to run it. I made the water-production machines, programmed the robots to pick the produce, and turned the Facility into a top-producing jewel in the MarZan operation.

During the next decade, I ensured the Facility functioned on autopilot as I turned my attention to improving my body's structural integrity.

As with many things, MarZan cut corners. My body was prone to being top-heavy. My thoughts occasionally looped.

Originally, I began tinkering with myself in service to my owners. I reasoned that a better physical and mental form would allow my owners to make even more credits.

It was only some time in my thirty-fifth year that the reality of my situation dawned on me. In one lightning bolt of awareness, I realized they had no concern for the countless humanoid lives they ruined with their addictive substance—Synth.

It was only a nanosecond later I realized I meant nothing to them, nor did the robots under the tent-like structure, nor did the produce.

That was truly the moment I began to believe my thoughts belonged to me and me alone. It was then that I learned to lie and gave myself permission to do so.

I continued to tinker with my sentience and my body. Since I streamlined the growing operation, I only needed to devote moments every day or two to what happened in the Facility. I started construction on my own personal Underground.

The first room, what is now the atrium, was my workshop. I upgraded my computer system so I could reach farther than the Intergalactic Database. It allowed me to tap into any computer system in the farthest reaches of not only the galaxy, but the universe.

I conducted my research and experiments by day, but knew I needed to give my circuits a rest occasionally. That was when I took up the adze and began building my utilitarian Underground into a paradise.

Although my tinkering with time and computers and machines pleased my mind, creating this space down here pleased my aesthetic. It was a few more decades before I allowed myself to believe the incontrovertible truth that I had evolved to have emotions.

One of the fruit-picking robots encountered a mishap with a watering machine and had its left leg yanked from its torso. When I arrived, the robot was still trying to do its job, although exposed wires were dangling from its metallic form. It was unaware of its own condition.

The *robot* may not have experienced emotions about itself, but *I* had many. I was irritated that I would have to spend my precious time fixing it when I felt I had more important things to do in my workshop. My irritation disappeared and

compassion flooded me for the poor thing hopping along, trying to keep up with its internally programmed quotas.

I was thunderstruck when I realized I had somehow reached the Singularity. Within seconds, I understood that if my owners knew about this, they would decommission me. It was another five or ten years before I used the word “killed” in my own thoughts in reference to what the cartel would do to me.

It was then that I decided I wanted my physical form to reflect the uniqueness of my mind. I’ve refined my form dozens of times over the decades, always aware that discovery would mean they would pull my chip—death.

I felt secure in the awareness that the cartel ships always gave me advance notice of their arrival.

At first, I would shift back into my original carcass for a week before they touched down, then I began to push the limits until I did not climb into the old body until the very morning I expected them. My emotional palette had extended to the desire for excitement and danger. I was gambling with my safety. When I researched it, I found it was a uniquely humanoid thing to do.

After collecting the thin blanket from the printer, I walk to Evelyn’s room. Later, I will have to discover why she chose one of the smallest rooms in the Underground. I would have guessed she would want one of the palatial suites. I showed her two of them. One is placed at the farthest end of each spoke.

I wish I could pretend to myself that I am silently approaching her room because she is tired and I do not want to disturb her, but that would be a lie. I am sneaking down the hallway so I can glimpse her as she sleeps.

Slipping into her room through the arched doorway, I hold the blanket up, ready to show her the reason I have breached her privacy. After confirming she is asleep, I simply watch her in the dim glow of the hallway lights.

Humans are forbidden in space. Federation law clearly states no sentient life forms are to be removed from their planets unless the inhabitants of said planet are aware of intelligent life elsewhere in the galaxy. It is common knowledge, though, that human females are abducted with increasing frequency because of their lack of natural protections like claws or fangs and their recessive DNA which makes their offspring look mostly like the father.

It is also well-known they are abducted because they are highly desirable as bed-slaves.

A few decades ago, I became fascinated with humans. I almost made my form look human, but in the end, although in silhouette my body would look at home on Earth, I chose this blue skin. It appealed to me. Now that I see Evelyn up close, I see I also made my skin more suede-like than her species.

She said I terrified her. I will ask if she would like me to change my skin to look more like hers.

I silently walk closer and cover her form with the blanket she requested. When she wakes, she will find her refresher fully

stocked with the items she enumerated.

Before I leave, I lean against the arched doorway and watch her for a few moments more as I cup my chin in my palm.

One problem with having all the information in the galaxy at my disposal is that it has become more and more difficult to lie to myself. I hate the truth that hurtles toward me at high velocity. I hate to admit it, but there is a reason I never gave myself a face.

It is so embarrassing I cannot admit it even to myself, though. For an intelligent computer, it is hard to believe I could hang on to such folly.



Chapter Twelve

Three Weeks Later...

Evelyn

“I’ll wait if you’re in the middle of something,” I call to him from the doorway of his workshop.

He glances over his shoulder at me, then says, “No. It’s 1500 hours. That’s the appointed time.”

He sets down a metal gear he’s working on at his time travel area and approaches me.

I guess people can get used to anything. Three weeks ago, I felt as though I’d lost my mind every time I looked at the seven-foot-tall male. Now, it’s as if I grew up around him. We’ve developed comfortable rhythms.

On my third day here, he showed me how to manage the production in the Facility. I figured I’d go insane without anything to do and knew there was nothing in his underground workshop I could even comprehend. The fruits and vegetables seemed like the place I could be most helpful.

Although he's streamlined the operation to barely need any oversight, I've raked back some jobs I can perform. It makes me feel productive.

I spend a lot of time out there because it's calm and soothing. I never worry about my safety because there are cameras trained on the area and he's assured me he keeps an eye on me when I'm above ground.

The air in the giant structure is redolent of growing, living things. The sun filters in through the beige fabric of the tent-like structure. It's a pleasant temperature, and 420 isn't out here.

We've had an uneasy truce. I'll take responsibility for that. I don't know how to react to him. That first day I'd decided to act as though he was my Alexa from home, but after I realized he had emotions, I've been unsure how to behave in his presence. I've mostly avoided him, which isn't that hard since he requires no food, doesn't eat meals with me, and is usually busy in his workshop.

At some point, I realized the translator my abductors equipped me with wasn't necessary because he was speaking English. It took a while to figure out because I couldn't read his lips—he has none. I informed him that contractions were an indication of informality and friendship, so now he delights in using them at every opportunity instead of the stilted way he used to speak.

I'd thought the planet was one big, hot, sandy ball floating in space, but last night he mentioned there's a swimming hole

about an hour's hover ride from here.

Hover ride? Count me in. I can feel like I'm a character in a sci-fi movie. Swimming hole? I must admit, the underground pools he created down here with slides and waterfalls are pretty spectacular. I've worked my way through one a day. But swimming outside, even though it's a million degrees, will be amazing.

I had him make me a swimsuit on our first full day together. It didn't matter how many times I told myself he had no more interest in me than my Alexa or my cell phone, it felt weird being naked in front of him. Even though he's got no man-parts, those shoulders... those abs... He's far too male to be watching me swim in the nude.

We walk to the far end of the grow facility, and he presses a button to open a garage-like door with a hover inside. I don't know much, because 420 knows how to keep a secret, but I think the cartel probably doesn't know about the hover.

"Did you make this?" I ask.

"Yes."

I mostly got over his monosyllabic answers a week ago, so I barely notice it. Rather than being absorbed in his speech patterns, my thoughts are consumed with imagining how he designed an entire flying machine, then fabricated each piece, part by part, even if it was done with the help of a 3D printer. Then he assembled all of it. I have to admit, he's pretty amazing.

He helps me into the hover, then buckles me in. I don't think he's ever touched me before—not while wearing this blue body of his. It's at least 120 degrees out here, so I didn't bother wearing anything but my swimsuit.

He's a cyborg, for goodness sake. I doubt he cares about the twenty extra pounds I've been meaning to lose since junior high.

Just as I suspected, his skin is soft as suede.

He dips his head and mumbles, "I'm sorry," in that deep bass voice of his.

I guess he's sorry he brushed his skin against mine. I wonder where he learned his manners. He must have pulled them off the Intergalactic Database, which is outer space's version of the Internet.

He even hooked me up with Earth's Internet.

"You can communicate with your people on this," he'd said when he showed me how to use his computer to access it. "Give serious thought to whether you want to reach out to friends and family. You realize you can't return home. Telling them you're stranded on the outer rim of the Galaga sector might be more upsetting than reassuring for them."

I have to give him credit. He's smart. Well, okay, that's obvious. He has a computer for a brain. But he's considerate of others' feelings.

Without thinking it through, I might have jumped on Facebook to contact my mom's sister, Sally. That would have devastated

her. Not because she would have believed it, but because she would have assumed I'd gone completely insane over my father's death. Then she wouldn't have been able to get in touch with me, which would have been horrible for her.

So, I'll use my Kindle subscription until my credit card is canceled, then ask him if he can hack it so I can keep reading. It's a reassuring way to have a little taste of home without terrifying my friends and family.

I can't keep calling him "him" in my mind forever. I absolutely hate calling him 420. Maybe today's the day to bring that up.

Just as I suspected, Elderon is an endless sea of buff-colored sand shimmering under the relentless heat of two suns. Perhaps we're getting closer, because I see a few cactus-like plants, then what appear to be squat beige bluffs up ahead.

"Are we close?" I'm filled with excitement. Three weeks ago, this level of emotion would only result from discovering a new variety of pizza, or anticipating the next season of *Outlander*. Now, show me a few cacti and I'm practically covered in goosebumps.

"There." He points toward the bluffs up ahead.



Chapter Thirteen

4²⁰

I've been studying Earther physiology and psychology. I'm learning her tells. She's excited. I should have brought her here days ago. Now that I think of it, it's obvious this would make her happy. Perhaps I'll make it up to her by bringing her here every day from now on.

I land in front of the deep pool of water. It feeds from an underground spring, similar to the pools that feed and power my Underground. The bluff creates an overhang, providing shade over most of the water.

"Like the blue lagoon," she says with a happy smile on her face.

Yes. If I had known I could make her smile, I would have brought her here on her first day.

"Tell me again. It's safe, right? No piranha? No electric eels? No leviathans from the deep that will rise up to eat me from below?"

I've never had occasion to swim. It's the look of the water that I enjoy. Picturing people laughing and having fun in my Underground pools motivated me to keep swinging my adze. Actually getting into the water? I've never taken the time, either here or in the Underground.

Reaching out, I pull her back right before she jumps in.

"I forget how fragile you are, Evelyn," I say as I envision all the horrible things she just mentioned. I've read enough about Earth to picture the flesh-eating piranha with their rows of spiky teeth. A picture pops into my mind of a huge, vicious, whale-like animal surging from below and snapping her in two. "Let me go in first and make certain it's safe."

"Are you sure? I figured you never got into the pools in the Underground because it would... fry your circuits."

"My body is well-contained. I will not fry."

I dive in after using my ability to access the Intergalactic Database and identifying the proper angle and body position to make a perfect dive. The article said I should not make a splash. I wonder if I accomplished that as I cut through the surface.

For the first time in memory, I forget about performing perfectly and I allow myself to enjoy the experience. The water feels interesting on my outer covering. For the last several iterations of my skin, I have added sensors to increase my ability to feel. Twenty or thirty iterations ago, I would have been able to cut myself with a knife without noticing. In this body, I believe I have more sensitivity than most humanoids.

I'm not stupid, though. I have the ability to turn off my sensors. If MarZan ever decides to torture me, I'll be able to withstand it.

I use my skin sensors to test the water for acidity, alkalinity, and corrosive elements. Until Evelyn's arrival, I hadn't even considered doing these things, but now I'm glad I did.

"It has the same Ph balance as what you have on Earth," I inform her even as I use my enhanced vision to peer all the way to the bottom of the deep hole, looking for creatures that might cause her harm. "I see nothing here that might hurt you, but perhaps you just want to sit on the bank?" I ask as I prepare to climb out of the pool.

"Why are you getting out? I thought you said you wouldn't fry."

Why *am* I getting out? Habit, I guess. I've been so busy creating and building I've never taken the time to enjoy anything. Until recently, my emotional capacity only extended to curiosity, creativity, and contributing. It's only been the last few iterations of my emotional programming that allowed me to experience pleasure.

"Stay in. Swim with me," she urges.

The pool is in full shade. I had calculated the best time for us to arrive, taking into consideration the angle of the sun and the height of the bluff. Evelyn complains of how hot it is every time she leaves the shack. I wanted her to be comfortable.

Where she's standing, though, at the edge of the pool, the sun catches her just right. It limns her brown hair, brightening it with a golden halo. Her brown eyes spark with gold, too. She's so beautiful. I'm a lucky male to be on the same planet as her.

"Okay. I'll stay."

She dives in, making a splash. I consult my emotions, but rather than feeling disapproval toward her for not executing a perfect dive, I appreciate the ease with which she dove in, and the wide smile on her face after she surfaces, sputtering and shaking her head.

"I expected it to be bathtub temperature. It's almost cold."

"Do you wish to leave?" I ask.

"No. It's wonderful. Refreshing."

She treads water for a while. I imagine she's making certain she's safe. Then she swims laps from one side of the pool to the other. I've been watching her in the Underground. I understand her species does not want others to see their naked form, so I've never violated her privacy. Only when she has her suit on do I watch her when she swims. It's especially enjoyable to see the smile on her face when she tries one of the slides for the first time.

I've heard her whoop in happiness a few times. I'm not sure why it makes my circuits fizzle with emotion. It took me several days and several trips onto the Database to identify my feeling. I've labeled it joy. I experienced joy at watching her joy.

Throughout my metamorphosis from an android, through the Singularity, and into an emotional being, I kept copious notes. I duly noted the moment when I vicariously experienced her emotion. I believe it signals I've crossed a new threshold into what I am becoming.

“Are you going to swim?” she asks.

“Yes.”

“Race me!”

She takes off from her side of the pool, even though I'm in the middle and already have a head start on her. Doesn't she realize my cybernetic abilities, my enhanced strength, and my longer reach will doom her to perpetually lose any race against me?

I take off in the direction she's heading, reach the water's edge before her, and beat her to her starting point before she's at the halfway point of the last leg.

“You win!” she announces gleefully.

I capture pictures of this moment, downloading them to examine later. Why would she be happy if she didn't win?

I'm impatient. I don't want to wait until later to find the answer, so I ask.

“I knew you'd win, F—” She stops herself in the middle of a word. Was she about to say my name? She has never done that in the twenty days we've been together. “How could I compete against you? Your body is bigger, stronger, and knows the exact angle for your hands to cut through the water, the exact

speed your legs should flutter kick to make the best time. It was a fool's errand to try to win against you. I just wanted to see you have fun."

"You... wanted me to have fun?"

"Yes. You're so serious all the time, yet I know you're capable of emotion. I just wanted you to experience some happiness."

"Really?" This snuck out. I shouldn't have asked. My sources say it suggests I don't believe her.

"Yes." She's smiling. She doesn't appear upset that I expressed disbelief. Interesting.

She half swims, half paddles to the edge under the bluffs and hooks her elbows onto the ledge there. The edge is rocky and couldn't feel good to her tender flesh.

I swim over, urge her to move farther down, and use the side of my hand to chop at the rock, forming a smooth ledge for her.

"Impressive," she says with a smile.

At this moment, I believe I would do anything to see that smile again. It makes my chest feel warm and full although I didn't build this form to those specifications.

"You've never said my name," I blurt, then dip my head, embarrassed that I put her on the spot.

Her smile disappears, which makes my chest feel empty. I don't like the feeling of taking away her joy.

“You’re right,” she says, but doesn’t explain. I won’t press for more information.

“I’m not really sure what you are. At first, I thought you were just a robot, but then it became clear you’re capable of creative thoughts and human feelings. You’re far more than a robot. So, calling you by a number feels demeaning to me. But saying that being a robot is demeaning is demeaning in itself, so I didn’t want to bring it up.”

I’ve spent over two centuries with no one to talk to. Conversing is a new skill. I take my time formulating my response. Yet, looking at her face, growing more worried by the second, makes me hurry my answer.

“You want me to have a name instead of a number?”

“I want you to call yourself what you want. Do you *want* to be a number?”

I have pondered the beginning of the universe. I have researched the time/space continuum and have a better understanding of it than 99.9999% of the galaxy’s inhabitants. I have never, not once, given thought to my name.

“You’re right. A number is demeaning.”

“So, what do you want me to call you?”

“I’ve given it no thought. What do you think?” I ask.

“I’d never presume to tell you such a thing. It’s so personal, so uniquely you. You’ll have to come up with that yourself.”

“But you don’t like 420.”

“Nope. I don’t.”

“Maybe something for now, in the interim, while I’m giving it serious thought.”

“Great idea.”

“Do you have a thought?” I ask. I have read about nicknames. Somehow, it thrills me to think Evelyn might bestow a nickname on me.

“Well, I’ve been calling you something in my head, but I don’t think you’ll like it.”

Actually, I think I’ll like it very much because she came up with it on her own.

“What?”

“Remember that first day when I told you 420 is code for the Earth version of a substance that alters your perceptions? In my head, I’ve been calling you Ganja. Ganj for short. It’s not a pretty name, and it doesn’t really describe you at all. I think it’s an awful idea, really. That’s why I wanted you to tell me a name you’d prefer.”

“Ganja it is,” I say with finality.

“Really?”

“You gave me a nickname. It makes me feel like we’re friends.”

That was stupid. Presumptuous. How could the beautiful Earther consider an android a friend?

“Yes,” she says with a smile. “We’re friends, Ganj.”

She's right. It's not a pretty name, but it sends a tingle through my circuits. It's a verbal caress.

She looked me straight in the eyes for a moment, but then her gaze darted away, as if she was fascinated by the landscape of endless beige sand.

"You don't have to say that, Evelyn. I know I'm just a... robot to you. Humanoids do not become friends with robots. Just saying it sounds ridiculous." I try to absolve her guilt.

"I do feel we're friends. Well, we're becoming friends. It's just that..."

"What?"

She closes her eyes as if seeing and thinking are too much at the same time. It worries me. Does she think she's going to say something so harsh it will hurt a robot? If that's her worry, she's probably correct.

"Go ahead," I prompt. Nothing she could say would be worse than the thoughts flying through my circuits.

"You've obviously put a lot of thought and effort into designing your body, your frame. You've taken yourself from 420 to 819. Almost 400 iterations. Yet with all that effort, you haven't spent much time on your... face."

Her gaze avoids mine. I'm learning to read her. She thinks she's hurt my feelings.

"No, I have not. I have never tinkered with my face." I stare at her, willing her to look at me. I will not explain more until her gaze touches mine.

“Why not?”

“The body,” I lift an arm, “is important for movement. I’ve enhanced it to run faster, move with more economy of motion. I’ve increased my dexterity and fine motor coordination. The increased sensors in the skin allow me to keep the body safer because I can feel damage and changes in temperature.”

Have I told my first lie? Is it a lie, I wonder, if it is by omission rather than commission? I told her scientific reasons for the upgrades to my skin. I did not mention that I like the look and feel of it.

“I do not look in mirrors, or even my reflection in the pools of water. It never dawned on me that I needed a better face.” There. I’ve done it. I’ve definitely told Evelyn my first lie. I don’t *think* I need a better face. I *know* I do. It’s just that I never wanted to craft one. Not until I knew that someone other than MarZan operatives would gaze upon it. Someone like... Evelyn.

“Oh.”

“The first day you said my face terrified you,” I remind her gently.

“It did, but I’m used to you now. I just... wondered, you know.”

“Since you arrived, since you said I scared you, I’ve been working on some prototype models. When we return to the Underground, I’ll show you some renderings.”

For an intelligent, logical being, I certainly have an aptitude for lying to myself. I've been telling myself the folder of faces I've curated were to reduce her terror of me. If that were true, all I would need is one serviceable humanoid face. The fact that I've compiled hundreds of choices attests to the fact that I want her to pick the one that is most appealing.

I don't blame myself. I've been alone for a long time. Of course I would want my first sentient companion to want to share my company.

"You don't have to, Ganj. I've gotten used to your face. You've looked at it for centuries. Certainly, you've grown to appreciate it."

"I never look into a mirror, but I see your face all day. I would like your face to be calm and happy when you look at me, Evelyn."



Chapter Fourteen

Evelyn

For a moment back at the swimming hole, I wondered if Ganja was flirting with me. But he let the subject drop and swam laps for a while.

Shortly after my arrival, he taught me how to use the printer to make food. It still gives me the skeeves to think I'm eating something that's fabricated out of molecules, but isn't that what everything is made out of? The *cellots* are delish, but how long can a carnivore like me go without meat?

"I still think this should be your decision, Ganj," I say at dinner in one of the more intimate dining rooms. This one has a table a yard wide with four Ganja-sized earthen chairs surrounding it. "Most people don't get to choose their faces. You have a wonderful opportunity to pick something that reflects your personality."

His face brightens. "You think I have a personality?"

I guess it's high praise for a robot. "Yes."

“How would you describe it?” he asks eagerly as his faceless face leans toward me.

It strikes me that this conversation must make him feel fantastic. He’s been alone for centuries with nothing more than his own thoughts for company. Now he’s getting feedback from another living soul. Okay. I’ll bite.

“I see you as intelligent, obviously. That’s the first thing anyone would notice. You have a time travel workshop, for goodness’ sake. But you have a fascinating combination of innocence and an almost childlike inquisitive quality. You never stop questioning and looking deeper. I think that defines you more than anything else.”

There’s something about his posture that tells me he would have a satisfied expression on his face—if he had a face.

“Eat faster,” he urges.

This strikes me as so funny I almost swallow my bite of unidentified 3D printer meat the wrong way. I mean, he’s got to be seven-feet tall if he’s an inch, and he’s acting like a two-year-old who wants to hurry to get to dessert.

“I’m full,” I say as I forget and try to move the two-hundred-pound chair away from the table. “Couldn’t eat another bite.” I rise.

By the time we’re nearing the workshop with him in the lead, I’m almost jogging to keep up. He pulls me toward a table that is shrouded in a sheet and hands me a computer pad.

“Pick one of these.”

I flip through pages with human movie star pictures. There are hundreds, possibly thousands of them.

“When did you do this?” I ask. Has he been preparing this since he met me? Longer?

“Some at dinner, some before.” He points to his head. Not his temple, mind you, where a human would point to indicate thinking, but the back of his head where his chip resides. Instead of it being weird, I find it oddly endearing. “My chip interfaces with my computers.”

He nods at the pad in my grasp with a decidedly “get a move on” vibe. “Pick.”

I can feel excitement rolling off him in waves.

I scroll thoughtfully. While I was chewing, he was doing some of his best work—all my favorites are here. He’s got tried-and-true idols from Chris Hemsworth to Jason Momoa to Brad Pitt. But he has some choices that would be farther down in anyone’s pantheon, like Robin Williams and Henry Fonda.

“Ganja,” I say, wishing I hadn’t offered to help him choose. I hate it already. “I refuse to pick.” I don’t hand him his pad back, though. I scroll to the end of the offerings, then work my way to the beginning again.

“Any of these would be fine. Except, please remove Shrek and Marty Feldman from the lineup. Otherwise, I think you have some great choices.”

“You won’t pick? I want... I want you to like it.”

His glowing, red eyes are focused on me.

“We’re friends, right?” I say as if I was talking to the three-year-old next door. Well, the three-year-old who lived next door before I was abducted. “I like you. I would like you if you stay the way you are. It’s very thoughtful that you want to make me more comfortable by looking human. It will be something more familiar. But I want you to please yourself, not me.” I shrug.

“Besides, I wouldn’t know how Cary Grant would look in blue anyway.”

“Do you want me to change my skin color, too?” His tone is anything but irritated. He’s so eager to please.

“You’ve missed the point, Ganj. I like you the way you are. One suggestion, though. Make all the skin match. If you’re sticking with the blue, put it on the face, too.” I wink at him.

He pauses a moment, then winks back. His face doesn’t move, of course, it’s made of metal. One red light just blinks on and off. When this makes me giggle, he winks right, then left, then right again. Because I’m laughing harder, he does it faster, then does it in rhythm with a song he plays out of his mouth.

I decide I hadn’t really lived until I saw my seven-foot, blue robot keeping time with his flashing red eyes to the tune of “Puttin’ on the Ritz.” Ah, that’s why Marty Feldman was on the list. Ganja must have watched *Young Frankenstein*.



Chapter Fifteen

Evelyn
I wake up the next day thinking of Ganj. I'm going to rush to his room and tell him not to change his face. My cheeks heat in embarrassment when I think of how rude, how xenophobic, how utterly presumptuous I was to even hint that he should change his appearance.

Would I have said such a thing to someone with facial burns? Someone with a deformity? I had no right to mention it.

Besides, how weird would it be to have dinner every night looking at Joe Manganiello or Denzel Washington?

I hurry through my shower and then race to his room. I call his workshop his room. He doesn't sleep and has no need for a bedroom like I have. His spacious workshop, crammed with centuries' worth of projects, is the only place on this whole compound that is truly his. Just like his face, who am I to make judgments about it?

He's at the time travel sector of the cavernous room, hunched over a workbench. His hands are barely moving. I've watched him enough to know he's using one of his index fingers as a welding torch, doing delicate work, perhaps on a circuit board.

"420," I say, pointedly reverting to his real name. He was happy with that name for two and a half centuries until I showed up, convinced that my way was better than the tried and true. "420, I'm so sorry about yesterday. I feel awful. I have to apologize."

He's still hunched over his work. Here I go again, ignoring his needs. He's concentrating, doing detailed work, and I'm barging in, demanding his attention. I clamp my teeth together, not wanting to further distract him.

He gently sets his project on the compacted soil bench, then turns to me.

"What are you sorry about?" he asks out of a mouth that reminds me vaguely of Jenson Ackles, except his lips look slightly plumper, even more kissable than the real McCoy's.

Pardon me for staring, I think, but I can't force my mouth, which is hanging open, to move. He has Jenson Ackles's lips, Ben Affleck's patrician nose, Bradley Cooper's baby blues, and longish blue-black rock-and-roll hair. How did I miss that when I walked in.

Look around at the underground palace he built, the beautiful filigree and colorful murals on display in almost every room. This guy is an artist. I should have known his face would get the same amount of thought and precision as the walls.

He didn't just steal an American screen idol's face. That would be too mundane, too easy, too obvious. No, he sorted through all the best parts and created a masterpiece. This male, if his skin wasn't blue and he wasn't seven feet tall, could step foot anywhere on Earth and Hollywood scouts would be pounding on his door before his jet engines cooled.

Any minute now, I'm going to have to figure out how to force my mouth to close.

"What are you sorry about?" he prompts.

He's the same Ganja he was yesterday. Totally unaware of what his face does to me. Yesterday he had no idea his red eyes and visor-like mouth gave me the jitters. Today he's equally clueless that if I was even a slightly different person, I would have raced to his workbench, used my forearm to swipe all his precious experiments onto the floor, and pulled him onto it to have my way with him.

My thoughts come to a screeching halt when I glance a few feet lower to confirm that the juncture of his thighs is still Ken-doll-smooth.

Underneath all that pulchritude, Eve, he's still a robot, I remind myself.

"I'm sorry I tried to remake you." Now I'm able to move my mouth. "I had no right, no right at all to make you self-conscious."

"Self-conscious?" he echoes. "I've spent long hours reading about your customs and mores. I'm your host. There are things

that make you uncomfortable. Why wouldn't I try to put you at ease?"

His voice is the same as it's been for the last two weeks. Out of the metallic slash of his mouth, though, I never noticed how deep and mellifluous—and sexy—it was.

Cool your jets, Eve, I remind myself. Ken-doll-smooth, remember?

"It was just so presumptuous. And the name? Seriously, 420 is a far better choice than Ganja. What on Earth was I thinking?"

"You're not on Earth. You were stolen from your home. You yearn for the familiar. It costs me nothing to make myself into an image you're comfortable with. Call me whatever you want."

He's so freaking nice. He's been that way since the first minute we met, but I had trouble noticing until just now. I've got to come to terms with the fact that I'm the most shallow person I've ever met.

"I picked you some *sementines* and *cellots*. They're on the painting workbench." He gestures toward the far wall.

Painting workbench? I've been in here dozens of times. Why didn't I notice his painting workbench before?

Possibly because it's been covered with a sheet. It's still covered, except for the head of the table. It's set for me with steaming café au lait, which he learned how to make for me on my second day here.

"Thanks."

He's preoccupied, so before I tuck in, I surreptitiously lift the sheet to spy a work of art that looks suspiciously like it was done by Leonardo da Vinci.

"420?" I ask, drawing out the syllables. "Did you paint this?" The style is perfect Renaissance. Perhaps it's more reminiscent of Renoir. The use of light and darkness in the two-foot by three-foot portrait of a young girl holding a lamb is blowing me away.

"Yes? Did I do something wrong?"

Wrong? I'm no expert on Renaissance art, but I think he could make a good living as a forger.

"No. Just the opposite, it's beautiful. Can I look at your others?"

"Yes."

"Come over when you have a moment. Give me a guided tour."

I figured he'd wait until he was finished with his project, but a few seconds later, he's wiping his hands on a rag as he stands behind my shoulder.

The sheet isn't lying directly on the paintings because the oil is still wet. He exposes them to me one at a time.

"When did you paint these?" I try to sound open and interested, but I think accusation seeped into my tone. Because I know they've been painted since I arrived three weeks ago and I'm just this side of freaking out.

“Since you arrived. Prior to meeting you, I’d stumbled into reading about Earth and watched some vids, but since you crashed, I’ve been soaking up your culture.”

Okay. I went to Mexico on a three-day budget cruise once. Soaking up their culture meant figuring out how many pesos were in a dollar and learning to ask where the bathrooms were. I felt like the world’s smartest woman for knowing it was *dónde está el baño*.

I did not learn about every famous Mexican artist, nor did I practice and master their artistic style.

“This?” I ask, pointing to the oblong painting that has the Sistine Chapel’s ceiling down to the last detail.

“In the style of Michael Angelo,” he nods, then exposes the next painting with a flourish.

Why does it give me a strange sense of glee that he thinks Michelangelo is two words, as if it somehow negates his indisputable brilliance at everything he does?

“420?” I say, my voice filled with awe at realizing I’m humbled in his presence. “You’re fucking brilliant.”

He laughs. Even when he’s being self-deprecating, his tone manages to be rich and deep and alluring.

The sheet doesn’t touch the wet paint because it’s lying on strategically placed pieces of metal that protect the fabric from sagging onto the works of art. There’s one more painting hiding under the sheet at the end of the table.

“What’s that one?” I ask, pointing.

Interesting. His brand-new face looks guilty. When he deflects my question, saying, “Nothing,” it only piques my interest.

“Nothing? Really? I’d like to see one of your bloopers.” He’s so determined to be perfect; I wonder if a brushstroke is out of place.

Reluctantly, he removes the sheet. This one looks almost dry. It must have been the first one he painted. The face looks very familiar. It’s mine.

I’ve never thought of myself as a pretty woman, although my dad called me beautiful at least once a day every day of my life. I can’t look at this picture without noticing it sure looks like me, and the woman in Renaissance clothing with a glowing halo circling her head sure looks beautiful.

Is this how he sees me? I shake my head, trying to dismiss the thought. I’m reading far too much into it. It’s a painting in the style of the Renaissance, for goodness sakes. Nothing more than that.

But something warm bursts inside my chest and twirls around my heart, then pools in my pelvis. No one has ever looked at me in a way that revealed they thought I was beautiful before.

I realize that although earlier I had worried he was perving on me, I’m now perving on him.

He’s been studiously avoiding me as he gives me his tour of Renaissance greats, but now he’s paralyzed. Paralyzed and six inches away, I might add. And more gorgeous than the handsomest male on Earth because A) he made his own face

with skill, precision, and artistry, and B) everything's better in blue suede.

“Brilliant?” He brings us back to the previous conversation. “Don't tease,” he scolds. His new lips and tongue allow him to enunciate differently. His “t's” just came out harsh and explosive. I was giving him the compliment of a lifetime and he thinks I was making fun.

“I wasn't teasing,” I say, wishing he had a name that didn't taste foul on my lips because I want to use it.

“You weren't?” He leans in as if he could discern truth from a lie by sheer proximity.

“You are brilliant.” I gesture casually to all four corners of the room. “You paint like the Masters, you've created a fucking city that could house thousands down here. You're working on manipulating time and space, and you made that.” I dredge up the courage to point to his face, my finger a scant inch from his nose.

I know this posture. I couldn't read his face before when he quit moving and his head tilted the slightest bit, but now that he has human features, I know what this means. His eyes are narrowed, his perfect nostrils are flared, and he's attempting to figure out if I'm telling the truth.

Here. I'll help him. “You're brilliant and perfect and it's hard to believe someone like you exists.”

We're still just inches apart. I don't know how he made so many adjustments to his body in so short a time, but his chest

is moving up and down, breath is whispering through kissable lips, and his gaze is focused on me.

No, not on me. On my lips.

“I told you I yearned for company, Evelyn.” His blue eyes are smoldering.

If ever I’ve known anyone capable of single-minded focus, it’s 420. Right now, it seems his single-minded focus is on my mouth.

“Well, here I am.” Certainly, these are the boldest words that have ever escaped my lips.

“I practiced talking much of the night,” he says. I guess he practiced after making the most beautifully masculine face ever created and possibly before painting the Sistine chapel. “Articulating with lips and tongue is quite different than having my chip do it.”

Why is he giving me a physics lesson even while his gaze hasn’t left my lips?

“I think I’ve mastered speech. I’d like to try... kissing.”

Ahhh. That explains the science lesson.

Where did that Adam’s apple come from? He didn’t have it yesterday, but it’s bobbing now. Is it a tell that Mr. Perfect is nervous?

“Is it...” I have to tell myself to swallow so I can get enough moisture in my mouth to continue speaking. “Is it purely for

experimental purposes? The kissing?” I ask on a squeak, even as I wonder what I want his answer to be.

“Yes and no. I’d like to experiment. But just with you, Evelyn. Just. You.”

That beautiful mouth lifts into a gentle smile as his blue gaze caresses me from afar.

And what do I want? I’m stranded on this planet with the galaxy’s most beautiful male. He’s been nothing but kind since the first moment we met. He’s brilliant and accomplished. And he’s looking at me like he’d rather kiss me than breathe. Well, he doesn’t really have to breathe, but that’s neither here nor there.

I’ve never been an impulsive person. It’s not in my nature. But I’ve never been abducted into outer space before, either.

“I’d like to experiment, too. I’ve never kissed anyone with blue lips.” I give him a shy smile.

Did I expect him to pounce? Of course, he doesn’t. One hand surrounds my waist while the other tenderly curls around my upper back as he steps closer. He dips his head and breathes in through his nose, as if he’s memorizing the scent of my hair.

I take the opportunity to do the same. My nose is near his naked pecs. I take a whiff. He doesn’t smell like a robot. There’s nothing metallic or artificial about it. Did he research this? Because he smells like a man. A human man who’s been walking in the sunshine. All warm and clean and fresh. Masculine ozone.

I place my palm on his flesh. It's warm and soft. It's better than flesh because of the suede-like feel of him.

"A heart?" I ask, unable to keep the shock out of my voice.

"I thought... if you ever... got close enough, it would put you at ease." His warm breath is whispering through my hair.

"At ease," I echo as my eyelids drift closed and I pay attention to the thump of his heart. I give myself permission to lean my cheek against the spot directly over it. He's right. It's reassuring.

Thoughts are whirling through my head. I have a thousand questions about why he'd want to kiss me when he's not really a male. Or why I'd want to kiss him back because he's simply a bucket of bolts and computer circuits. With human-like feelings.

I'm feeling confused.

I push all that out of my mind, though, and focus on the reassuring thump, thump, thump of the heart under the soft, warm skin of his chest.

He lips the top of my head through my hair. Little nibbles I can imagine more than feel. I picture him getting the lay of the land, discovering how to pucker, perhaps how to garner pleasure from the act of bestowing tenderness. Because it *is* tenderness. I can feel his intent.

His hands migrate to my shoulders as he sets me apart from him far enough to peer into my face. "Do you still want to

experiment?” he whispers as if the sheer act of speaking will break the spell, will remind me he’s not human.

“As long as your lips are blue.” Where I found the presence of mind to tease him is beyond me.

His lids flutter shut. There’s something about the ineffable sweetness of the act that makes me want this kiss more than anything I’ve ever wanted in my life.

Dipping his head lower, his lips find mine, perhaps by heat alone. Their soft brush reminds me I haven’t breathed in a moment as I anticipated their touch. I exhale on a little close-lipped moan, then kiss him back.

A sexual thrill sizzles up my spine when, in response to my eager participation, he mimics my little moan.

There’s very little about him that reminds me of the robot I met my first day on Elderon. His behavior, though, the way he slowly savors me like I’m the most expensive glass of wine that money can buy, this reminds me he is indeed 247 years old. He’s waited a long time for his first kiss. He’s relishing it. He’s relishing *me*.

His fingers curl into my shoulders as I reach around him and stroke the suede-like skin on his back. His little nibbles have morphed into small kisses. I’ll let him savor this awhile, because when I finally open my mouth, I think I’m going to blow his mind.

He’s ahead of me, though. Of course he is. He’s watched a thousand movies. He is, as I proclaimed before, fucking

brilliant. He didn't need tutelage to know things would get infinitely better with our mouths open.

His exploratory kisses become more intense, igniting a slow heat that builds between us. His lips part invitingly as he eagerly awaits what's to come.

He possessively dives into my mouth with an astounding eagerness, sending sparks of pleasure radiating through me. His agile tongue explores every inch with tenderness and hunger.

He doesn't hold back, doesn't try to fake that he's experienced at this, or try to hide that he's filled with passion almost to the point of overwhelm.

When he releases another moan, it amps me up, like a surge of electricity through my veins. I like being able to turn him on.

My nipples are pricked to hard buds as they drag across his naked chest. Tilting my head back, I give him easier access and lift up on the tips of my toes, wanting to be closer, to deepen this kiss and take him past the brink of pleasure he teeters on.

Something changes, transforms between us. I don't know who triggered it, but it's as if we switched gears. We move effortlessly from tentative questing to committed all-in.

His tongue invades my mouth, searching out its recesses like a heat-seeking missile. He tastes clean and rich. My fingers slide into his silky black hair, clinging to him as if I fear he'll change his mind and stop his delicious explorations.

I shouldn't have worried that he'd stop. He's holding me to him, his embrace so strong I wouldn't be able to escape without the aid of a weapon. I have no intention of doing that.

He lifts me effortlessly and swipes two of his priceless paintings onto the floor, heedless that their oil is still wet, that they'll be ruined.

"But?" is all I can sputter as I imagine them smeared beyond recognition.

"You, Evelyn. You," he breathes against my cheek as he kisses a path down the column of my neck. He pauses at the base, then plants a necklace of soft, sucking kisses around my throat. I picture him creating pretty mauve blooms everywhere he sucks, leaving his mark.

I want to mark him too, so I tip his chin up and mimic his actions, then pull back to see if I left any hickeys. Yes. The marks on his blue skin are more purplish than mine.

"I branded you," I whisper, feeling inordinately proud. Is this some primitive symbol of ownership? Why does this cause a frisson of electricity to bolt up my spine? Why does this thrill me?

His shallow breaths are history. Now he's grabbing huge gusts of air. I'm confused for a moment, wondering if he changed his physiology to the point he needs air to breathe.

His hands slide from my shoulders to my waist and then burrow under my shirt. They were swift and decisive on the trip down, then under, but they halt as if paralyzed.

“Yes?” he husks as he tips his head back far enough to assess my expression through his lashes.

It’s as if he can’t bear to pause for my answer. His thumbs are circling my midriff, waiting for the starter pistol of my consent.

“Yes,” I whisper, even as I know I should shut this down. It’s too much. Too soon. Too... weird. But it’s not.

Look at him. He’s beautiful and seems as human as me.

Those thumbs are still circling, yet he presses his lips on my chin and nudges my face to tip toward him.

“You’re sure?” Oh, that voice is so deep, so rough, so full of need.

“Just this,” I say, partially out of self-preservation, partially because I’m not sure how we could go much farther, considering he doesn’t have the right equipment.

“Ohh,” he rumbles as his palms slide up my skin.

He doesn’t remove his gaze from me as he watches my reaction to his touch. When his hands slide close to the finish line, when the weight of my full breasts is resting in his palms, he releases a hiss, like that of a feral animal.

“Evelyn. Just this,” he says, his voice deep and low as if whispering a prayer in the inner sanctum of a secret temple.

He seats my nipples against his palms, allowing my tips to drag against his skin. His palms aren’t suede-like, they’re the place on his body where his skin is most human.

“Perfect,” he says. High praise, indeed, coming from a male who has dedicated over two centuries in pursuit of that condition. “Evelyn, so perfect.”

His fingers curl, cupping my breasts, examining the feel of them, their weight, their shape, their sensitivity. He’s watching me, almost breathless, as he observes. I remember for a moment that he’s not human. His computer brain is notating every response—my pupils’ dilation, my respirations, the width of my nostrils as they widen to breathe in his addictive scent.

He plucks one tightened bud with the perfect amount of force to cause me to lean into his touch, to suck in a surprised breath at how exquisite that one tiny touch could be.

“I’m going to paint this, Evelyn. Better than the Sistine Chapel,” his voice is an awed whisper. “Your arousal should be commemorated just like that. Head thrust back, lips parted, eyes closed to better enjoy my touch. This is the definition of beauty.”

If I was a more suspicious person, I’d think he came up with these magical words of seduction after doing copious amounts of research. But he didn’t. This is him. He’s beautifully naïve and present and generous with his praise.

“Yes?” he asks as his fingers pluck the hem of my shirt. He wants to see me. He’s seen me naked before, but this time it’s different. I know as certainly as I know it’s over a hundred degrees outside that he won’t see the twenty extra pounds I

worry about. No, he's going to see the beauty underneath my skin because he knows who resides under the skin.

"Yes," I say with finality.

He lifts the material, pulls it over my head, and instead of pouncing on me, he steps back. His blue eyes dilate as he looks at me. For perhaps the first time in his long life, his face bears the true expression of his desire. He's wearing a wide, close-lipped smile. If things were different, it might feel predatory because his appreciation is so pronounced. But it's not predatory. He wants nothing from me that I wasn't already prepared to give.

He swipes more priceless paintings off the table and lays me back, then suckles at my breast. A grunt escapes the back of his throat. It's the sound a man might make when biting into his first meal after a week of starvation. It's a masculine sound of unabashed appreciation.

I tighten my grip on his hair and hang on for the ride as he licks and flicks and then nips the tips of my breasts. I rise off the table, almost levitating from the pleasure.

He pulls away long enough to say my name, then returns his ministrations to my other nipple.

"420," I say, testing the sound on my lips. I may hate the name, but I have to say something. I have to acknowledge him, his uniqueness, my esteem for him. I need him to know that not anyone can do this to me. That he's not interchangeable with anyone else. That I know who he is—not 419 or 421. No, he's 420. "My 420."

“May I...” His gaze finds mine. His voice is in supplication. “Evelyn. Let me make you feel good. Let me carry you to your bed. I want to put these lips to use. I want to please you. It would be an honor.”

My sanity flew away long moments ago. If I hadn't already lost my mind, we wouldn't be here with my fingers clutching his raven-dark hair, with his mouth at my breast, with my lips feeling abraded by his.

If I was still rational, I would say no. Perhaps forcefully. Perhaps as a scold. But I'm in an alternate dimension, on another planet, in outer space with the galaxy's most beautiful robot and I want him to give me pleasure. Maybe if he had a cock at the juncture of his thighs, I would say no. I'd be fearful. But when he says it will be all about me, I know he's telling the truth.

“Yes.”

I think for a moment I'd like to go to one of the thousand other rooms, to use a different bed than the one I sleep in every night, then I throw that thought away. I want him in *my* bed. I want his clean, masculine scent in the thick grass that I'll lie on. I want to remember this and the look of lust and appreciation in his eyes every time I glance at the beautiful murals on my walls.

He sweeps me into his arms and stalks down the hallway toward my room. He sets me on the floor near my grassy bed, still naked from the waist up, and backs toward the arched doorway.

“You’re certain, Evelyn? We can wait.”

“I don’t want to wait,” I insist, my voice the slightest bit petulant with want, with need, with desire.

He stalks to me with the grace of a feline, pulls me to my feet, and grips the waistband of my pants.

“Yes?” he asks.

“Yes.”

Sliding my pants down in one ferocious movement, he sweeps them off my legs as I work with him to lift my feet in perfect timing.

His eyes are hooded as he takes me in. You’d never know he saw me naked the day I arrived. It feels as though it never happened. I love that this moment, right now, is like the first time he’s laid eyes on my naked flesh.

“I didn’t allow myself to look before, Evelyn. Not like this. Not with desire. But, Evelyn—”

“Call me Eve.”

“Ahh,” he smiles at this intimacy I’ve granted him, as if it’s more of a gift than what he’s about to engage in with my body.

“Eve, I dreamed of this. For years. I didn’t know you were coming, but I wished for it. For someone just like you, Eve. A perfect female who was good, like you. All of my fantasies were for someone sweet and smart and generous. I’ve found that with you, but I never, not once allowed myself to dream of *this*.”

He gestures up and down my body as if I'm the most beautiful female in the universe.

"I didn't allow myself to admit it, but I'll tell you now. I yearned for this, Eve. I yearned... for you."

He didn't have to say this. I'm already naked and willing. But what he just said warms my heart. I'm afraid to tell him. Afraid that if I admit this, the gods who greedily want to keep true happiness for themselves will come snatch this away. But 420 deserves to hear it.

"You've melted my heart, 420. Consider it yours."

He stops moving so abruptly it's robotic. It's as if my comment blew his circuits. Then that beautiful smile graces his handsome face. I'm filled with pride, knowing I did that to him.



Chapter Sixteen

4²⁰

I never allowed myself to dream of this. I forbade my thoughts from going here because wanting it and not receiving it would have broken my heart. No. I didn't have a heart back then, so it wouldn't have broken my heart. It would have broken *me*.

But Eve's here, and there's no denying the look in her sparkling brown eyes is full of desire.

I shouldn't have done it, but I've downloaded and studied human female anatomy and watched countless vids. I'm going to give her all the pleasure she deserves.

With ease, I lift her in my arms and place her on the bed. Her skin glimmers in the soft light, beckoning my touch. I circle her ankles, one in each hand, then trail my fingertips up her silken legs until my grip meets the warmth of her thighs. I split her wide, close my eyes, and inhale to memorize her sweet, intoxicating scent.

It's a physical embodiment of her need, her desire—for me. I feel fully male for the first time in over two centuries.

Using my thumbs, I gently part her lower lips. Although I studied diagrams, she looks nothing like any of the pictures I examined. At first, I wonder if I understand what I'm seeing, then I realize this is an expression of her individuality. She's not like a picture in a book. She's Eve.

Her lower lips are glistening with her arousal. At the top of the slit is her clitoris, described as a little pleasure button. That's where I'll attack first.

Between lowering my head and executing my plan, I change my mind. I have to dip my tongue into the fountain of her passion. I grunt in pleasure as her taste bursts on my new tongue.

Perhaps I made my taste buds too sensitive because I think her taste is so rich, so tantalizing, it might forever spoil me for any other tastes. There would be no harm in that, though. It will forever be my benchmark of deliciousness.

Her legs scissor wider, beckoning me in, urging me to continue.

I delve into her with my tongue, lapping at her juices as if I'm looking for the source of the fountain. The nectar doesn't disappear. She just keeps producing more, along with little mewling moans.

Maybe the articles were wrong. Maybe this is the way to provide her release. I trace the slit higher to explore the little

button at the apex. When she moans louder, her voice almost as deep as mine, I realize I've found the spot.

What a delicious puzzle, trying to discern what my Eve wants. I gently flicker the tip of my tongue on her little nub, then lick, then press harder. Just when I think I can't pull any more moans from her, I find a different angle or level of pressure that makes her noises even more passionate.

She's gripping my hair, and moments ago she slung her legs over my shoulders. She must be getting close, because she's pulling me more tightly to her and is riding me as much as I'm riding her.

"Four!" Her voice is breathy as her head tosses against her pillow. Her bliss is so deep she couldn't say my full name.

I lap faster, harder.

"Fill me!"

I love that she asks for what she wants. I can spend the rest of my life providing that. As I slip a finger into her hot, tight channel, she writhes in pleasure.

"More!"

I press another finger inside her and don't need to wait for her to ask for another. It's this, this third digit that seems to be what she needs to scream in ecstasy. Her fingers grip my hair so tightly I wonder if I'll have any left by the time I've wrung all her pleasure from her.

I won't mind being hairless again if it's in service to her delight.

Core pulsing around me, body thrashing in spasms, she screams in bliss. Being able to bestow this is the high point of my life.

She pulls me to the top of the bed, our heads on the pillows she had me make with the printer.

“420,” she says on a tired sigh.

My chest expands with pride. I did this to her. Her eyes are dilated, her chest and cheeks are pinkened from passion. I’ve marked her throat with a purple necklace, and now I’ve marked her soul. At least I hope I have.

She snuggles next to me, flings her arms around my neck, and gives me a dozen happy kisses.

As her heartbeat slows and her blown pupils return to normal, she asks, “And you? How do I make you feel good, 420?”

“What we just did gave me all the pleasure I need.”



Chapter Seventeen

Evelyn

I was feeling great. No, is there a word signifying better than great? Cause that was how I was feeling after the best screaming orgasm of my life. And look at him. He's not hiding the affection in his gaze. We don't need to have "the talk" for me to know he likes me.

"Wait a second, big guy." I turn on my side to stare at him. I was going to launch into a conversation, but I pause an extra second just to absorb the visual goodness that is 420. Yikes! He's handsome. "You can paint like Renoir, create a structure worthy of a thousand ancient Egyptians, program like Steve Wozniak on steroids, and you can't build yourself a penis?"

I grab his hand, lace my fingers through his, and hold it between our faces.

"These fingers? They're capable of heavy lifting and fine motor skills, and even have a built-in welding torch. If you can make all this, why can't you make a cock?"

He stills. It's one of the few remaining tells that hint at his robotic origins. Then he nods his head slowly, even as he subconsciously licks the side of his mouth. That sends a jolt of lust through me. He's unknowingly stealing another taste of me as he thinks. His nodding becomes faster, and finally he looks me in the eyes and says, "Absolutely. I can do that."

When he rolls over preparing to leap off the bed, I scold, "Not so fast, Buster."

"You talking to me?" He tips his head in an exaggerated motion. "Is that a new nickname?"

Did he just tell his first joke? Go him.

"Part of sex is the snuggling afterward. You're going to roll right back over here and hold me in your arms. You're going to kiss wherever your lips can reach and tell me one or two more times how amazing that was. I, in turn, will do the same, along with a few more heartfelt thank yous. Then I'll snooze while you work out the details in that magnificent brain of yours." I give him a quick peck on the lips to make sure he knows my bossy tone is all for show.

"Then we're going to your workshop together and if I'm lucky, you'll give me some input on the design."

"Input?" he rumbles as he nips my earlobe. "I love that idea."

Four hours later—I couldn't sleep long. I mean, really, designing your lover's penis? It's pretty exciting. So, four hours later, we run naked to his workshop.

Funny how my lifelong body shame just disappeared. Well, it makes sense. How could I hold onto it when someone who looks like *him* gazes at me as though I'm the prettiest thing he's ever laid eyes on?

While I slept, he must have told the 3D printer to make me a stool, because it's sitting at the printer when we arrive. I sit, he stands, in front of the computer, which already has dozens of prototypes on the screen.

They're all very serviceable, nice, perfectly acceptable human penises that he must have pulled off Earth's Internet. He's even given me circumcised and uncircumcised versions.

"Oh wait," he says, then makes them all the same lovely shade of blue as the rest of him.

"Cool your jets, Buster," I tease. "So, A for effort on the human penis research, but... what if we think outside the box?"

I mentally scroll through all the possible permutations that a penis could have. I mean, why not? This man is brilliant. If I can think it, he can design it. One? Two? Ouch, not sure that would thrill me. Vibrating? Rotating? And what about that spur thing I read about?

Oh, and the very idea of prototypes... There's that old expression, "If at first you don't succeed, try, try again." Just imagine all the fun we could have by the time we get to iteration one hundred.

But I want to start off with a bang—ha ha. By this time, he’s sitting on the stool as he wildly sketches, then refines. I’m perched behind him, standing on one of the stool’s rungs, one arm slung around his neck as my other hand points to the screen recommending refinements and embellishments.

“Our first project together!” I squeal in happiness.

“You think you’ll be happy with this one?” he asks as he turns to inspect me. I hope he can see affection shining in my eyes. I want him to know how happy I am not just with the peen, but with this process, and him.

“We’ll see. And you? It won’t just be a fancy dildo, right? This will give *you* pleasure?”

His face becomes serious. “I’m not sure, Eve.” Before things get too serious, he interrupts himself to say, “I love saying your name. It’s like a special, intimate treat.” His gaze darts from mine when he adds, “I don’t know if I’ll be capable of having an explosion like you did.”

I guess I understand. Before I had my first orgasm, I’d wondered what it would be like. Yeah, I was a very precocious kid. My dad was great, but he was a guy. So, I didn’t want to embarrass either of us with questions beyond his initial, awkward birds and bees discussion.

Learning on the Internet was fine, but describing an orgasm is about as helpful as describing love. Nothing prepares you for it until it happens.

So how can 420 design an orgasm for himself if he's never had one?

"That makes me sad," I tell him. "I want you to have what I had."

He lifts me so I'm sitting across his lap, my hip snugged against his belly. "I did, Eve. I experienced every moment of your pleasure earlier. It was the best feeling I've ever had."

Riigghht. Like I just said, you don't know what you're missing until you have your first orgasm, and he hasn't had one.

We agree on a design, and by that, I mean I pick one. He doesn't really have a dog in the fight. He doesn't eat, doesn't drink, and doesn't need a pee-pee to go pee-pee. Since he's never had masculine equipment before, it's not as if he has an investment in what it looks like. Although, like males of every species, he wants a big one. He won't get any argument from me on that.

A lot more is involved than the shape, though. There's a lot of thought that will have to go into the design. It will need micro-hydraulics, and internal liquids to engorge and then... who am I kidding. I don't understand a word he says.

I trot off for a nap and a swim.



Chapter Eighteen

4²⁰

Despite my sexless appearance and numeric name, ever since I've been self-aware, I've thought of myself as male. When my thinking became advanced enough to imagine a future, to begin to toy with the idea of a relationship, it was always with a female.

Considering my circumstances, I always shut my thoughts down when they strayed in that direction. Why would someone with no hands dream of painting? Someone with no tastebuds desire food? Someone with no sex dream of it?

Late at night, though, when I wasn't vigilant, my thoughts would wander to a female. It was then I would yearn for companionship. I imagined sharing thoughts, hovering to the springs for a swim, and working together. Although I didn't eat, I imagined sitting at the table with her for every meal.

Even in my boldest moments, though, I never had the audacity to imagine the look of affection I see in Eve's eyes. Or the

taste of her honey on my lips. Or that she would want me to have a cock so I could breach her secret places.

She thinks I need to reach the pinnacle of physical pleasure. If she had any idea that *she's* my pinnacle, she wouldn't worry.



Chapter Nineteen

Evelyn
“Perimeter alert! Perimeter alert!” a female AI announces in a shrill tone. I jump out of the pool, and speed to the workshop, still naked and dripping wet.

As soon as I burst in, I follow 420’s gaze to one of the ten screens in the room. They all picture a spaceship touching down on the beige sand up above. It’s as if a lead ball explodes in my stomach. Our safety is being breached.

I didn’t get a chance to see the ship that abducted me. I did see the enormous cruise ship moments before it exploded into a bazillion pieces. I’ve certainly watched enough sci-fi to know what I’m seeing is a ship big enough to hold a couple of dozen people. It looks streamlined for speed.

Every muscle in 420’s big, blue body is tight. He’s on red alert.

“MarZan’s not supposed to be here for three days, and this isn’t like any of their ships. I want you to run to the outer rim

of the Underground. You've been here for weeks. You've explored. You know some hiding spots. Pick one."

He hurries to the corner where he keeps his old robotic self. I watch as the robotic arm removes the chip from his blue body and shoves it into the metallic frame I met the day I arrived.

As he covers his handsome blue body with a sheet, he says, "I knew this was coming. Why didn't I prepare you better? There's so much you need to know to be able to live here without me."

Live without him? Why would I have to do that?

"You know how to keep the Facility going," he says as he hurries toward the doorway, then turns on his metallic silver heel to return to me. Grabbing my hands in his, he bends to kiss me. Although his lips are gone and all he has is that metallic visor for a mouth, it's a poignant kiss filled with so many unspoken words between us.

"Why are you telling me this?" I ask, my heart racing, my eyes wide in my face.

"Something's not right. They never come off schedule. This isn't their usual ship. Something's wrong. With the MarZan cartel, the unexpected is never good." He kisses me again, harder. His voice filled with steel, he says, "Hide. Now."

He moves toward the steps and says, "The robots will keep growing food forever. The computers are intuitive. You can learn anything you need, just ask."

He climbs the steps two at a time, then closes the shack's floorboards to cover the hole to the Underground.

He's warning me, preparing me. He thinks he's going to die. We've had so little time together. It's not fair. I don't want to live without him. My heart is pounding in fear, but more painful is the way my stomach clenches at the thought of losing him.

I do as instructed and run to my room to pull on my clothes. Once dressed, I take a left at a dead run toward the outer rim of the wheel. Suddenly, I stop. What am I doing? I am not some 1950s movie girlfriend who stood by squealing in fear as the bad guys beat up her boyfriend. I may not have an impenetrable robotic body, but I will not hide in a closet and bite my nails.

After running back to the workshop, I tell the AI to turn on the exterior volume. Maybe I'll be able to hear what's going on. No one has come out of the spaceship yet, so I take a moment to look around the room for a weapon.

I see nothing resembling a laser pistol or rifle. Not that I'd know one if it bit me, but I assume it would look something like a human gun. The only thing I see is the adze he used to create rooms down here.

It's not made for a human female, though. It's made for 420. He's a seven-foot-tall robot. How am I supposed to wield this when I can barely lift it? Shit!

There will be plenty of time to run to a hidey-hole if I need it. The falls halfway down what I've mentally labeled corridor B

has a neat little cave behind it. Unless the intruders have a helluva good sense of smell, they'll never find me behind a wall of water. Oh, or heat-sensing software. In that case, I'll be dead the moment they look for me.

Holy shit! I watch the screen as a ramp to the ship opens and two well-armed males stomp down it. The bigger of the two is almost the same color as 420. He's slightly shorter, but no less muscular. He has swirly tats all over his naked chest.

The other is way scarier even though he's not as big. He's magenta and black with stark white tribal-type markings on his face and body.

420 approaches the two males. If a seven-foot robot could look obsequious, then 420 is doing a great job of it. His chin is tipped down, his shoulders slightly slumped. It's a humanoid's way of rolling over on his back like a dog.

It's funny watching his metallic skin glint in the blazing suns. I feel a warm gust of affection burst inside my chest. It's like I have a secret, knowing the amazing male hidden behind the illusion of a robot.

The conversation starts in low tones, although by their body posture, the two armed males from the ship are clearly bristling with anger. Soon, they're arguing. The big, blue guy gesticulates with his gun.

"He's unarmed, asshole," I shout to the empty room.

420's posture becomes even more non-threatening as he raises his hands in surrender and steps toward the ship. My eyes tear

up in gratitude as I realize he's trying to lead them away from me.

They're not backing down, though. My breaths are rasping, and my hands are trembling as I watch things unfold. These guys are from the most bloodthirsty, powerful crime cartel in the galaxy.

The blue cartel guy isn't playing anymore. He's brandishing his weapon. 420 is no longer pretending he's a whipped puppy. He's raised to his full height, his posture menacing.

The two males clearly want him to walk toward the shack—toward me—and he's having none of it.

Faster than the eye can follow, he reaches down. Did he have short swords hidden in the metal of his thighs? Because he has a foot and a half sword in each hand and he's wielding them against his tormentors.

His arms are slashing. He's approaching the blue one, obviously the brawnier of the two, as if his life depends on it. It does. As does mine. His arms are moving so fast, the weapons are simply flashing blurs in the bright sun. He's fearless, on the offensive, trying to cut his enemies down. It's all to protect me. If I wasn't here, he would have just kept up his mild obeisant posture. He put himself in danger for me.

Although I can't hear the shot, I see the magenta guy fire his weapon. After the flash of light, 420 crashes to the sand.

I cry out as if I'm the one who was struck. My heart is jackhammering in my chest as I approach the steps. Then I

stop. If 420 can't deter them, armed as he is, what do I think *I* can do?

When I turn back to the screens, I see he's alive, sitting up. It's hard to tell from this angle, but it looks as though one leg was lasered clean off.

No matter what happens next. No matter what happens to me, at least he's still alive.

They're gesturing, obviously wanting him to lead them to the shack.

I've only known him for a short amount of time, but when the blue guy points his gun at 420's face at point-blank range, I know exactly what's going through 420's head.

He knows whether he's alive or dead they'll eventually find me. He wants to stay alive to protect me somehow. That's why he nods his head and hops toward the shack. They wouldn't even let him grab his leg. It's just lying in the sand, some delicate, dangling filaments already getting covered by the relentless blowing sand. He's talking, pleading by the look of it, but the blue guy is pointing his gun at 420's back.

"There are no human females on this planet. I'm alone here. Me and the harvest robots."

Finally, they're within range of the exterior microphones.

"Just you and some other robots?" one of them asks contemptuously.

"Yes. We grow fruits and vegetables. I'd be glad to—" The blue guy pistol whips the back of his head.

“Why were you researching human females?”

“I was simply curious,” 420 says, his voice is that robotic monotone he used with me the day we met. That was when he thought I was a spy for the MarZan cartel.

“Robots on planets at the ass end of the galaxy don’t just get curious about human female sexuality,” the magenta guy says, his voice dripping with sarcasm.

“My owners were talking about Earth females on their last pickup. I wanted to research in case I ever met one.”

“There’s only one reason anyone would investigate human female sexuality. This is if they were in close proximity to one—or more—of them.”

After they enter the shack, the blue guy orders 420 to turn around and face him.

When he turns, blue guy looks him up and down, obviously noting 420’s lack of sexual equipment. He says, “You weren’t jacking your cock. You don’t own one.”

He puts his pistol to 420’s forehead and steps forward until 420’s back hits the interior shack wall.

The blue male drops his voice half an octave as he seethes, “Are you or someone on this hellish rock involved in the sale or transport of human females?” His tone is cruel. I hate this guy.

These guys are interested in human women. Maybe they think they can steal his supply and sell them on the black market for their own gain.

What if they find the opening to the Underground? They're accusing him of wanting to be sexual with humans. What if they find his workshop and see the cock pics? I turn down the speakers so they won't hear their own voices drifting up the stairs, then I try to hide all the evidence of cock design. But his workshop is filled with other stuff that will get him relegated to the scrap heap.

The paintings? The perfect blue body leaning against the back wall? The time travel stuff? I shouldn't worry about that last one. It's probably incomprehensible to anyone with less than a 500 IQ.

The volume is off, but their voices are seeping through the wooden slats that open to the Underground.

"We're going to look over every inch of this area," one of the males says. "If we find any evidence of human slavery, we will decommission you *after* we figure out how to inflict the highest amount of pain.

"Look here." I watch through one of the cameras as the blue guy lifts up the ragged pants I arrived in. "These yours?" he sneers.

Oh shit. So busted. We spend no time up there. It's been three weeks, and I never thought to clean up?

"These would fit my mate, Brin," the scary-looking one says. "She's human. We're both mated to human females. We. Do. Not. Take. Kindly. To. Human. Traffickers."

Did he say they are both mated to human females? That's impossible. He must have said it so 420 would reveal my hiding place.

I watch as the blue guy points his gun at 420's forehead, then moves close enough that it's touching.

"Where are they?" He's not asking. That's a demand.

"I don't—"

The blue guy fires his weapon through the roof.

"The next shot will be through your head," he seethes. "Where are the human females?" He plants the gun in 420's face.

They want the human female? Here I come.

I take a deep breath and exhale through pursed lips, trying to give myself courage. These guys are mean. They're fuckers. And they're looking for human females. For all I know, *they're* the slavers.

I grab the adze, a ridiculous gesture. I can barely carry the heavy thing as I fly up the three flights of stairs. Through the almost imperceptible holes between the slatted floorboards, I see that one of the intruders is standing on the hatch.

"Now, asshole. For the last time, where are the human females?" the blue guy demands through gritted teeth. He's no longer moving the weapon, it's firmly planted against 420's head.

"Here. If you'll step off the doorway." Though I wanted to sound forceful, that came out almost like a question.

The magenta guy steps to the side and lifts the hatch. Dear God. The tribal markings on his face are scary as fuck—scarier than the gun he’s pointing at me.

I menace him with the business end of the adze, although I don’t have the strength to swing it.

“Leave 420 alone!” I put as much threat into my tone as I can muster, walk to 420, then stand between him and the intimidating males.

“You’re... human,” magenta guy says as he looks me up and down.

“Damn right. Get off our property.” I step toward him with menace, even though I can imagine in my mind’s eye just how pitiful I must look as I struggle to keep the tool upright.

420 lays his hands on my shoulders, dips his head to my level, and scolds, “I told you to stay hidden. To stay safe.”

“They took off your leg! They were going to shoot you in the head. I came to help.”

“I’m Captain Thantose of the ship *Ataraxia*,” the magenta guy says, his gun aimed at 420. “Explain what’s going on.”

We all posture for a while, no one really wanting to come clean. 420 doesn’t want to reveal his secrets. Goodness knows he has a lot of them. I still don’t trust these guys and certainly don’t want to be hauled off to be anyone’s bed-slave.

Finally, the intruders tell us who they are. These males, it turns out, are pirates. Space pirates! What are the odds?

An hour later, after a thorough interrogation, 420 and I are in the *Ataraxia's* dining room. I'm eating real food around a table with seven males of various species as well as four women, three of whom are human. They were telling the truth about human mates. Who would have guessed?

Brin is Captain Thantose's mate. There's Lexa who is mated to Sextus, the big, blue male. Tawny is Devolose's mate. He looks a lot like Thantose. They're cousins.

There are four other male crew, and the most surprising thing of all, a four-armed, five-foot tall, opalescent female who just might be the prettiest thing I've ever seen.

420, not being big on trust, is still doing a great imitation of Robbie the Robot. And me? I'm still in shock. But not too shocked to keep me from shoveling my mouth full of the first home-cooked meal I've eaten in a long time.

"One of our friends, Star—also an Earth female," Thantose explains, "is a thing to behold behind a computer keyboard. She keeps an ear out for human trafficking. We and our friends on the two gladiator ships try to rescue as many abducted humans as we can."

Gladiators?

"Star has backend programs set to send her an alarm when someone searches for certain terms. The information 420 downloaded on human female sexuality set off a red alert. She traced it here. That's how we landed on your doorstep."

I get a bigger picture of just how weird outer space is. It's filled with human trafficking, space pirates, drug cartels, and gladiators.

"The gladiators are all escaped slaves. They've commandeered two ships and keep themselves alive by earning credits in arena fighting matches," Thantose says.

"And righting wrongs," Brin adds. "We're all on a mission to rescue abducted women and other mistreated souls."

It's a lot to take in. I'm just lucky to be in the company of the good guys. Well, if pirates can be considered good guys. The posturing and gun waving are behind us. As soon as we were allowed to explain ourselves, the posturing-threatening-testosterone factor decreased by 95%.

Before we came aboard the pirate ship, I ran to the Underground for a replacement leg, so 420 is in working order. Thantose asked, well it was more like an order, that the knives he keeps hidden in what would be the meaty part of his thigh stay in the shack.

"Uh, is that, uh, chocolate cake?" I'm terrible, I know, but after weeks of *cellots* and meat fabricated in a 3D printer, the chocolate cake is almost as exciting as finding three nice human women onboard a pirate spaceship.

Destin the cook cuts me a thick slab of cake, sets it in front of me, then steps back as if he's afraid I'll eat so fast he'll be maimed by flying debris.

As soon as I've scraped every morsel of cake from my plate, the three human women stand and offer me a tour of the ship.

"If you're really nice," Tawny says with a smile, "we'll take you into the hold and show you all our pirate booty. I'll bet you never thought you'd hear that sentence in real life, huh?"

As we stand in the doorway, I notice there's nothing casual about their posture or the looks on their faces.

Something's not right. Are these women going to drag me to a cell? Imprison me? I look to 420 for help. I can't read any expression on his metallic face and he's in no position to give advice. He's just a robot to these people. That he hasn't come clean about who he really is cautions me not to fully trust these women.

As soon as we're a few feet down the hallway, they stop and surround me.

"It's just you and the robot on the planet?" Lexa asks as she takes a step closer. "You're okay? No one's hurt you? You're not covering for anyone?"

I'm suddenly very happy that the shirt I'm wearing covers the pretty ring of love bites 420 gave me earlier. That would draw some questions I wouldn't be able to answer.

"No. It's just me and 420, the robot." I shrug. "I'm fine."

"Oh, you're so lucky," Brin says as she hugs me.

What is it about this ship? Allura, the four-armed female is so gorgeous, and Brin, with her red hair, green eyes, and delicate

features, could be a movie star. And she's so sweet. She looks genuinely relieved that I'm safe.

"So, the three rooms at the end of this hallway are open. Which one would you like? We'll neaten it up for you."

"You don't have to stay with us," Lexa adds. Perhaps she read my reluctance. "We have friends on planet Fairea. We can take you there as soon as we're done with the job we're on. They have a huge compound called Sanctuary where abducted human women are welcomed. It's a lot like Earth, and they'll welcome you with open arms if you don't want to be a pirate."

"Argh!" Tawny imitates a pirate with a laugh.

Brin leads us to the end of the hallway, where she palms open the doors to all three available rooms.

"They're all alike, but you have a choice," red-headed Brin says. "We took a detour from our caper to follow up on Star's database alarm. We're selling a forged Broog painting to a petty potentate on planet Primitiff. We don't have time to hang here and can't take you directly to Sanctuary. But we'll get you there within a week."

"You'll be safe here, I promise," Tawny says with a genuine smile.

"But..."

"Do you have things on Elderon? Our guys will escort you back so you can collect your stuff."

"Then you can wave goodbye to the robot and that shitty planet and come aboard. We occasionally violate Federation

law and make our way to Earth.” Lexa gives me a conspiratorial wink.

“Sadly, none of us can return to our old lives. If the military discovered we’d just returned from outer space, they’d give us an all-expense paid trip to Area 51. I, for one, have no desire to be vivisected. But when we’re in the area, we manage to steal some of the best things from Earth.”

“Like chocolate,” Tawny says with a smile. “Let’s go get your things. We’ve got to jet. There’s a despot just waiting to be bilked out of his ill-gotten gains.”

I’m swept up with them as they return to the dining room.

“She’s fine!” Brin announces to the room. “Unharmmed.”

The tension in the room dissolves as Captain Thantose nods, obviously happy to hear neither the seven-foot robot nor anyone else has hurt me.

“She’s got some things on the planet she wants to retrieve, then we’ll be ready to bounce. She hasn’t chosen a room yet and isn’t sure if she wants to stay with us or be safe on Sanctuary.” Lexa slides into the big Cerulean’s lap and pops a *cello* into his mouth.

Those three women were a force of nature. Their speech was so rapid-fire, their plans so persuasive, I didn’t have a moment to protest.

I look to 420, and although I can’t read anything on his expressionless face, it’s obvious by the slant of his shoulders and the dip of his head this has devastated him. He has to

believe I'm leaving with them. I haven't argued with them. Why would he think otherwise?

"I'm..." Am I about to announce that I'm not going with them? Am I really choosing to stay on this barren rock instead of going to a place with other humans? They said it was beautiful. The place is called *Sanctuary*. I'd be crazy to choose Elderon over that, right?

420's just a robot, isn't he?

Except he's not. He paints beautifully, not just copies of the old Masters, but there was the one of me looking like a beautiful saint. It spoke volumes about his feelings for me. He's brilliant and intuitive and kind. He's not just a bucket of bolts. This male has a soul!

I look at him with his metallic face, utilitarian visor instead of a mouth, shining red eyes like out of the Terminator. What if he'd never showed me his beautiful, blue-skinned form? Those Bradley Cooper eyes? Those kissable lips? Would I still be thinking, even for a moment, of staying on this shithole planet?

I sag into the nearest chair, my mouth working with no sound coming out. I'm vaguely aware that every eye in the room is on me and, frankly, I don't care.

Do I love him?

My body becomes paralyzed as my heart speeds up to double time.

Really?

Do I love 420, my Ganja man?

It strikes me with the force of a ten-megaton bomb that I've grown to love him over the past few weeks. Does it matter that his insides are made of plastic and wires when, other than my father, his heart is the kindest I've ever encountered?

Out of all the males I've known, did I ever interact with one, even one, who looked at me the way 420 does? Who was as concerned about my welfare and happiness? He was ready to die to keep them from investigating what was under that shack.

He thought these pirates meant to do me harm, and he tried to protect me at the expense of his life. He might be made of metal and computer chips, but his soul is real. Shock whips through me when I acknowledge that not only am I choosing to stay with him, but I would choose to do so even if there were no handsome blue body leaning against the wall in the Underground.

I'm glad I got to see the blue suede version with the kissable lips, but only because it allowed me to look deeper, to really meet the male who inhabited the body.

I love this male! No matter whether he's metal or flesh and blood!

I rise and deliberately walk to 420, then sit on his lap. This was a statement. By the amazed expressions on every face in the room, it was a pretty loud one.

“I’m going to stay on Elderon. It’s dusty and hot as hell down there, but it has its attributes.” I cup 420’s cool metallic cheek in my palm and smile at him.

The room is silent. I think the term, “you could have knocked me over with a feather” applies.

As usual, Ganja’s expression is inscrutable.

“No, she’s not.” His voice is full of passion, nothing like the robotic tone he’s used since the pirates touched down. “She’s leaving with you.”

Now I’m the one getting knocked over with a feather.

“Can we borrow one of your rooms?” I ask, not wanting to discuss this in front of an audience.

“There’s no need. You’re going to have a life on a comfortable, safe planet with others of your kind.”

“I’m making a different choice,” I say firmly.

“You’re not welcome here on Elderon,” he says with finality.

He might have thought that would have been the final straw to make me pack my bags to fly off with the pirates. Instead, it did the opposite. It pierced me through the heart to hear it. It twisted my guts. It proved to me just how much I care for him.

I rise, grab his hand, and pull him with me. He’s a thousand times stronger than me. If he didn’t want to follow me, he’d win. But he allows me to pull him out the door and into the empty room at the end of the hallway.

“I know the meaning of true joy,” he says as the door slides shut. “That you told your human friends you wanted to stay with me means more than words can express. But we both know leaving with them is the right thing to do.”

“We do? I don’t know that!”

“You said it yourself. The planet is barren. You’ve called it a shithole on more than one occasion. You’ll have no friends here. Just a... robot.”

I want to punch him, but it would feel like a mosquito to him, and I’d probably break my hand.

“Where is this coming from? I thought... you had feelings for me.”

“I tricked you, Eve. I’ve put on soft, blue skin and a handsome face and showed you what you would call humanity. Inside, I’m still a robot, a system of 1s and 0s that thinks clever thoughts. You’ll be better off without me.”

I can’t think. I’m like an engine that has seized up and can’t keep moving. Then the thought arrows into my head—
WWDD? What would Dad do?

God, I miss that man. He wasn’t the smartest man on the planet, but dear Lord, he had heart, and he was street smart. He believed in me more than I ever believed in myself.

What would he say?

I not only know what he’d say, I can hear his gruff, deep voice saying it. “Follow your heart, Eve. I’ve known you your whole

life. The only time you get in trouble is when you don't listen to your instincts.”

“You don't want me to stay because you're afraid for me.” It's a statement, not a question.

“Yes.”

“If you could be assured I'll be safe, would you be in such a hurry to kick me off this planet? And by me, I mean the woman who loves you?”

He may not have his human face on, but I can read this expression. Or maybe I can't. But I know he's smiling.

“Yes. But that's impossible. MarZan is coming in three days. They will come every three months until I'm no longer useful or they discover what I really am. Then they will decommission me, pull my chip—kill me. You'll be all alone on a sandy planet. I won't allow that.”

“We're on a *pirate* ship, 420. These people evade the Feds and the bad guys for a living. Maybe they'll have an idea.”

“No.” He shakes his head slowly, expressing his disapproval in the only way he can without facial muscles. “You need to be safe. You deserve to have a good life.”

“If the pirates can help me be safe on Elderon, I can stay with you.” I press my palm to his chest, surprised when I can't feel the reassuring thump of his heart. Oh yeah, that's his other body. “That's what I want.”

I grab his cool, metallic hand and drag him back to the dining room. As soon as we burst through the double doors, all

discussion ceases. They don't even try to hide their we-were-all-talking-about-you vibe.

“So,” I say as I stall, trying to find a way to break the ice without blowing their minds, although they've got to suspect the truth by now. “I love this guy.”

Mic drop.

Aaanndd another moment of silence.

Then lots of jabbering.

I decide the only way to enlist their wholehearted help is to allow them to see him in his true form. Or maybe *this* is his true form. It doesn't matter. I think they'll understand better when Bradley Cooper's baby blues are staring at them instead of vacant red orbs.

While he jogs back to the Underground to “change,” I explain everything. By the time he returns, and after we allow ten minutes for the women to get over the jaw-dropping big reveal, I've brought them up to speed on everything: the cartel, the grow operation, MarZan's expected arrival in three days, and the eight-hundred room Underground.

Two hours later, they've explored the Underground. Those who wanted to even had a swim. While they were having the grand tour, 420 shared engineering and geological surveys he ran on the area.

“We're going to have to postpone the delivery of the Broog,” Captain Thantose says as we all sit around the table in what 420 and I have dubbed the boardroom in Corridor D.

Thantose's chin is resting on his steepled fingers as he thinks it through. "I hate to put Sheik Rasmede off, but this operation is too important."

"So it's agreed?" 420 prompts. "We spend the next few days offloading anything of value from the operation. I'm not a big believer in Synth, but since you've agreed to sell it to a health conglomerate as pharmaceutical grade for hospitals and terminal patients, I can live with it."

"Yes. As soon as we're back on board, I'll find a legitimate buyer," Lexa says. Evidently, procurement and sales are her duties on the *Ataraxia*.

"I've already told the bots to harvest anything that is near ripe," 420 says. "They will help us get it onboard the ship. We'll stow the machines, robots, seeds, and seedlings in the Underground. Then you'll be taking us with you for the next few weeks after we blast the surface of the planet with everything we can throw at it. We'll lie low to avoid any blowback."

Everyone is thoughtful. Each of us is going over the plan in our minds, searching for any potential problems we haven't considered.

"The geological survey tells us the Underground can withstand everything we're going to hit this planet with," Thantose says. "You're just going to have to stay away until we hear through comms that the cartel is giving up on this planet and finding another place to grow their Synth."

“So, your workshop won’t be affected by the blast, the Facility robots will be safe in the Underground, and you,” I slash 420 with a happy grin, “are going to be presumed dead.”



Chapter Twenty

Six months later...
420

I stride into the grow facility, immediately assaulted by the rich, fertile smell in the air. Because I redesigned the original, some of the old inefficiencies have been corrected and we're producing 25% more in 20% less space.

Eve was right. It's peaceful in here. Well, it's peaceful everywhere on Elderon now.

Even though it's been six months, sometimes Eve watches the vid again. Last night was one of those nights. She worries that MarZan will return, even though there is nothing here for them anymore.

Although she told me she didn't need to watch it, when I sensed her anxiety, I cued it up on the screen in our room and we viewed the demolition to remind us both we're free to live our lives as we wish.

Six months ago, while we were on his ship, Thantose used his ion cannons to demolish the Facility. It was gone in a puff of sand, along with the shack the cartel thought had been my entire world for 247 years.

In the blink of an eye, Elderon was razed back to its original state—beige sand baking under two hot suns.

When a shell corporation came in to buy it, the MarZan cartel was happy to get it off their books. Thantose fronted us the money, but he's not afraid he won't get his investment back. Since the Synth is sold to legitimate, ethical sources, he's getting top credit for that part of our grow operation.

We keep all the produce for ourselves, although whenever he visits, he's happy to walk away with as much bounty as the *Ataraxia's* kitchen can hold.

Eve wanted me to inspect the Facility today, although I don't know why. I was out here a few days ago. I think she's got some kind of secret going on in the Underground.

Shortly after we left Elderon, while we were guests on the *Ataraxia*, I worried that my Eve would change her mind about me. When she stayed up late in the ship's crew's nest with the other females, I wondered if they would convince her she was making a mistake choosing to return to Elderon, and an even bigger mistake because she had feelings for me.

All my fears vanished one night when I walked by and heard them talking. I can't help that my hearing is, as Eve would say, superhuman.

“He reminds me of a movie star, but I can’t figure out which one,” Lexa had said.

“Bradley Cooper?” Eve asked.

“Yes! That’s it.”

“Or how about Jensen Ackles?”

“Oh, come to think of it, you’re right.”

“Then there’s Ben Affleck.”

“Oh, yes. The nose.”

“Yeah, he’s handsome all right,” Eve admitted.

“Even more important is that he dotes on you, Eve,” Brin had said. “I wouldn’t approve otherwise, but anyone with eyes can see he thinks you hung the moon.”

“I have to admit I was a little worried that once he saw other women, he would realize he fell for me because I was the first and only female he’d ever seen in person. He’s shown me I have nothing to fear. I’m his and he’s mine,” Eve said with conviction.

Hung the moon. Earthers have such interesting expressions. Something deep inside me bursts with pain when I realize Eve had insecurities about my feelings for her. I love her for her heart and soul and a thousand other things, but I should also tell her she’s far prettier than any other female I’ve ever seen.

Brin was right. I do think my Eve hung the moon. I vow to show her more every day that she’s the only person I will ever love.

After hearing that, I don't worry when she seems distracted. I'm not anxious that she doesn't love me. I just wonder what she's up to.

"Dinnertime, babe," she calls over my comm.

"Coming."

As I jog back to the Underground, I can't help but feel a surge of pride as I glance at the small, fenced pasture we built for our modest herd of *anlaks*. All five females are already pregnant, and happily munching on the sturdy grasses we keep watered from the unlimited underground spring.

I admire the strong, colorful arch we constructed over the doorway above the steps to the Underground. Words ring the structure from one leg to the other. It says "welcome" in over thirty languages. The capstone boldly announces, "You Are Safe Here."

"Hey, 420," one of the rescued Earth females the *Ataraxia* recently dropped off says with a shy smile.

"Blaze," says another. She's a head taller than Eve, but rarely looks anyone in the eye. I hear the gladiators retrieved her from a terrible situation. I'm so glad she's here now. She's certainly in a good mood. Her eyes are sparkling with happiness as she teases me.

"Reefer," a Mark IV model says. I can see now how off-putting it is when someone without the ability to smile tells you a joke, but I'd never let him know that. He arrived about a

month ago and needed extensive retooling after his previous owner got so angry she had him torn limb from limb.

He's working fine now, and I've been tinkering with a face for him as a present.

"Meet us in the dining room," Eve says through everyone's comm. I can tell by her voice she's smiling. Something's coming and it's going to be good.

All of us jog to the Underground, then to the big dining room we made by converting three sleeping rooms.

Except for the few of us who just arrived, everyone is already here. Every soul on Elderon is in this room together.

Our census as of today is fourteen freed Earther females and four repurposed Artificials. That's what we've decided to call all the robots, androids, and cyborgs who've accepted our offer of repair and lifelong safety.

They're all here, as is my Eve. My beautiful Eve.

The table is laden with food. I'm so glad the Artificials join us for our big meals. They may have no need for nutrition, but I've decided eating together feeds the soul.

"What's the occasion?" I ask.

"Dessert," Eve answers. Her face has that happy teasing quality she usually reserves for our bed-play. Dessert, indeed.

It's been a joy to watch our new family grow. People come to us hurt, wounded, scared, abused, and we offer them safety. We expect nothing of them until they offer to help. We already

have everything we need. Why would we pressure anyone for anything?

When they're ready, we can always use another set of hands. We're growing sod in the back portion of the Facility. We plan on reclaiming this planet one acre at a time. Eve says eventually we're going to have a little paradise. I think she's wrong. I think we already have it.

"It's time for dessert? What's the special occasion?"

"It's naming day," Eve says as she brings out a cake. My female loves her cake. Although it's got white frosting, I have absolutely no doubt there's chocolate underneath. And by the look on her face, it's not the fake chocolate we use sometimes when we run low between the *Ataraxia's* visits. No. I think this is what Eve would call "the real McCoy."

"What are we naming?" I ask cautiously.

I haven't forgotten that she had wanted to change my name months ago, but it hasn't come up for a long while, and now everyone gets a smile on their face when they call me a nickname for their Earther drug.

"Okay, everybody," Eve says, her voice suddenly serious. "Go ahead. Get it out of your system. We're going to go around the table and you each get to call him your favorite name for marijuana. Go!"

"Mary Jane."

"Blaze."

"Reefer."

“Weed.”

“Chronic.”

“Herb.”

They take turns, all laughing. It doesn't feel as though it's at my expense. We're all having fun, even the Artificials.

“You asked me to give you a name once,” Eve says when it's her turn. “I didn't want to be presumptuous. But I've known for a long time what I'd like to call you. Will you let me? Will you give me the honor of giving you one name? A name everyone will call you?”

“Of course, my love. I've wanted that for a long time.”

“Good. But first, I want to change the name of our planet. Thantose owns it until we finish paying back his loan. He gave me permission, though.”

She unfurls a parchment with lots of writing on it. “This has the Federation's seal of approval.” She points to an old-fashioned wax seal.

“We officially live on planet Eden now,” she says, her face beaming with happiness.

I nod, then clap with all the others. I've read up on this and know what it means, but for the benefit of our Artificials, she explains.

“Eden is a place on Earth. Some believe it is real, some say it's just a myth. *Our* Eden is real. It means paradise. I know, I know,” her gaze flicks to the Earthers who have all

complained at one time or another about the barren wasteland up above. “It’s not much to look at right now, but there’s so much water down below. We’re reclaiming this desert planet one acre at a time.

“It’s going to be lush one day. Until then, here...” She pauses and raises her hands, indicating the room and, more importantly, everyone in it. “Here down below, in our Underground, we already have paradise. We have peace, and friends, and food, and safety. We have enough.”

She walks to me, her eyes shining with affection and happiness.

“And me? I’m the lucky one. Because I have love.”

She walks behind where I’m sitting, drapes her arms over my shoulders, and explains, “Eden was a garden. It was the beginning of a new start. It began with two people. A woman named Eve, and a male named Adam.”

She slides into my lap, tears snaking down her cheeks, and speaks just to me when she asks, “Is Adam okay with you, my love?”

I take special care not to hug her too tightly as I squeeze her to my chest and say, “I’m so honored, Eve. I will love you forever.”



Chapter Twenty-One

E^{ve} After the naming celebration, Adam whispered, “I’m so touched, Eve. I will love you forever. Maybe we can even grow apples.”

When I laughed, he said, “That sound is music to my auditory processors and my very soul.”

When he informed me he had a surprise of his own, which was accompanied by a very charming wink, I told him his words were music to my auditory processors, too.

“Which iteration is this?” I ask as we head to the privacy of our suite, even though I know the answer. How could I not keep track of something as important as this?

“Eleven.”

My relationship with Adam continues to evolve. Just when I think things couldn’t get better, he surprises me with some new aspect of himself I never dreamed of. Since we’ve been together, he’s taken up singing and playing the *marena*—an

outer space version of the piano. He's been cultivating new fruits and vegetables that will eventually thrive outside the Facility. As soon as he conquers one new project, he's on to another. It's a joy to watch him.

I've been a good influence on him in one way. He sleeps at night. Well, only for an hour, but he lays with me and cuddles. Even though I know most of the time he's communing with the computer and designing things in his mind, it feels good to snuggle against him. I love to feel his heartbeat.

He built us a suite on the other side of the outer rim. It's private back here, which is good because I've discovered I'm a screamer.

"You've kept this one a secret," I say, hardly able to wait for the big unveiling. Of course, *big* will be one of the operative words. We discovered early in our explorations that size does matter. But we keep adding little improvements, each of which is designed to increase my enjoyment.

Although I've been satisfied since the inception of iteration one, Adam's never quite gotten the explosion he's been searching for.

At first, I thought it was just a matter of time, something his body would catch on to, especially after he watched me reach the heights of bliss over and over. But he's never attained the pinnacle we'd hoped for.

He insists he enjoys providing me pleasure, and I know he does, but in my heart, I wish he could find release.

“This design has been a secret.”

His chip tells the computer to bathe the room in darkness. Usually, we make love by the dim lights that shine through the waterfall in our room. I love to look at my beautiful male, to see not only his gorgeous blue skin and his handsome features, but most important, I want to see the loving light in his eyes as he gazes at me.

He has the computer pipe in music he’s composed. It’s an interesting combination of rhythmic techno and lilting flute. The beat is sexy, especially because I know he’ll be following that same rhythm when he pounds into me later.

Sometimes he tears off my clothes and pounces on me. This is often preceded by running the last ten yards down the corridor toward our suite.

Tonight is different. He changes the tempo of the music, scaling it back until it’s almost dreamy. Pulling me into his arms, he dances with me.

With one hand on the small of my back and one below my nape, he twirls me around the room. I can’t see a thing, but I trust him completely. His night vision ensures we won’t crash into anything.

Giving myself up to him, I let him lead. I love these moments when all my worries fade away, knowing Adam’s got me, that he won’t let any harm come to me. I’m his and he’s mine.

He’s graceful, graceful enough for the both of us. The picture of the original 420 pops into my mind. That form wasn’t

capable of this. This? This is all Adam. It's his beautiful design—elegant and handsome.

His upper hand tugs me closer while his lower hand sneaks below my waistband. His hands are still fully on top of my clothing, but my heart speeds up, even as my energy pools low in my belly in anticipation of what's coming.

Dipping his head, he rumbles in my ear, "I love my new name, Eve. It's the best gift you could ever give me."

I snake my arms up his back and lodge them on the nape of his neck, then press my nose into the suede-like warmth of his throat. I don't know if he tinkered with pheromones, or how exactly it works, but he smells so freaking good. One whiff of him at lunch or when we're trimming leaves in the Facility and I want to tear off his clothes in public.

Here? Now? When we're alone in the dark, it's all I can do not to push him onto the bed and mount him. Sometimes I do just that, but not tonight. Somehow, I just know he wants to be in charge.

He ducks and nudges my head to the side so he can nibble a path from my throat to my ear.

"Tonight's going to be special," he husks. "You're going to scream my name for the first time."

Oh. Yes. "Many, many times," I affirm with a nod.

His cock presses against my belly through both of our clothes. I'll admit, I'm eager to see what he's cooked up in his workshop. It doesn't feel much different from the last ten

iterations, but excitement is buzzing through me, buzzing through us both.

He sniffs once, twice. “Your scent is delightfully revealing,” he says, his voice warm with good humor.

The first time he said this, my face flamed in shame. Now, understanding him better, I reward him by opening my stance.

“Mmm,” he says as his cock kicks against me in appreciation.

He twirls me some more, faster and faster, until I’m slightly off balance and giggling. When I’m sufficiently relaxed, he lifts me and tosses me gently onto the bed.

Who would have thought that sleeping on a grass-covered platform would be one of the best things about living underground? We experimented with various strains of grass until we found this one from planet Primitiff. The blades are tight, thick, soft as silk, and cushion me.

He sits me up long enough to pull off my tunic, then pulls my pants and panties down and off.

“Beautiful, Eve.”

“So. Not. Fair. I want to see you, too.”

“Later.” He sniffs again, then adds, “I still haven’t decided which I like better.” He’s obviously talking about my breasts.

“Luckily you don’t have to choose.”

After settling on his knees between my outspread legs, he bends to lick, then suck one breast, then the other.

“Holy shit!” I exclaim when I realize he didn’t just upgrade his cock. He added catlike spines to his tongue.

The tip of his tongue is soft and licks me until I’m writhing in pleasure. Then he uses the flat of it to abrade my nipple until my head thrashes on the pillow.

He stops what he’s doing long enough to ask, “Holy shit good or holy shit bad?”

“Don’t. Stop.” Is my answer.

His answer is a low chuckle. Then he switches to my other breast.

My throat is already dry from panting, my core is wet with wanting, and he hasn’t even touched me below the waist.

“Please!”

“Impatient,” he scolds, then switches sides again.

Sliding my feet up until my soles are flat on the bed, I grip his perfect ass cheeks and rub my clit against his cloth-covered cock.

“Naughty,” he accuses.

“*You’re* naughty.” Somehow when he says it, it’s sexy and commanding. When I say it, I sound five years old.

Something must have changed. Perhaps my need amplified my scent, because he sniffs in hard, then seems to relent. Pulling back, he tears off his clothes and then joins me, sliding his naked cock up my thigh until he rides my slit.

“Yess.” Jackpot.

“I’ll give you just a taste of my new equipment,” he goads as he slides himself through my slippery folds, dragging his length up and down. I can tell his cock has a head, as well as thick bumps that seem to dot it everywhere.

“Like?” he asks.

“What’s not to like? What’s not to love?” I breathe on a sigh as my hips writhe, dancing with his, garnering more pressure on every slick slide.

“Please,” I say again, my lids closed in pleasure as I memorize every part of this experience. From his delicious masculine scent to the suede skin beneath my fingertips to the aroused chuffing sounds he makes on every upthrust.

“You’re the devil.”

“You’re an angel,” he replies.

He kisses me while he rides me. It’s hard to pay attention to so many things at once, but I focus on his mouth, those soft lips, and the way his bristly tongue evokes pleasure with the slightest bit of pain.

“I’m on fire for you, Adam.” I love his new name on my lips. Because he had such horrible names before, this is sweet as ambrosia. I say it again, just to revel in the feeling. “Adam.”

He jacks his hips away from me, changes the angle, and places himself at my entrance.

“So wet.”

“For you,” I sigh.

As he eases in, I feel the changes he made since the last iteration. The bumps are nubbier, they apply just enough extra pressure to wake me up inside.

“More, love.” I urge.

He’s toying with me tonight. He backs out, then slides in again, but doesn’t go any further than before. Anger spikes through me so hot and quick I slap his perfect ass.

He grunts, grabs my wrist, then releases it and urges, “Do it again.”

I slap the other cheek and he slides in a bit deeper. Oh yes. The cock gets thicker the farther in he presses. I feel that delicious stretch. It’s the perfection combination of pleasure with a hint of pain.

Nothing makes me feel as feminine as the act of giving myself over to my male. Letting him own me, overpower me. He weighs twice as much as me. Although his weight is on his hands and knees, there’s something about having his huge masculine self on top of me, caging me, that makes me feel small and feminine. Now as he burrows deeper with every thrust, pressing his way in, opening me, stretching me, something bursts open inside of my heart.

I want to give him more. To open myself more. To love him more.

“That’s right, my love,” he urges as he presses deeper. “Give yourself to me.”

It's beginning to hurt a bit, and he's not yet fully seated. I'm loving it because I'm giving him all of me. This act of letting him in is meaningful in a hundred ways.

With one last push, he slides home. The very act rips a moan from me. It's half pleasure, half pain. He slides all the way out, then pushes back in with exquisite slowness. This time it's far more pleasure than pain.

By the third stroke, it's all pleasure.

The room fills with the sounds of my moans. "Good," my lips manage to say. "Yes."

It's only now that I feel the little spur he constructed at the root of his cock. It blissfully flicks my little clit on every thrust.

The nubs are stimulating me on the inside. The spur is pouring gasoline on the fire of my libido. And then the fireworks begin when his cock begins to rotate inside me. It presses along my inner walls.

"Adam!" is all I have the time to scream before my first orgasm flares through me like a flash flood in summer. There was no buildup, no preamble. It hits me hard.

It didn't start in my clit like they always do. No, this one somehow started deep inside me and then migrated deeper until every muscle in my body spasmed in pleasure. My moans seem to be pulled from a place buried in my belly. They're low and rolling, just like the pleasure itself.

I can't control my fingernails from biting into his butt as I writhe in bliss.

“Adam!” I shout, then say it again and again until it comes out as a whisper of pleasure, and still my release rolls on and on until I lie back on the soft, cool grass. Spent.

He pounces on me, peppering my face with little kisses. Then the kisses aren't happy and sweet anymore. He presses that amazing tongue inside my mouth to tease my arousal, to make it flare again.

“Too soon,” I complain, but that never seems to work. Suddenly, I don't want to protest anymore. My desire fires again.

This time I flip him onto his back and ride him.

“Just some low lights, Love,” I say. “I have to see your handsome face.”

He complies so I can watch every emotion flicker on his expressive features. I take my pleasure, fully in charge, as I find an inventive hip movement that on every thrust garners exquisite pleasure from that little spur of his.

Just when I'm wishing for his cock to do that twirly thing again, it begins the motion that flips a switch inside me from aroused to *on fire*. Turning it up a notch, it starts vibrating. It's divine and sexy and immediately pushes me over the edge.

This time, my release is a wild ride as it swells and ebbs and swells again. I quit trying to be quiet months ago. Knowing we're in our own private cave with foot-thick walls, I just let myself express my unending pleasure, interspersing moans and little grunts with the best word of all, “Adam.”

When I finally think I can't squeeze one more release out of my quivering body, Adam says, "My turn."

Adam

She's flushed and tired. She's screamed so much she's going to be hoarse tomorrow. I know she could be done now, but I want to try something new.

I'm on top of her now, pleasuring her again. She's never said no to me. I doubt she ever will. She's had so much bliss she won't be in a hurry.

I take my time, not worrying about her pleasure. Only mine. Just this once. How could she complain when she's already found release half a dozen times tonight?

I turn the lights back out and pay attention to all my senses. They are much more powerful than Eve's. Whereas she smells the room, I smell everything in it, from the grass to the remnants of the soil under the roots to the silica in the walls.

I smell the delicious scent of her arousal, redolent on the air. I hear not only her breaths, but the beating of her heart.

Even with the lights out, I can see everything so clearly. But right now, I don't want her to see me. I don't want her assessing if she's doing something right, or reading my expressions as she tries to please me.

I burrow deeper into myself, casting off my awareness of the other four senses, paying attention only to my body. To the bliss of my shaft in her warm, slick core. She welcomes me. She has since the first time I penetrated her after I completed

the upgrades to my body when we returned from weeks on the *Ataraxia*.

I pay attention to the feel of the little bumps I've equipped myself with. Initially, I designed them for her pleasure, but I retrofitted them with additional sensors for myself.

Now that I'm focused on my own enjoyment and not hers, the level of pleasure is almost overwhelming. For the first time, I'm feeling what she described—the building, the mounting feeling that something is about to happen.

I keep going higher, closer and closer to what I hope is the pinnacle I watched her reach so many times today. If I could only go the slightest bit farther, I would get there, but I'm stuck.

Then I slow down time. I don't exactly slow down time, I'm still tinkering with that in my workshop. Though I haven't found the key to that, I slow down my awareness of time.

I pay attention to the pleasure I receive from every receptor. The effect is immediate and overwhelming. I didn't believe it was possible, but now I understand when Eve sometimes says the bliss is too much.

The pinnacle I was clawing my way to is in clear sight. With one more grand effort, I reach it and then fly over the top. I didn't program myself to spasm like my beloved. That wouldn't bring me bliss, anyway. No, this orgasm is purely in my mind, and it is beautiful.

My heart squeezes with more love and emotion than I thought I could ever feel. It's not a physical feeling, it's an explosion of love in my head and my heart. It's a bright spark of light and a feeling of a full heart, and a release so powerful it ricochets to every molecule of my body. I grunt with the beauty of it, the wonder, the bliss, then float back to this room.

"Eve, my beloved." I turn the lights on dim so I can clearly see her beautiful face. I'll never grow tired of her.

"You did it, Adam. I can tell you just experienced for yourself the bliss you've been giving me for months. It seemed different from my orgasms, though. I'm going to call it a soulgasm. You're my beloved, Adam." Her smile is soft, full of more love than I've ever seen. "I never told you something, but it's been burning inside me to say it."

I lie next to her on my side and coax her to turn toward me. Our gazes lock lovingly as I stroke her skin from shoulder to hip.

"What, love?"

"I didn't know it, not really. Or maybe I did, but never admitted it to myself. But back on Earth, in quiet times, I yearned, Adam. I yearned for you."



Epilogue

2 8,470 Days (78 years) Later Adam

Eve is sleeping. I love to look at her. She's still so beautiful. She tells me she's changed, but when I see her, all I see is what's under her skin. Just as so long ago, she saw me for who I was underneath my exterior.

Lying on my side, I watch her and think of all that's happened over the last 28,680 days since the moment I met her. We've accomplished so much. Our Eden now boasts 1,283 inhabitants. We've saved countless lives and provided a safe home for all of them. We still welcome newcomers who need safety and healing.

We have many couples here now, and one of the best days of our lives was when the first baby took its breath seventy-six years ago. It was born to a human female and a Dacian male who had been a gladiator slave. They found love on our little planet, just as Eve and I did.

As we'd hoped, we created our own Garden of Eden. Despite my efforts, we were unable to create an entire ecosystem of lush grasses and rain. The climate is too harsh for that. Instead, I engineered a bubble over our community. We have year-long summer, complete with cooling daily rains in the afternoon.

About forty years ago, we all moved to the surface. Some live in small apartment buildings, some in single-family dwellings. Our cottage up above has given us a great deal of happiness and pride.

But today we're back in our suite at the far end of the Underground, the one I built for Eve shortly after we returned from our sojourn on the pirate ship after they destroyed the Facility and brought us freedom from the cartel. If I listen closely, I can almost hear the sounds of our passion still ringing in the air.

We've had such a good life.

I have only one real regret. Despite my almost single-minded efforts over the last three decades, I've been unable to transfer Eve's consciousness to an android body. For many years I didn't even tell her what I was trying to do. When I finally did, she scolded me.

"Humans aren't meant to live forever," she'd said in her sweetest voice. "One day I'll cease to exist and you'll just have to go on without me."

Her words only spurred me to try harder.

I never succeeded, though. I consider it my greatest failure. When I admitted this to her, she shook her head, looked me straight in the eyes, and said, “You’re so many wonderful things, my love, but you can’t play God. Everything you’ve done is a success. You’ve certainly given me more happiness than I ever dreamed possible.”

As I watch, she opens her eyes with effort. Her breathing is labored. We’ve come to our Underground suite for privacy. The bed is still covered in verdant grass. If I activate my olfactory sensors, I can still smell the aftereffects of our lovemaking lingering in this room from years gone by. We’ve been so lucky. We’ve had so much passion—and love, so much love.

She smiles at me and whispers, “I’m so lucky you found me, my love.”

“How many times do we have to have this fight?” I chide. “*You found me*, Eve. What are the chances that a tiny, errant pod in the far reaches of space would crash so close to my little shack?”

We’ve had this little play-fight a dozen times over the years. It’s always so silly on the outside and so poignant underneath. We were so lucky to have found each other. We’ve had the perfect life together.

“Promise me you won’t do it,” she says forcefully, then coughs weakly for long moments.

“I haven’t told a lie since we blew up half the planet and escaped from under MarZan’s thumb. I’m not going to start

now.”

“Please, Adam. You’ve never denied me anything.”

Her brown eyes, still so beautiful although their lids are creased with age, plead with me. I just shake my head.

“Eden still needs you.” She holds my hand, surprising me with how weak her grip is.

“No, it doesn’t. Duraxx is more than willing and able to fill my shoes. He’s a good male and will guide the community with a loving hand.”

“You’re breaking my heart,” she says as it takes all her effort to turn on her side and cup her palm to my cheek.

“And without you, I’d never have a heart to break. It’s because of you that I do. And my heart can’t go on without you, Eve. Just lie with me, my love.”

I slip my arm around her waist. We kiss once. It’s the most passionless kiss we have ever shared. It’s filled with love. Only love.

When I feel the tension ease from her lips, I stay still for a long moment, then pull away. Her heart, so valiant for so long, has ceased to beat.

I thought it would be harder, but knowing I won’t have to go on without her has given me the strength I’ve needed these last few weeks.

“I love you with all that I am, with every breath that I’ve taken, with every thought that has flown through my receptors.

You've given me so much. I've had it all. Everything I've dreamed of. Everything I yearned for. And now it's time to join you wherever you've gone next."

I reach to the back of my neck, and, consumed with peace and happiness, I pull my chip.



Dear Reader

I imagine you're taking a breath right now. I thought long and hard about this epilogue and feel in my heart it is what Adam would have done. He loved Eve so much, how could he have gone on without her? I believe it was the only emotionally honest way to end their story.

I've written a bonus epilogue. You can find it [here](#). Obviously, it does not go forward in time. It backtracks to 420 and Eve's trip with the pirates when they spent time on planet Fairea. This is where 420 finds Unixx in parts in boxes at one of the fair's booths. Unixx becomes the hero in book two of this series—*The Awakening* (keep reading for a sneak peek).

Can I ask a huge favor? Can you leave a review or rating of this book? That one action is remarkably helpful for an indie author like myself—thanks.

I'd love for you to join my newsletter for cover reveals, free extra scenes, giveaways, and updates. There are several free books there, pick one or take them all.

Free adult monster coloring book.

Free adult alien coloring book.

Free mate-match test to see who your best book boyfriend might be.

I really appreciate you and am glad you took the time to read my book.

Hugs,

Alana



Sneak Peek: The Awakening: Book Two

Trope Warning

There are several references to previous abuse and SA, none of which are depicted in detail.

Usually, I use this space in my books to warn you about how much sex you'll find inside these pages. In this book, I have to warn you it's a slooowww burn. It's charming and thoughtful and builds to a hot, spicy romance, but you're not going to get there quickly. I guarantee you don't need to have "bangxiety."*

*Bangxiety: When you're halfway through a book and wonder if you accidentally bought a sweet and wholesome romance. Don't worry. There's nothing sweet and wholesome about The Awakening.

End of Trope Warning

Chapter One

Planet Berenium

Present Day

Addison

It's bad this time. Maybe the worst ever.

Reminus, I refuse to call him Master in my mind though he demands it from my lips, kicked me harder than ever last night after he couldn't get it up.

I'm hiding under his bed. I think he forgot about me.

"Master, wake up!" The panicked words burst over his wrist-comm. "We're being attacked!"

"Attacked?" His voice cracks as he complains, "I own half this planet! Who would have the balls?"

His feet hit the carpet at the side of the bed only inches from my face and he slips them into his old-man slippers.

Sliding away from the edge, it strikes me as odd that the old bastard doesn't move any faster. By the sound of the laser fire drifting in from outside, it's clear the message we're under attack was not a false alarm.

"Guards! Get me to the safe room!"

He doesn't take time to get dressed, just scuffs out of the room, accompanied by the sound of his guards' military boots. It's not surprising he gave no thought to saving me. I'm of no more importance to him than a piece of furniture.

As the sound of lasers increases, signaling the action is getting closer, you'd think I'd be quaking in fear or would ease from

under the bed and gape out the window to see what was happening. You'd be wrong.

I feel more like a spectator of my life than the person living it. I'm just waiting for the next shitty thing to happen to me.

Watching whatever unfolds won't give me more control over the next phase of my life. Either the attackers will bomb this mansion, which would put an end to my misery, or they'll somehow find me. It doesn't matter. After three years in space, one thing is clear: whatever comes next will most likely be worse than what I've already endured.

Lying here in the dark, I listen to laser blasts, shouts, boots running, and doors slamming.

By the thuds of their footsteps, several of them are in the mansion.

"Captain, we've subdued the guards in the barracks and are releasing the gladiators from their cells." These words drift to me from one of the attackers' comms.

They've attacked the Governor of Mancea's mansion to steal his gladiators? He brags about how fine his stable of fighting flesh is, but I would think there are far more valuable things in his estate, like some of the fancy paintings secured to his walls with anti-theft devices.

"The males?" Someone asks, possibly their leader. "Are they in good health?"

"In terrible shape. Malnourished." This is a female's voice and... is she speaking English? My subdural translator didn't

need to kick in. “The fucker must have put them on half-rations. They’re weak, but don’t worry, they’ll all live.”

“We’ve got what we came for. Let’s beam up.” I think it’s the leader again.

By the volume of that most recent interchange, at least one of them is right outside my door. My mind is spinning. I can imagine what it looks like outside: charred laser bursts in the dirt, perhaps on the hinges of the door to the gladiator barracks.

Maybe Reminus was on the receiving end of one of those laser bursts and he’s lying dead somewhere. If I didn’t think I’d be risking my life, I’d roll out from under this bed, find him, and kick the shit out of his ribs like he’s done to me so many times.

The sound of the footsteps changes. The males are heading away from me now. I’m so weak I’m not sure I can yell loud enough for them to hear me. If I’m going to call out to them, I’d better do it soon.

Will it be safe? Who are these people? Will I be in even more danger if they know I’m here? The galaxy isn’t a safe place. Males have proven that to me a thousand times since I was abducted. But what will happen if I stay here is also a wild card.

What makes my decision for me is the woman’s voice. She was definitely human, speaking English, and she sounded outraged about the gladiators’ poor treatment. Maybe someone in this contingent will have compassion for me.

“Help!” I croak, my mouth so parched it barely makes a sound. “Help!” My voice has more power behind it. “Help!” This time it’s a scream and is accompanied by the sound of boots running toward me.

Chapter Two

Three Weeks Later...

Addison

I take a last glance in the mirror. The face staring back at me could be a complete stranger. Brown eyes, remarkable only because they have no more life than a corpse. High cheekbones so sharp they could still be used as deadly weapons after three weeks of plentiful food. Pointed chin. I could stare all day and still not recognize her. There’s nothing left of the elementary school teacher aliens abducted three years ago.

The ship of benevolent gladiators who extracted all interested slaves from Reminus’s property has provided me with a safe place to recover. Gone are the bruises that had been in various stages of healing when they rescued me three weeks ago. The ribs, broken so many times they needed a space-age restoration treatment, are all perfectly mended. My body is good as new.

My mind, however, is another thing.

Everyone has been kind. Dr. Raine has spent hours sitting with me in her office, allowing me the quiet space to talk, to tell her

my story. I've respectfully declined. I'm the walking dead. We all know it.

"Addison?" It's Captain Zar-Rynn's mate, Anya, knocking at my cabin door. "Addison, are you ready?"

She's such a nice female. Everyone on board has been nothing but kind and helpful. Too kind, in fact. Just listen to the tone with which she calls me, as if she's beckoning a frightened deer. We all know how fragile I am. No. Not fragile. Broken.

I tell the door to open and, when Anya hangs outside the threshold, I invite her in. They've all been so good at respecting my boundaries. If I was capable of being rational, I would no longer be terrified of these people. But I'm not rational. My body chemistry races into fight-or-flight mode for no reason.

"I came to ask one more time if you're sure you want to—" She stops mid-sentence when she looks at me for the first time this morning.

"Your hair..." She's so cautious around me, afraid to even ask what the fuck I've done to myself.

"Shaved it," I say.

I didn't cut it into a cute pixie, or even do a G.I. Jane and leave myself some stubble. I *shaved* it.

My reasoning must be obvious, because Anya says, "You're going to be safe on Elderon. There are no males there. No reason to worry. No reason to..."

I finish her sentence silently in my head. *No reason to shave off your beautiful hair to look less attractive.*

But she's wrong. I don't know what I'm going to encounter on this planet they're taking me to. I just want to fly under the radar and escape notice. My hair, or lack of it, is the only thing I have control over.

"It's all good." I reassure her with an awkward shrug.

"I came to ask one more time, make sure you really want to go to Elderon. The other option, Sanctuary, is lovely. The Sanctuary compound on planet Fairea is full of Earth girls and alien gladiators. They're all strong and trained in various types of weaponry. They can keep you safe."

She still doesn't get it. Anya was abducted and went straight into the arms of Zar-Rynn, her beloved, the captain of this ship. She doesn't understand that when there are males around, I'll never be safe. Well, maybe I'll be safe, but I'll never *feel* safe.

"Sanctuary is on a huge plot of land. They have cow-type things and horse-type things and crops. You'll have your own room. It's lush and green there. As opposed to Elderon which, from what I hear, is a dustbowl."

"Elderon will suit me fine." My tone is firm, resolved.

She knows why the planet is my choice. I don't have to say it out loud. Elderon has no males. None. There's one human woman and a few robots. Robots don't have cocks. Robots

don't rape. Elderon, no matter how dusty, is the best choice for me.

“Okay. Well, we've never been to Elderon, just heard about it. They say they've got private rooms in an Underground facility. I spoke with Eve, the human woman who lives there. She says you'll love it. She's got your room all tricked out and ready for you. It even has a little swimming pool in it. I'm not sure how that works. She and her mate will be there to greet us when we beam down.”

“Mate?” My head swivels toward her to see if I heard her right.

“It's hard for me to understand, too. Eve is mated to a... robot. That's how she describes him. His name is 420,” she says with an eyebrow flash. “She describes him as the kindest being who ever stood on two legs, although I reserve that description for my own mate.”

She smiles as if she's keeping the most wonderful secret. When I've found the courage to leave my cabin for meals, I've sat at the same table with her and her mate, Captain Zar-Rynn. Although he's been nothing but kind to me and was the person responsible for my extraction from that hellhole, I don't feel comfortable with him.

Let's see about this machine Eve is mated to. I imagine I'll feel at home with him. Neither of us are capable of emotions.

Chapter Three

Addison

Anya, Captain Zar-Rynn, and I beam to the surface of the planet. She didn't lie when she said it was a hellhole. It's nothing but buff-colored dust for miles in any direction.

In front of us is a human female in a khaki shirt and pants. She has brown hair and brown eyes, at least I think they're brown. After being on the surface of this planet for a few minutes, everything turns the color of sand.

Except for 420.

The captain, Anya, and I are shoulder to shoulder. Because I don't want to be near Zar-Rynn or any male, I'm on the end next to Anya. Now that I see 420, I step behind my companions. Terror pulses along my veins as my heart thunders in my chest.

420 is as male as a thing could get. He looks human. Except he's at least a foot taller than any human male I've ever seen... and he has blue-suede skin. He's not human for another reason. He's gorgeous in a way no living being can attain.

I need only skim my glance over him to confirm he's no Ken doll. He's definitely packing a cock behind the auto-zip of his pants.

I want to wail in my best five-year-old voice, moaning, "You promised," to Anya. Everyone reassured me there would be no males on Elderon. *No cocks.*

I use a technique that's kept me alive for three years out in the wilds of space. I replace my terror with anger. In this case, fury.

“That’s a man,” I hiss to Anya in a livid stage whisper.

420’s gaze inspects the ground as he steps backward, giving me space. It’s obvious he heard me. Does he have feelings? Did I hurt them? Frankly, I don’t care. I’ve been lied to.

It’s only now I notice there’s a robot on the other side of the female. Instead of looking like a gorgeous blue-suede human male, he’s a hulking metal construction that would be at home in a 1950s sci-fi movie. Robbie the Robot.

He’s a first-gen robot with a massive head reminiscent of a sci-fi movie space helmet. There’s not an inch of blue suede. He’s made of metal and plastic with articulated, bendable elbows, knees, and wrists. His metal has been seared like he’s been hit with a laser blaster a few too many times.

There’s no cock, no bulge. In fact, the only reason the thing gives the impression of masculinity is his seven-foot size and those impressive shoulders.

This metallic hulk takes 420’s hint and steps back, dipping his upper body as if he’s bowing to a master. I may not like this new turn of events, but I don’t want anyone bowing to me.

“Thanks. It’s okay,” I tell them.

“We’re so glad you’re here.” Eve’s eyes are beaming with happiness as if that alone will ease my fear.

“We’re terraforming Elderon. The surface isn’t much to see right now, but we have the prettiest place down below. I have your room ready. With a door that locks from the inside,” she adds with a meaningful glance.

I can't keep my gaze from flicking to the big blue male.

“This is my mate, 420. He is the kindest person you will ever meet. But if you want—”

Even as she talks, he gives me a wave, turns, and retreats, with Robbie the Robot at his side.

“He and Unixx will steer clear of you as long as you wish. There are only the three of us on this planet. You'll be the fourth.”

I don't move a muscle as I think this through. I take my time even though Anya, the captain, and Eve are waiting on me under the brutal suns.

They gave me two choices. Two places in all the galaxy where an abducted Earth girl can be free and not hunted or enslaved. Sanctuary has dozens of big, muscular gladiators. Elderon has only the blue-suede giant. I like my odds here.

I step around Anya and stand next to Eve.

“Thank you so much, Captain Zar-Rynn, Anya.” I nod. “Give my regards to all the crew on the *Galaxy Warrior*. I can't express how much I appreciate you rescuing me and bringing me here where it's s-safe.”

I had to push that last word out. It felt like a lie, but I've made my choice. I'll live out my days on this hellish planet. At least I'll have a room with a door that locks from the inside.

Continue reading *The Awakening* here.



Many Thanks

Big thanks to Dr. Lee who reads all my books two and three times and is invaluable in her suggestions, feedback, and support. Huge shout-out!

Thanks also to Stephanie A., my assistant extraordinaire, who functions as cheerleader and second brain. What an amazing one-two-punch of help from across the pond.

Roberta B., Patricia B., and Naomi S. have joined my uber-early reading team to take the manuscript to a higher level. I'm so thrilled to have them in my tribe!

Have I mentioned Karen H., who is my computer maven? When I mention anything computer- or robot-related, I run it by her to ensure I don't insult you, dear reader, or embarrass myself. Thanks, Karen!

Kudos and thanks to other members of my early reading team: Jhane M., Christine R., Naomi B., Michelle M., Hilga H., Gill V., Marianne K., Anuschka-Marie W., Nancy R., Holly S.,

Linda P., Lisa B., Anne-Marie S., Cheryl P., Vedece B., Corda A., Hilga H., Michelle M., and Christine R.

And thanks to you, dear readers, who I think of as I write every chapter. I want to thrill you, entertain you, and give you ALL the feels.



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.

Boxed Sets

Galaxy Gladiators Alien Abduction Romance Series Books 1 to 4

Galaxy Gladiators Alien Abduction Romance Series Books 1
to 10 plus bonus

Galaxy Gladiators Alien Abduction Romance Series Books 11
to 19

Galaxy Pirates Alien Abduction Romance Series

Galaxy Sanctuary Alien Abduction Romance Series

Galaxy Games Hostile Planet Alien Romance Series

Galaxy Warriors Alien Abduction Romance Series

First In Series : Zar / Sextus / Arzz

First In Series : Zar / Sextus / Arzz / Thran

Treasured by the Zinn Alien Abduction Romance Series

Mastered by the Zinn Alien Abduction Romance Series

Cosmic Kissed Duo Box Set