

## Eve

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“Fourteen sixty-three B has just inhabited.”

Kayal looked up from the data stream he had been studying. It had been a slow night and he had spent it rereading Miasma’s early history. He knew it by heart now, though he did have to learn it, rather than just owning the knowledge as everyone else did.

Thirty-seven hundred years ago the colony ship Fulfillment, en route to an approved class M planet, had somehow been forced to abandon its trajectory and take orbit about this inhospitable world. Miasma’s atmosphere was poisonous and there was little land mass on which to settle. However there was no choice. Fulfillment’s AI woke the settlement team from stasis.

Bacent Sands headed the team of scientists. There was long debate about whether or not it would be possible to settle Miasma at all. In the end it was Sands’ decision to return to stasis while a team of bots built and terraformed a massive dome on the largest land mass. Within the Grand Dome would be smaller domes for human habitation, farming, and for the domestic animals and wildlife that awaited a new life, frozen in their embryonic stage. The latter was the most hotly debated, as it represented a use of precious space that would not be available for human habitation. However, the point of the colonization program was preservation of Earth’s species, human and animal alike. Fortunately, given that they would be confined within a dome, this particular ship had not carried any predator species.

The process of building and terraforming took eighty-six years. The ship again woke the settlement team who judged that all was in readiness and the three thousand colonists were awakened.

Kayal found it hard to imagine that his ancestors had lived in open air up until this point. They had a hard time adjusting to life inside the dome. Just as Kayal would have found life outside the dome frightening, his ancestors felt claustrophobic. They did what they could to alleviate the strangeness of their new home. The lighting mimicked that of Earth’s day-night cycle and the colony still followed Earth time, rather than Miasma’s forty-six hour day.

The first governors had tried to emulate as much of Earth-like conditions as they could. With space at a premium, however, housing was now all in blocks. On Earth people had apparently lived in single family dwellings, a concept that he found odd. Kayal did not even have his own space. He lived with Reyun, who, because of his status, enjoyed spacious living quarters.

The population grew slowly on Miasma, but it did grow, and the dome was unable to sustain its numbers. Second, then third domes were built; these were smaller than the original by necessity. Finally it was acknowledged that there was nowhere else for the Miasmans to expand. Strict population control was practiced. Life was restrictive but over generations it became the norm.

Although humans did well in the domes, the wildlife did not breed as often as necessary to maintain healthy herd numbers. A portion of each of the Grand Domes was given over to a “distillery” in which new animals were grown. Once they reached maturity, they would be released into their respective habitats.

In 1719 PL (Post Landfall) Paru Zell, the most brilliant scientist of her time, succeeded in growing a new human body using distillery practices. She placed a tiny transponder into her own body and another into the prototype, and then single-handedly changed the entire fabric of Miasman society. She transferred her own consciousness into it.

At first, only the wealthy were able to afford “re-life” as it was then called. However, the problem of population control continued, and worsened as more people were now able to cheat death. At the Dome Summit of 1894 it was decided that all humans would be offered re-life, with the understanding that this meant they would not reproduce. Miasmans would enjoy eternal life with the added benefit of population control.

For the first few hundred years there were those who chose to raise children and accept their own deaths. But this became less acceptable to the few born into ensuing generations. Eventually it was outlawed completely. Ultimately genetic modifications were made and bodies were grown without the ability to reproduce.

Occasionally someone would, having grown jaded and tired of life after life, remove their transponder just prior to body death, choosing not to continue. This was illegal, and transponders were tracked. Only those who removed their transponders very close to death succeeded. Those who assisted others in this were punished severely.

It was now the year 3614 PL. As a rare, anomalous event, Kayal was in his first body life, and therefore had to support himself as he learned about the world in which he lived. Hence, his employment here in the distillery.

“Run identification sequence and move the incubator to decanting.”

“Sequencing and pre-prep will require fifty-three point four minutes. Shall I inform you when you are needed?” Dar’s voice was almost human, as was his concern for Kayal. Dome One’s operating system was sentient, class eight, and there were those who suspected that the developers had actually piped one of themselves in there at body death. The sentience leap from the sevens to this eight was phenomenal, and it hadn't been repeated in a thousand years. “You should take a break from studying. Reyun is in the dining hall.”

Kayal smiled at that. He and Reyun had just contracted for five years. Their initial, one year contract had gone so well that they had decided on a longer marriage this time. “Thanks, Dar. Idle data stream.”

Part of the monitor room back wall dissolved as Kayal approached, and then reformed when he had passed through the space. He eschewed the platform in favour of physically walking the distance to the cafeteria, his limbs stiff from sitting. Familiarity had long since dulled his fascination with the evolving, sentient artwork that inhabited the walls of the corridors of the Rebirthing Centre. He didn't even notice the pretty, blonde girl who smiled and waved at him, or the disembodied face that watched him disappear around the corner, and then reappeared in the next corridor to watch him again.

Reyun, Dome One’s Wildlife Sanctuary Prime sat with his back to the entrance wall. Kayal knew he would find him watching the wildlife dome outside the only window in the facility. One of the three preserves of non-human, non-domestic animal life, it contained samples of many of the remaining wild species. Despite best efforts, some,

like anteaters and badgers had died out. The ability to recreate them existed, if it could only be discovered how to get them to breed in the dome. Other species survived with help, and a few outright flourished, hedgehogs being a notable example. Both Reyun and Kayal were fascinated by the procreation and rearing of young, and marvelled to see the interactions of parents with their offspring. Occasionally the population of a species would drop too low and they would grow and decant the number of young required to bring it back to viability. Specialists, of course, had to introduce these young ones to the dome, as they required care until self-sufficient. This was the work Reyun oversaw, and that Kayal aspired to.

Reyun had been fascinated by the decanting of an anomaly, the first in over three hundred years. While most were initially offended by his existence, Reyun was enchanted. One of the richest and most influential people in the Grand Domes, he had taken Kayal in, housed him, fed him, and educated him. Kayal could have chosen to live under Reyun's protection, but he knew that Reyun would not respect him for it. In addition, there was next life to think of. He would no longer be an anomaly, and he would have to be in a position to make his own way. He would need standing.

There were two cups of coffee on the table. Dar had obviously informed Reyun that Kayal was coming. Kayal dropped a quick kiss onto the top of his husband's dark head and sat down. The aroma of the coffee was more than inviting. He picked up the cup in both hands and brought it to his lips, but did not drink. Instead he peered over the rim at Reyun, inhaling both the scent of the coffee and the beauty of Reyun's face. He never got tired of the black curls or the startling blue eyes that peered out from under them.

Reyun's mouth crooked into a lopsided grin as Kayal swam in the ecstasy of the coffee smell. "Are you ever going to actually learn to drink it?" he asked.

Kayal laughed, the movement almost spilling the coffee onto his coveralls, "Why would I do that? The stuff tastes like decanting fluid."

"And how would you know that?"

They sat in companionable silence after that and watched a pair of deer as they ate grass under a hundred year old oak tree.

At precisely fifty-three point four minutes Dar's voice interrupted the quiet. "Sequencing and pre-prep are complete, Kayal. The being has sufficient funds to pay for this body. Shall I begin decanting?"

"No," Kayal replied. "I should be there for it." Of course, if he had not been an anomaly, he would have had funds as well, and would not have had to rely on Reyun's good will. Nor would he have had to go through education and integration. He could have supported himself from the moment of decantation. Of course, he also would never have met Reyun. Reyun, the only one who had not held any of this against him. He even paid for Kayal's body, something Kayal would not have accepted if he had understood the enormity of it at the time.

No one knew where anomalies came from. Some postulated that they were animals who had made the leap to sentience; most thought that they were beings who had somehow forgotten themselves. But there was never a discrepancy in the death and habitation logs to account for them, and they never matched the patterns of those who had chosen not to return after body death.

Kayal turned to look at his husband. "Sorry, love, work beckons."

“No problem. What if I come with?” Reyun transferred his attention to the operating system. “Dar, please inform unit one that I'll be a little late. Tell them to go ahead with reseeded sector three.”

“Done as you speak, Reyun,” Dar replied.

Kayal retraced his steps to the monitor room, Reyun at his side. They continued past the entrance wall to a room twenty meters further down, on the opposite side of the hallway. As they walked through the newly created doorway an incubation pod appeared through another void in the wall to their right. It was enveloped by the decanting processor, which proceeded to attach various hoses to receiving ports on the pod. There was no reason that the body could not have preceded them here, but Kayal knew that Dar felt it was fitting that its arrival should be witnessed.

Kayal nodded his head for Dar to proceed. The operating system preferred verbal command, but in a small room with few people, it sensed movement well enough to understand. “Who do we have here,” Kayal asked, though he could have looked at the data scrolling on the screen.

“This body is female. The previous inhabited body was male, name of Bokan Mar. Sixteenth Quadrant Prime.”

“You might have warned me that this was someone important,” Kayal grumbled.” He had a feeling that Dar was amused at his discomfort. “Clothing suitable to station, please.”

Reyun laughed out loud at that. “Dar knows that better than you do, sweet. He's been decanting people for a thousand years.”

Kayal looked from the now very active decanting process to Reyun. “Yes, but I've only been doing it for five, and I still like to know who's coming to dinner.”

Ninety-two minutes later Dar reported Prime Mar stable, clothed, and ready for entry. Kayal told him (he thought of Dar as a him) to open the pod. Both he and Reyun stood ready to greet her as she stepped, fully composed, from the chamber in which her new body had grown.

Kayal bowed deeply, hands outstretched to either side. Reyun inclined his head, a greeting between equals. Prime Mar returned Reyun's nod but barely glanced at Kayal. She walked over to a mirrored wall and examined her new body. Nodding approval at the slim, well dressed image reflected back at her she said, “Female this time. It's been awhile. I think I'll enjoy this habitation. Dar, you're getting better at this. The decantation felt smoother this time.”

“Decantation is always the same, Prime Mar. Perhaps you have simply learned to appreciate its finer points,” Dar replied.

Prime Mar snorted a laugh. “Well, you, at least, never change, Dar” She stepped further into the room, away from the mirror. “I don't think I'll ever appreciate the finer points of *that* experience.”

“Your transport is waiting to return you to your quarters, if you feel so inclined, Prime Mar,” Kayal said, straightening his back to look at the cool blonde woman who now stood before him.

“No,” she said. “I'm feeling a bit peckish. I think I'll head to Ribaldi's for a meal first.” She paused. “What time is it? Are they even open?”

Reyun smiled at her. "Bokan, for you they're always open. But it's six thirty pm, supper time. I'm sure Dar will call ahead for you."

"Your reservation is already confirmed, Prime Mar. You are expected in forty minutes." Bokan Mar thanked Dar. She departed without further discussion.

Kayal and Reyun lingered for a few minutes before leaving the decanting chamber. Reyun walked Kayal back to the monitoring room and bent to give him a quick kiss to hold him until his shift ended in another hour and a half. Reyun's lips never touched Kayal's.

Dar's voice interrupted in what could only be called panic, "Great aborted landfall!"

Kayal hadn't considered it possible for the operating system to evince this tone, let alone this language. "Dar, what's wrong?" He bolted through the entry wall, barely waiting for it to open for him. Reyun followed nearly as quickly. Inside he immediately saw that there was a new habitation. The reason for Dar's panic was also immediately obvious. An unripe body had been inhabited. This was supposed to be impossible. The receiving beacon on a pod was not activated until body maturity.

Kayal flung himself into his seat. "How bad is it?"

"Computing," Dar said, his voice calmer now. After a brief pause he continued. "This is a forty two week growth, viable, but not capable of locomotion or motor control."

Reyun dropped down into the seat next to Kayal, stared at the screen. "What are you going to do?"

Kayal shook his head. "I don't know. Dar, who is it?"

"Forty-nine point six minutes remaining in identification sequence. Would you like to go for a coffee while you wait?"

"Ummm, no, I think I'll wait here for this one." Who this was would probably determine a great deal of how this would be handled. A wealthy person would, of course, have resources to have this body cared for. But would they want to wait in the pod for another ten years while it matured? Would they be able to sit that long in zero stim without severe psychiatric consequences? If they decanted now, would Kayal be demoted? What if they terminated this body? Would the being be able to transfer to another? Whatever the outcome, he was in trouble. This was his responsibility. He would not ask Reyun to use his influence to protect him.

After what seemed an eternity, Dar's voice interrupted Kayal's brooding. "There is no correlation found for this being. This is an anomaly." An anomaly. Like Kayal, himself. No resources, no standing. "Is the body male or female, Dar?" He didn't know why this should matter, but for some reason he needed to know.

"This inhabitation is female," Dar answered. "What do you wish for me to do?"

Kayal sat, immobilized. "I don't know."

"Kayal." He started at the sound of Reyun's voice. He had forgotten that his husband was there. "We can't leave her in there."

"I know that," Kayal answered. "But she can't pay, and she can't work. Hell, she can't even feed herself." He started up out of his chair, sat back down, then got up again and started to pace in the small space afforded by the control room.

Reyun snagged Kayal's arm on his fifth pass. "Sit down, sweet." Kayal reluctantly sat. Reyun addressed Dar. "Is there any procedure outlined for an event like this?"

"Nothing like this was ever anticipated. There is no protocol."

“We have to inform Council,” Kayal said as his shoulders slumped. He felt near tears. “They’ll have to rule on what to do.”

“I will call for the Council to convene in an emergency session in three hours’ time. They will not want to leave anyone suspended for any longer than necessary.”

Reyun stood and started for the door, motioning Kayal to follow. “Thanks, Dar. We’ll be ready.”

Three hours later, showered and changed into formal dress, Kayal and Reyun sat outside the council chamber. Despite the short notice, one hundred forty-three Primes were present. This represented half of the World Council. Reyun had thought that only Dome One would be represented. Kayal again paced the floor as they waited to be called. Finally the chamber wall opened and the steward emerged. Kayal, at the furthest reach of the hallway, turned on his heel and quickly retraced his steps. Reyun straightened from where he had been leaning against the opposite wall.

“The Council will see you now.” The steward’s tone matched his exterior, pale and non-descript. If Kayal had hoped to read anything there he was disappointed.

Kayal had told Reyun that he would face this alone; it was his responsibility. Reyun had simply laughed and said that this affected his husband, so it affected him as well. “Besides,” he had said, “This is history in the making. I wouldn’t miss it for anything.”

Side by side Kayal and Reyun followed the steward through the entryway. The room was completely silent. Before them a tiered semicircle of seats rose around a central open floor area. For this occasion there were two seats placed facing the Council. They were dwarfed in this large space. Kayal knew that this was meant to intimidate. Reyun reached over and briefly squeezed his hand. He put on a confident smile, which Kayal did his best to emulate, and they followed the steward to the chairs.

Not yet given leave to sit, Kayal looked up at the seated Primes. Stern faces above flowing indigo robes scrutinized the pair standing below. None looked sympathetic. Kayal’s already weak attempt at self-assurance faded. Finally, First Prime Ogun nodded for them to sit.

Ogun glared at Kayal, and then turned his attention to Reyun. “Aren’t you on the wrong level, Sanctuary One Prime?”

Reyun gave a slight head shake. His smile did not reach his eyes as he answered. “I am hardly unbiased in this case, First Prime. I stand with my husband.”

“This is without precedent. I don’t think that...”

“This entire situation is without precedent,” Reyun interrupted. “I would not leave a first lifer, in his ninth year, no less, to be atmos-tossed by the Council for something that we all know he had no control over. I would choose the floor on this even if Kayal were not my husband.”

Ogun’s lips became a thin line. “As you wish. He turned his attention back to Kayal. “You will have an opportunity to speak, but first we will hear from Dar.”

All chairs in the Council chamber rotated in unison to face the left hand wall. Its blank features were replaced with the image of an incubation chamber, magnified to dominate the room. A small, immature human female body floated in the nutrient solution, apparently in a sleep state. As they watched its green eyes opened, appeared to look out at the room. Kayal had observed developing bodies before, but, like everyone else in the room, had never seen one inhabited. It felt strange, somehow

wrong. Council members shifted uncomfortably in their seats. There were a few muttered comments and several of the Primes looked away. Kayal stole a glance at Reyun, who looked on, rapt.

“This is eighty-one twenty-two J,” Dar’s voice jolted the room back to business. “At six fifty-one pm today this body inhabited. I have run a full diagnostic on the incubator. Not only was there no activation of the receiver, there does not seem to have been one implanted. This body should have been rejected long before reaching this level of maturity. It should not even be capable of habitation.”

Kayal couldn’t get his breath. His heart felt like it was fluttering in his chest. This just wasn’t possible. None of this made any sense.

“Furthermore,” Dar continued, “This female seems to have a complete reproductive system. The body is a genetic throwback.”

There were sharp intakes of breath around the room. Suddenly voices were raised all around. First Prime Ogun pressed his buzzer repeatedly, calling for silence.

When the room finally quieted, Ogun spoke. “Truly there is no precedent for this. It is clear that Kayal is blameless in this. Dar, you will check your systems for any signs of tampering. I can only see this as a deliberate action by someone with advanced genetics training.” He turned again to Reyun. “Is this, perhaps, why you chose to attend?”

Reyun looked as stunned as Kayal felt. “My work is with animals, Ogun, not humans. And I don’t think this is genetic manipulation. Reproductively capable embryonic lines must have been maintained in human engineering. I suggest you start there.”

Reyun stood up and addressed the room at large. “And as much as this issue needs investigation, are we forgetting that there’s a human being in that body?” He raised his arm and pointed in the direction of the image floating on the wall before them. “What are we going to do about her?”

Eleventh district Prime thrust herself from his seat. “That is an abomination. It must be terminated.”

A number of voices joined his, but just as many dissented. Bokan Mar pressed her buzzer.

“Sixteenth Quadrant is recognized.” First Prime Ogun shouted, bringing the room back to order.

“Thank you, First Prime.” Mar’s face now appeared on the wall in split screen with the incubator. “And thank you, Dar, for letting everyone in chambers see my new face.” She stood and walked from her seat in the fourth tier to the floor, deliberately saying nothing until she stood next to Reyun. She looked pointedly at Kayal, who reluctantly rose from his chair.

All eyes now turned from the screen to look at the trio on the floor. Mar continued, “Whatever we may think of the body or means of inhabitation, there *is* a person in there. You aren’t talking about termination. You are discussing murder.” As voices again rose throughout the room, she raised her hand for silence. “I have the floor.” The room quieted. “I don’t know what the best course of action is, but I absolutely cannot stand for termination of an inhabited body. With no transponder the being would be lost.”

Forty-seventh Prime buzzed in and was recognized. "Do we even know that there really is a person in there, Dar?"

"There is clear evidence of habitation. Despite the lack of transponder there is brain activity consistent with human thought."

The next forty minutes were filled with arguments for and against termination. Kayal's legs became tired at some point during the proceedings and he sat down. Finally First Prime Ogun noticed that he was still present. He excused Kayal from the proceedings. Reyun chose to leave with him.

Twenty minutes later Kayal and Reyun were again seated in the dining hall with something stronger than coffee in their hands. They stared out a pair of squirrels chasing one another around the oak tree.

"We could do it, you know."

Kayal turned to look at Reyun. "Do what?"

"We could raise her. I know how to raise young."

Kayal turned, stunned, to look at Reyun. "You've raised animal young. They mature in months, not years. And they can feed themselves if you put the food in front of them. This habitation will be helpless. Even if you feed her, her excretions will be everywhere. She'll require constant care. It's barbaric. There were reasons they outlawed this."

"It was outlawed because we were greedy. We wanted to live forever, and that meant we had to keep our numbers down. We've become so insular, so jaded. Kayal, you don't know how boring life becomes after thousands of years. But we hang on because we refuse to die. Besides, we do bottle feed mammalian young, and manage their excretions just fine."

"What, are you saying that you want to die?"

"No, sweet, I'm saying that I want to have something more to live for. You've given me that something. But this new being, this human youngling, isn't a throwback. She's a new future for all of us."

Reyun's eyes pleaded with Kayal. "Look, the raising of young wasn't outlawed. Giving birth to them was. Don't you see what a unique opportunity this would be for us? To raise a human child? We would have a daughter."

"But she has reproductive capability. You heard them. They think she's an abomination. Do you really think they'd let us?"

"We wouldn't give them a choice. If she's already been decanted they wouldn't dare kill her."

"You're serious, aren't you?"

"Yes, I am."

Kayal's hands shook as he raised his glass to his lips and took a drink. He turned his eyes back to the squirrels, but what he saw was green eyes peering out of a tiny body, demanding the same chance at life that he had been given. "So you think I should just go in there and say, *Dar, start decantation procedure?* Council would definitely atmos-toss me."

Reyun moved closer to Kayal, put his arm around him and drew him closer. "No, I'll do it. Council will be furious, but my standing is too high for them to do more than give me a slap on the wrist."

"I don't know. This should be an easy decision for me. I'm an anomaly too. But I just don't know."

Kayal lapsed into silence and Reyun decided that he needed processing time. They couldn't afford to wait too long, but there was a small window.

A while later in the wildlife dome a fawn stepped out of some bushes. It moved farther into the clearing, and then seemed to realize it was alone. Its eyes went wide and it froze for a long moment, until an adult deer also emerged from the bushes. The fawn relaxed, walked towards its mother and leaned against her, reassuring itself by suckling.

"All right," Kayal said. "Let's do it. We should..."

Suddenly Dar's voice broke in. "Kayal, Reyun, you are needed in the monitor room immediately. You should run."

Kayal chose to use both the platform and his feet to return to the distillery. Both he and Reyun were out of breath as they came to a sudden stop inside the monitor room. Eleventh sector Prime stood over a frightened distillery tech, using all of his considerable height and bulk to intimidate.

"I told you to terminate."

"What is going on here, Jysk," Reyun managed to get out between panting breaths.

The room stood frozen for a moment. Reyun's breathing eased. Finally Prime Jysk turned his glare from the tech to Reyun. "The abomination is to be terminated."

Kayal felt as though he had been punched in the gut. Reyun however returned Jysk's glare in full measure. "Where's the Council order?"

"I just gave it."

"No," Reyun said. "You didn't. Council would never send this kind of order without the Seal of Office. And they would never, never entrust an atmos-breather like you with it."

As Jysk's face turned scarlet with rage, Reyun turned his attention to the now open mouthed, staring tech. "You did well. Go take a coffee break until Dar tells you to come back." With a quick nod she scrambled out of her chair and exited the room.

Reyun looked back at Jysk, but his next words were for Dar. "What is Council's status?"

"Council is currently in a one hour recess, with debate to resume in thirteen minutes."

"Inform First Prime of Prime Jysk's actions here, Dar." Reyun smiled broadly. "You're due back in Council, Jysk. I suggest you hurry, though I doubt that you can get to Ogun before he has Dar's full report."

Jysk was almost out of the room when Dar announced, "Incubation pod is on its way to the decanting room. Would you like to meet it there?"

"What?" Jysk turned on his heel and stared, first at Reyun, then at Kayal.

Kayal finally found his voice. "Who ordered that?"

"You did." Dar's voice almost sounded amused.

"No, no I didn't." Kayal's eyes were glued to Jysk's enormous hands, which were now tightly clenched into fists. Then he remembered. *So you think I should just go in there and say, Dar, start decantation procedure?* "I was talking to Reyun. It was a hypothetical question."

“My apologies, Kayal. I completely misinterpreted that. Yes, reviewing my logs I can see that that was a private conversation.” Definitely a tone of amusement now. “However, the pod continues to approach decanting. Would you like me to send it back?”

Reyun actually laughed out loud. “No, Dar, we’ll be right along.” He turned to Jysk. “You need to hurry if you’re going to make it before the chamber is sealed.”

A few minutes later Kayal and Reyun watched the incubation pod slide through the same entryway that had opened for Prime Mar and tens of thousands of other beings. Just never one such as this. They were acutely aware that they were witnessing history.

Kayal alternated between pacing and staring at the pod during the ninety-two minutes it took for the decanting process to complete. Just before the pod cracked open Reyun stood up from the chair in which he had forced himself to remain seated.

Together Kayal and Reyun stepped towards the pod which opened to reveal a tiny, perfect human being. She was dressed in a pale pink dress accented with delicate green leaves that matched her wide open eyes. Bare arms and legs moved randomly. She was the most beautiful thing either of them had ever seen.

“If you would like to pick her up,” Dar said, “she should be handled as you would an infant primate.”

Reyun reached into the pod. He gently lifted the baby girl with both hands, carefully supporting her head, and then shifted her weight so that he held her along one arm, keeping her safe with the other. Kayal instinctively reached out and touched her face gently with the fingers of one hand. Her skin felt soft, delicate.

Both men stood, completely absorbed in the vision of this new life. Kayal finally lifted his eyes from his daughter’s green eyes to look into his husband’s blue ones. “She needs a name,” he said.

“I hadn’t thought about that,” Reyun answered. “What should we call her?”

Dar spoke quietly, with warmth. “Might I suggest Eve?”