

Elysium: Road To Paradise

By Alice Baburek

Chapter 1

Joanne Sterne eagerly placed the compressed block of refuse into the incinerator. Instantly, warm air seeped through the vents, taking the chill out of the icy atmosphere. She sighed heavily as she stared intently at the half-empty storage area. Without hesitation, she grabbed another, and swiftly fit it neatly within the inner core of the generator. The lights flickered, then glowed a low-grade beam. The supply was slowly diminishing. It had become obvious that the other members depended solely upon her undeniable knowledge to cheat the inevitable, even if it was for just a little while longer.

“Joanna, Old Man Harris...well, he died in his sleep.” Josh Grady was extremely fit for a middle-aged man. His previous military experience showed. He commanded no army now, but insisted on maintaining security within the stringent perimeters of the establishment. Even with his rough exterior, his words were soft when he spoke to Joanna. Her eyes swelled with tears. Haunting images of her father flashed before her, who like so many others, had died from the onslaught of the ungodly disease.

“Are you all right?” he asked. He took a step closer.

She immediately regained her composure then moved away from his advancement. Josh narrowed his dark brown eyes. His face grew stern from her continuous rejection.

“Please dispose of his body, and...thank you, Josh,” she stated before abruptly turning away. Suddenly, his large hand held her round-toned shoulder. “I can’t,” she whispered.

Josh reluctantly let go, and heaved a heavy sigh. “You can’t, or you won’t!” he murmured. Then angrily pushed her to the side. Without any warning, he stopped and faced her. “I’m...sorry, Joanna.” Josh shamefully hung his head. He dared not look at the woman he secretly adored. “I’ll take care of Old Man Harris.” Within a second, Josh was gone.

Joanna silently breathed a sigh of relief. She could never have feelings for Josh. In fact, she could never have feelings of that sort for anyone, ever again. Joanna felt cold inside—her heart remained frigid. Emotions had disappeared long ago with the death of the only person she had ever truly loved. Her soul had been stolen and ripped from her inner being, thus emerging forth an empty shell of welcomed loneliness.

“Josh means well, and he does have a definite crush on you,” explained Darrin Rosen. “Sorry, I

couldn't help overhearing..." She looked hard at her friend and colleague. Darrin, before the downfall of the earth, was her right-hand man at the institute. At one time, his expertise in biological warfare surpassed any scientist across the globe.

Joanna forced a half grin. "I know, but Darrin, he's barking up the wrong tree!" she exclaimed with frustration.

"We've all been cooped up way too long. He's had his eye on you since day one. Josh doesn't know you're a lesbian, Joanna. Why don't you just tell him, so he leaves you alone? I think you owe him an explanation." He winked.

"I don't owe anyone anything, especially when it comes to explaining my sexuality," she snapped. "We're dying one by one, and I'm supposed to be concerned with Brady's inflated ego? If it bothers you that much, Darrin, you can break the news to him." With that said, Joanna turned about and left Darrin alone in the storage unit.

The underground complex had been built to house at least 100,000 people. Its chambers and tunnels led in so many different directions, that a special navigation system had to be issued to each of its city members. But none of this seemed to be of importance anymore to the twenty-five people who survived the genocide of the entire human population. Enormous sections had been sealed off with the dwindling energy supply. All that remained was a small area the size of a warehouse, which housed three levels of living units and a holding depository. Blocks of refuse had been confiscated from topside and stored miles below the surface. But after only two years, this vital key to life began to slowly diminish and disappear.

Joanna sat down at the hard metal table with a cold bottle of fresh water. It felt soothing as it coated her hot, dry throat. The eating arena was enormous, and had been created to entertain up to one hundred occupants at the same given time. Joanna closed her weary eyes and laid her head upon the freezing surface. Within moments, she could feel herself drift into a restless sleep. Horrible images blurred and meshed violently together as screams and cries for help echoed inside her mind.

"Wake up, Joanna!" urged a familiar voice.

Joanna desperately fought the instant pull to consciousness. Suddenly, the nightmare dissipated, then faded away back into her darkest dreams. "Sadie?" she questioned. With the palms of her hands, she rubbed her burning eyes.

Sadie Farrington smiled and gave Joanna a slight nudge. Her youthful appearance could be refreshing on most days—but not this one. "Joanna, do you think the sun will ever shine again?" Sadie was an optimist. She believed in the heavens above. She believed in miracles—unlike Joanna, who based her

beliefs on scientific data, and frowned on manifested visions.

“Yes. Isn’t that what you want to hear, Sadie?” Joanna stood up and stretched her short and lean body. Joanna’s once-beautiful blue eyes had darkened, along with her caring heart, giving still the appearance of a lovely woman, despite her sour and discouraging outlook on life.

“Oh, Joanna, I may be younger than you, but I am not so naïve. Please do not patronize me or insult my intelligence. You may be a scientist, but remember, I was once a highly honored physician and coroner. Doesn’t that count for something within our close-knit community?” Sadie battered her long black eyelashes, then giggled like a school girl. “Maybe if you would smile every now and then...” Sadie’s voice drifted off as Joanna’s mind suddenly traveled back to a more pleasant time in her life.

Joanna was happy—excited to be alive. Life was worth living as her career soared, and she had become one of the top leading scientists in the entire country—and eventually the world. It was then an uplifting and energetic intern had been given the honor of shadowing Joanna’s highly acclaimed accomplishments. Candace Murphy was bold and forthright with her sexuality—unlike Joanna, who rarely let her guard down to expose a single flaw. The two of them skirted around each other like vinegar and water, neither one willing to back down and claim defeat.

“You couldn’t save her!” shouted Sadie. Immediately, Joanna’s mind shut down. She stared hard at Sadie. “You did everything humanly possible.”

Joanna tried desperately to fight the arising emotions. Her eyes filled with sorrowful tears. “What do you know about it?” she murmured. She quickly tried to compose herself, and once again turned her surfacing feelings inward. She took a deep breath, then closed her eyes.

“Maybe if you would just grieve her death, you’d be able to look at yourself in the mirror!” Sadie shook her head and left Joanna to suffer alone in her silent tomb.

“Joanna! We’ve got movement on the surface!” shouted Darrin from a distance.

Joanna immediately let go of the past and focused her undivided attention to Darrin’s discovery. Within minutes, they were both analyzing the pertinent information gathered from ground above.

“Heat sensors are picking up low temperature readings. It’s emanating from...” Darrin did not finish. His fingers flew across the keyboard.

“It can’t be!” exclaimed Joanna. She searched the screen for confirmation.

Darrin abruptly stopped, then turned to stare at Joanna. “Somebody is definitely out there, Joanna.” She looked at him in disbelief.

“You mean there are still people on top...alive?” Sadie chimed in. “I thought we were the only ones

who made it!”

“Well, we’re about to find out,” whispered Darrin.

Chapter 2

The icy ride to the desolate surface took only minutes. Heavy titanium doors swished open. A white, odorless gas evaporated into a thin mist. It had been almost two full years since anyone from down below had ventured outside. The atmosphere still remained far below freezing. Dark, ominous clouds squeezed tightly together and consumed the gloomy sky. They hovered above repelling light from surrounding stars. A constant threat of death held the earth prisoner, and continued to suffocate any type of life within its devastating reach.

“Let’s not spend too much time out here,” suggested Cameron Littleton. She held up the biometer in order to track the waves of heat produced by a human body. “This way—it’s coming from the direction inside the city.”

As the small crew began to move ahead, Joanna remained motionless. “You do realize our thermal suits and protective helmets can only shield us for about three hours. Then acidic slivers of ice slowly eat away at our insulated gear, thus painfully peeling the flesh right from our bones.” She gave a half grin.

“And you find this particularly amusing, because...?” Darrin didn’t bother to finish.

“I just want all of us to agree that there will be no sightseeing.” Lines across Joanna’s forehead pulled tight under the mask. Cameron and Darrin nodded their helmets in unison.

Extremely hard and rocky, the hike into the crumbled remains of the shelled metropolis was tedious and tiresome. It was quite difficult to keep a constant, even pace.

“The readings are getting stronger,” announced Cameron. Cameron was once a stylish physics professor within the United Federation. She, too, had lost her entire family to the lethal disease which squeezed most human life to the brink of extinction.

The whirling wind began to pick up speed. It smacked playfully against their fatigued bodies. Cameron abruptly stopped, then turned about in a circle.

“It’s gone! I lost the signal!” she said in disbelief. For a brief moment, she hesitated and seemed confused. Cameron desperately tried to recalculate her findings, but to no avail. “I don’t know what happened. The biometer was picking up strong heat impulses, as if someone was moving about.” Cameron shrugged her shoulders.

“Do you think something might be blocking the signals?” Joanna pointed to the thick metal barrier. It had been built years ago in a desperate attempt to protect the occupants against the harsh and changing weather.

“Why don’t we go and take a look inside?” suggested Darrin.

Joanna gave him the thumbs-up, and the three of them pushed forward. The fortified partition was immense. Massive steel plates climbed high, then disappeared into the dark sky. The decaying structure had been intentionally reinforced at the base and outer perimeters. Its purpose seemed to be clear: to keep out unwanted visitors and deadly storms. Unfortunately, it did neither. Enormous dents and slices ripped into its sides leaving wide, gaping holes. The icy, acrid atmosphere had found its way deep inside the damned fortress.

“Cameron, what do you suggest we do?” questioned Joanna. The illumination projecting from the head gear was limited.

Darrin was busy searching through frozen stacks of books. He cracked off a piece, and held it high up into the freezing air. “Look what I discovered!” he proudly exclaimed.

Joanna seemed irritated by Darrin’s unending uplifting spirits. Cameron, on the other hand, could care less. Her focus was on the malfunctioning tracking device.

“What is it?” asked Joanna nonchalantly.

Darrin heaved a huge sigh for Joanna’s ignorance and lack of interest. “Well, I think it’s called a book, but I won’t know for sure until we get back underground. I’ll use generated heat waves to thaw it out. It’s priceless!” Darrin was in awe with his exciting find.

“Oh, it’s priceless, all right.” Joanna tapped at the top of her helmet. Darrin mumbled a response only he could hear.

“It’s working again!” shouted Cameron. Both Joanna and Darrin grabbed at the sides of their helmets.

“We can hear you just fine, Cameron! Please lower your voice!” replied Darrin sarcastically. But before Joanna could contribute her own witty comment, Cameron began to move swiftly towards the innards of the metal-plated edifice. She followed the signals to a set of heavy steel doors. There, she stopped and waited impatiently for Darrin and Joanna.

“It looks like an elevator shaft.” Darrin reached into his thermal suit pocket and pulled out a small portable metallic device. Within seconds, the frozen doors creaked open.

Cameron carefully leaned in, and looked down into the shadowy, endless abyss.

“How much time do we have?” asked Cameron.

“We still have a little over two hours, but remember, we need enough time to get back, so we shouldn’t cut ourselves too short.”

Cameron nodded in agreement. Joanna removed a silver sphere from her sleeve pocket. She painstakingly reached in and attached the unique contraption to the side wall. Instantly, the small round cylinder transformed into a hovering rigged rectangular step.

“Who wants to be first?” asked Joanna.

Cameron was eager to snag the lead. “I’ll see you both at the bottom,” she announced. Then moved onto the floating step quickly descending out of sight.

“You’re next, Joanna.”

Immediately, Joanna followed suit while Darrin volunteered as last man down. The signals grew stronger as they made their way through the depths of a massive archaic tunnel system built hundreds of years ago. Suddenly, the temperature seemed to rise with a mysterious surge of warm, fresh air.

“What was that?” Darrin cried out. Cameron eagerly turned about, facing the biometer in both directions.

“This way!” she shouted with excitement. Cameron moved with ease to follow the strange phenomenon.

“No, Cameron, wait!” yelled Joanna. She tried desperately to restrain Cameron, but lost her footing and fall heavily onto the damp ground. Cameron quickly continued on. Then mysteriously vanished without a trace.

“Where’d she go?” asked Darrin. Joanna frantically adjusted her dimming head gear. Cameron was gone.

“Cameron, can you hear me? Cameron, where are you?”

Neither Darrin nor Joanna heard a single word. Silence filled the air. Finally, Darrin could stand it no more. “Okay, this is getting pretty creepy, so Cameron, just tell us where you are, and stop messing with our heads.”

Once again, Cameron remained silent to their urgent request. Joanna closed her eyes for a brief moment. She needed to gain control of the overwhelming feeling of panic which stirred hungrily within the pit of her stomach.

“Let’s go find her,” is all Joanna could say.

Darrin’s hand lightly tapped Joanna’s shoulder in agreement. “You lead the way, Joanna.”

Chapter 3

“We’ve been walking over twenty minutes, Joanna. I can’t believe Cameron could be that far ahead of us. We can’t even see the reflections from the light on her helmet.” Darrin seemed frustrated.

“Well, she couldn’t have just disappeared!” Joanna was becoming more and more irritated. “It looks like we have a decision to make before we go on any further,” she said. Then came to a sudden stop. The main tunnel suddenly split into three.

“Now what?” asked Darrin.

Joanna hesitated a moment before answering. Then, without any warning, the refreshing burst of warm air came again. “This way!” shouted Joanna. Immediately, the two of them sharply turned right and followed what seemed to be a never-ending passageway. Within minutes, darkness had surrounded them, and the cold and icy temperatures grasped eagerly at their depleted bodies.

“Stop, Joanna, just stop! We’re getting nowhere! Let’s face it. We’re not going to be able to find Cameron without help. We need more people to help search through this maze.” Darrin halted and stood firm in one place. Joanna didn’t want to admit Darrin was right.

“We have to go back, Joanna. Maybe Josh knows of any blueprints showing the extent of these underground passageways. Besides, we can use the spare biometer, back at the warehouse, to track Cameron,” he said in a low, hopeful tone.

Joanna felt defeated—a feeling she was well acquainted with after her futile effort to try and save the human race from total annihilation. “Darrin, I want you to go and bring back Josh and a couple of others.”

“Oh no, you are not going on by yourself, Joanna; that’s just plain suicide!”

Joanna’s smile was weak. “Cameron was my responsibility...” Joanna unexpectedly placed her hand on his arm and lightly squeezed. Her tired eyes brimmed with tears. She was relieved Darrin could not see through the tinted shield that covered her wet eyes.

“Fine, I’ll do it. But when I get back, you and Cameron better be waiting for us!” he stated in a firm voice.

And with nothing left to say, they both parted and went their separate ways. Darrin rushed eagerly to the entrance, and retraced his steps back up into the dismal world. He knew that even if Joanna did find Cameron, they could not return to the surface without the silver cylinder which now rested flat against his hip deep inside his frozen pocket.

Joanna continued to move along her initial path with determination. Her pace quickened at the uneasy thought that maybe Cameron was somehow hurt and unable to make contact.

“Cameron, can you hear me? Cameron, please respond!” Joanna’s breathing had become labored. The air seemed to thicken inside her helmet. Then, as she stopped briefly to catch her breath, a piercing stream of static shattered her ears.

“Cameron! Where are you?” Joanna cried out. The crackling noise increased, slicing through her headgear, causing immense pain.

“Aaagh!” she screamed.. Joanna frantically grasped both sides of her helmet. She could no longer tolerate the agonizing blast that seared her brain. Then, without even thinking, she detached her helmet and dropped it to the ground. Immediately, overwhelming nausea swept over. Within seconds she fell heavily to the crystallize ground to vomit. Immediately, her vision became blurred and the fluid around her eyes began to freeze. Joanna instantly realized her deadly mistake, and adamantly struggled to reach for her only means of survival.

I can’t die this way! Her mind flashed with distorted images. And then suddenly, out of nowhere, came Cameron. Without hesitation, she bent down and reattached Joanna’s viable support. Within lifesaving moments, pure air rushed her senses, immediately clearing her mind.

“Cameron! Is it really you?” asked Joanna. Cameron did not speak, but nodded her head. Then, as quickly as she appeared, she took a step back and vanished. Joanna was alone once more.

“This can’t be happening!” she mumbled to herself. As the crisp, tempered flow of oxygen surged through her revitalized veins, Joanna quickly regained her strength. She began once again the search for her friend.

“Cameron! Can you hear me? Cameron, where are you?” Joanna surged ahead. “Is anyone out there?” Beads of sweat formed along her brow. Then, suddenly, sounded a familiar voice.

“Joanna, can you read me? Please come in, Joanna,” begged Darrin. “I returned with reinforcements!”

It took a moment for Joanna to realize and accept the fact that she did indeed hear the voice of her friend Darrin.

“Joanna, can you hear me?” questioned Josh.

“Yes, I can hear you quite clearly. I’m still in the same tunnel where you left me, Darrin. I’m heading back now. I’ll meet you at the split as soon as possible.” Joanna stared back into the vast darkness then anxiously made her way to the rendezvous point.

“Joanna, I was worried about you when Darrin came back. We brought the biometer with us. This should help us find Cameron.” Josh pointed to Chadwick Haney.

“I’m picking up a strong impulse from the middle tunnel,” called Chadwick. The biohazard engineer seemed eager and ready to move.

“I think we need to stay together. No use spreading ourselves thin, leaving us vulnerable to the unknown.” It seemed everyone agreed to Josh’s strategy, except for Joanna. Once again, she urged separation for covering more ground. But Josh would not hear of such a foolish idea.

“I couldn’t find any type of blue prints or information related to this entire area below the city. It’s vast, Joanna, and it could be dangerous.” Joanna finally gave in, and followed the group.

“Joanna, you’re unusually quiet. Are you sure you’re okay?” Darrin persisted.

Joanna was pouting at the firmness bestowed by Josh. “I don’t agree with his thinking, Darrin. But I guess I’ll just have to accept his authority and his decision, since I did send you back for him.” Joanna debated inside whether to share her unusual experience with Darrin. “Darrin, something strange happened when I was alone. I don’t quite know how to explain it.” She switched her headset for only Darrin to receive. Hurriedly, she told him of her mysterious visitor.

“You probably blacked out. Then, for some odd reason, you imagined the entire episode. When the oxygen supply is cut off from the brain for too long, strange things can happen.” Darrin seemed confident with his quick analysis.

“No, Darrin. I was not unconscious, and I did not imagine seeing Cameron. It was her helmet and suit...she saved my life!” The connection between the two of them became silent.

“If it was her, where is she now? Why would she leave again? It doesn’t make one bit of sense, Joanna.” Maybe Darrin was right.

“Okay, people, the readings are getting stronger!” announced Chadwick. “You’re not going to believe this, Josh!” He suddenly halted, then passed the biometer to Josh.

“What in the name of...?”

“Josh, would you care to share your discovery with the rest of the team?” asked Joanna in an irritated tone.

“It’s going crazy, Joanna. There must be at least a dozen or more people somewhere underground. We just have to find them!” Chadwick was ecstatic at the prospect of other survivors. He, along with a few others, never gave up hope that civilization could outlive the horrendous turmoil from the deadly wrath of Mother Nature.

"I bet that's where we can find Cameron," Darrin chimed in.

"Team, may I have your undivided attention?" commanded Josh in a deep tone. "We are going to pick up our pace. According to the biometer, we should make contact with the enormous cluster within the next 1.6 kilometers. Let's all stay on course, here, people!" With that in mind, the small group forged ahead with gusto and determination.

"Josh, is it my imagination, or does it seem a bit warmer as we move closer to the signals?" Joanna's neck began to sweat.

Josh recalculated his suit to match the outside temperature. "You're right, Joanna; my gage indicates 8.89 Celsius, and climbing!" Josh was astounded by this fascinating revelation. "Could this possibly mean we discovered an additional source of pure energy?"

"Wait a minute! Obviously, there are other people who have survived, just like us. I guess you could say we're crashing their party," replied Darrin. The thermal readings increased sporadically, hitting a steady high of 22.23 Celsius. Then, without any warning, a stream of bright lights flickered on along the ceiling of the dingy old tunnel.

"I'm removing my helmet," announced Josh. Within seconds, his safety gear was off, and he was happily breathing in pure, fresh air. He gestured for everyone to follow his lead.

"Up ahead, it looks like a hatch of some sort." Chadwick's voice echoed inside the sweating corridor. Josh, using brute force, grasped the cast-iron ring, and turned violently to the left. The oval metal door creaked and moaned with resistance. He pulled with all of his strength, only to find it would not budge to his masculinity.

"Darrin, Chadwick! Give me a hand!" His voice was gruff and filled with frustration. With the combined strength of the three men, the aging metal seal broke loose, then sprang open wide. Suddenly, each of the men stepped back as they gawked in disbelief.

"What do you see?" asked Joanna from behind. The other team member, Sadie Farrington, pushed and shoved in order to get a better view. No one said a single word as they gazed in awe at the spectacular sight before them.

"I guess it's my turn to hallucinate!" uttered Darrin, finally breaking the warranted silence. Hesitantly, each member of the team crossed through to the other side.

"Where are we?" whispered Chadwick.

The magnificent beauty was breathtaking. No one said another word as they tried to ingest the extreme magnitude of surrealism. Joanna turned in circles to engulf its entirety. There, swaying high

above, were looming flowered trees, rocking back and forth gently in the light, feathered breeze. Below their feet rolled waves of long, slender grass.

“Up there...it’s...it can’t be...a bird!” exclaimed Darrin. Instantly, all eyes darted to the end of Darrin’s outstretched hand. A big red-bellied Robin chirped a round or two then nonchalantly flapped its colorful wings and took flight.

“We have to be dreaming, or all of this is some type of hologram,” commented Josh. Beads of sweat lined his brow as he quickly checked the temperature controls on his suit.

“It’s holding at a steady 23.8 Celsius; that’s impossible!” he mumbled. Their thermal suits felt heavy from the radiating heat below them.

“The origin of the energy source is penetrating up through the ground. This is quite fascinating!” explained Chadwick. The team focused immediately on the soil where they stood immobilized inside their thick boots.

“You are absolutely correct!” drifted a soft, yet firm voice. There, just standing a few feet away, was a tall, beautiful woman. Short dark hair accentuated her girlish features, while the yellow blouse hung loose above her tight-fitted pants. Her long, muscular arms hung lazily against her curved hips. Joanna was astounded by the overwhelming loveliness beaming like a halo from this mysterious woman. But it was the woman’s deep blue, penetrating eyes that locked onto Joanna’s intense gaze which sent shivers of delight up and down her spine. Instantly, a tiny grin crawled across the unknown female’s slender lips.

“My name is Kelly Mandis; welcome to Elysium,” she announced with a slight bow. The curious group looked about their surroundings in amazement—except for Joanna. She remained fixated and was held captive by Kelly’s pure essence of enchantment. Taking turns, each one of them gave a brief introduction.

“I know you all must have many questions; please follow me into the city, where you can be comfortable.” Without saying another word, she gracefully turned about, breaking the magical spell.

“Your friend, Cameron, is here and unharmed. She can be found at the main building,” said Kelly. The small group followed close behind as the lovely lady led the way through the tall, streaming grass. It wasn’t long before all of them were standing together inside a round dirt circle. Without uttering a single word, Kelly retrieved a minute device from inside her pocket. Instantly, the surrounding images swirled into a blur.

“What’s going on?” demanded Josh in a firm voice. Grumbles arose among the others while Kelly, once again, gave her undivided attention to Joanna. Immediately, Joanna’s palms began to sweat.

“Please, please, don’t be alarmed...you’ll understand in a moment,” explained Kelly. Suddenly, the

distorted visions became clear.

“Welcome to the city of Elysium.” Kelly gestured with her arm. The view was like nothing they had never seen before, nor could be conceived through one’s imagination. Elysium was an illustrious city designed exclusively from the polished rocks and stones found deep within the layers of the earth’s core.

“As the surface became a hostile living environment, our community thought better to move underground. We were able to extract rocks, minerals, and stones to build our city. Our energy source, as you have already guessed, comes from deep within the earth’s inner core. The heat rises, warming the soil and ground. The metamorphic and igneous rocks act as conduits.” Kelly smiled with swelling pride.

“And that’s why the city has a faint glow about it,” murmured Darrin.

“You are correct. Here in Elysium, the temperature never seems to rise above 23.8 Celsius, which is the perfect temperature for not only inside, but also the environment outside.” She nodded her head with satisfaction.

“Are you saying you tapped into the Earth’s inner core? How could you possibly get through its mantle? The outer core is comprised of liquid.” Chadwick was full of questions.

“Well, that’s the part we don’t quite understand. It seems the mantle of the Earth is pliable. The outer core had been compressed to the point of formed molten rock. Again, we were able to work our way through to the innermost core of the planet.” Kelly glanced at Joanna, who was staring noticeably, once again, at this fascinating and alluring woman.

“We were also able to cultivate and refine essential gases, including oxygen and carbon, along with extremely useful minerals of aluminum, calcium, sodium, potassium, and much more,” reported Kelly.

“And thus the reason for so much growth and development,” she added. “We have acres of fields that are groomed for viable food sources. We even have farm animals which supply us with fresh and wholesome dairy products!” exclaimed Kelly.

“There haven’t been field-grown food plants or livestock in almost two hundred years!” uttered Chadwick.

Kelly remained quiet for a moment, then smiled. “When the world was righteous, I was a microbiologist. My research included DNA reconstruction within single organisms. With the help of other scientists, I was able to replicate an advanced cloning procedure which we used here in Elysium.”

Josh suddenly interrupted Kelly. “Wait a minute, how long have you and all of these other people been living under the surface? What you have here is astounding, and must have taken years to plan, create, and develop.”

Kelly walked a few feet ahead, then turned to face the group. "Elysium has been colonized for the past ten years." Kelly nervously clasped her hands. She seemed a bit uneasy by the intense stare from the doubting Josh.

"Ten years ago? You knew what was going to happen to the earth?" inquired Chadwick.

Kelly remained silent for a brief moment before she decided to address Chadwick's accusation. "In actuality, the earth's destruction was known to be forthcoming by at least fifty years. We had warning after warning, but no one would listen. One of the biggest predictors of doom had been the shift and change in the weather across the entire world. Global warming, ice caps melting, giving way to the rise in sea levels, along with the marine and animal life disappearing had created a horrendous pathway to self-destruction. Yet we deliberately pushed it aside and waited until the next round of devastation came about to justify the impending perils of our dying planet. By then, it had become too late, and the catastrophic events which followed were irreversible." She shrugged her shoulders.

"So, you and the others decided to build Elysium on your own?" asked Darrin.

"We researched the notion of leaving this planet and heading for the sixth celestial body called Pluto. But it was not feasible. Our only other viable option would be to dig ourselves in and wait it out. One of the most unique theories studied involving the evolution of the Earth revolves around its rebirth. We believe this to be true. How soon...well, the answer remains unknown," explained Kelly.

Joanna could barely hear the words as she wondered why Kelly intrigued her to the point of captivation. Her feelings surprised her, as she felt a strong sexual attraction to this vibrant, yet mystifying woman.

"Joanna, do you have any questions for me?" Kelly slightly tilted her head. Joanna remained speechless. Her cheeks flushed to a light pink.

"There are many things you need to learn about Elysium. First and foremost is that transport pads are used to travel between sectors. We have designated areas created for exclusive development in farming, crops, city dwelling, and relaxation. You found your way to the entrance to the relaxation sector." Kelly glanced over at Joanna, who stood nervously shifting from one sticky boot to another.

"We understand the outside world has become extremely volatile, and has reached beyond any type of livable stage. We also know that your refuse supply is on the verge of exhaustion. You and the rest of your group are more than welcome to join us here, in Elysium. If you decide to stay, you each will be provided with a living unit, transport codes, and a list of communal functions." Kelly looked about the small group.

“Communal functions?” questioned Sadie.

“Elysium is a society within a city. In order for Elysium to succeed as a society, each member contributes to the welfare of others, so that all may enjoy and reap the benefits. There are many assignments from which to choose, unless there is a specific skill or ability you wish to share. Many of us down here used to be scientists topside. Some of the communal group kept their distinctive abilities; others chose not, and eagerly began completely new lives. Our system has flourished over the past few years, and we are proud of what we have become.” Kelly’s aura was penetrating. For the first time in a long time, since the death of her partner Candace, Joanna felt moved by another woman. Her mind scrambled and became mixed by her unsettled emotions.

“Elysium is a unique name,” Darrin stated. “If my memory serves me correctly, according to Greek mythology, Elysium was the final resting place for heroic and virtuous souls.” Darrin’s fascination with ancient myths and cultures had come to surface.

“I can tell you’ve become a devote professor of the archaic history plates,” Kelly chuckled. “I’m impressed. Elysium is also a synonym for the word ‘paradise,’ which would be more appropriate for this place and its occupants.

“You need not make up your minds in haste; please accept my hospitality and stay at my unit until you each reach a decision. In the meantime, I will send a welcoming party to bring the others. Please follow me.”

Kelly began to walk quickly towards an enormous, beautiful rock formation. The rainbow quartz flickered between variant spectrums of pastel colors, which sparkled to life from the generated energy source.

“Please make yourselves comfortable; there are plenty of individualized rooms you will find to your liking,” offered Kelly graciously.

Joanna proceeded to be the last visitor to come inside. “This place is more than amazing,” she murmured. Once again, she was caught up in a trap by this woman’s hypnotic eyes. Her obvious obsession with Kelly had surpassed anything she had felt emotionally in a very long time.

“I already sent for your friend, Cameron. She will join us soon. We all will gather together after the remainder of your community has the chance to survey Elysium. But in the meantime, I will issue you individualized transport codes so you may travel freely about within its perimeters. Don’t be afraid to ask questions. You will find that the people of Elysium are cordial and extremely knowledgeable.” Kelly began handing each person a small round metallic object. As she reached Joanna, she held back.

“Joanna, would you mind accompanying me to the main building?” Joanna remained silent. “I will assume by your silence it means compliance.”

“Oh, yes...I’ll go...” Her words trailed away. Kelly turned away and addressed the others.

“Please explore Elysium and return here when you grow weary. Your friends should be joining us within the next couple of hours.” Moments later, Cameron walked in. Her face seemed to glow.

“Cameron, you’re safe,” exclaimed Joanna. She rushed to her friend’s side. Cameron leaned in and gave her a hug.

“What happened to you?” asked Joanna.

“I unexpectedly stumbled upon our new home, Joanna. It’s beautiful here in Elysium. Wait until you see for yourself,” said Cameron.

“Give us a tour!” exclaimed Sadie.

“I can show you what I’ve seen so far,” replied Cameron. Darrin, Chadwick, and Sadie were the first to be adventurous, and eagerly left the unit with Cameron. Josh had already occupied one of the several empty rooms, leaving Kelly and Joanna alone.

“I guess that leaves just you and me,” whispered Joanna hesitantly. But Kelly’s response was not spoken words. She unexpectedly pulled Joanna close to her and kissed her on the lips. Surprisingly, Joanna did not flinch nor resist, and eagerly melted into Kelly’s loving embrace. Passion ensued and surged throughout Joanna’s emotionally starved body. After a minute or two, Joanna gently pulled back to catch her breath.

“I am sorry for being so forthcoming with my obvious attraction to you...I just assumed you felt the same.” Kelly pulled her close again. Her wet lips softly touched Joanna’s tossed hair. Joanna’s heart skipped a beat. She nuzzled her head against Kelly’s smooth neck. They both remained quiet and cherished the moment.

“I know this may be too soon to ask, but would you stay here with me?” whispered Kelly.

Joanna’s eyes brimmed with tears. For some odd reason Joanna’s mind had whirled and flashed back to Candace—the day she laid dying from the horrible disease that ravaged and tore at her defenseless body. Instinctively, Joanna pushed Kelly away.

“I don’t deserve to be happy,” she said with sorrow. Her shoulders sagged. With those disconcerting words, she immediately left to find an unoccupied room. Kelly felt confused by Joanna’s mixed messages. Once alone, Joanna released her tears—tears held inside covered with bitterness and denial.

Chapter 4

Joanna finally joined the rest of the group after spending hours by herself, wallowing in self-pity.

“What’s up with you and Kelly?” questioned Darrin. His mouth full of fresh vegetables grown in Elysium’s rich fertile soil.

“Mind your own business, Darrin!” snarled Joanna. Fury burned inside. Darrin took a step back, as if Joanna had just slapped him in the face.

“Whoa...you are my business, Joanna!” he said. His bottom lip curled. He lightly placed his large hand on her shoulder. Joanna rolled her tearful eyes, then roughly pushed him away.

“Joanna, I need to speak with you privately,” pleaded Kelly. She wrung her hands in abated anticipation.

“There’s nothing to talk about,” murmured Joanna. She dared not to look at Kelly.

Darrin glanced back and forth between the two estranged women. “If you haven’t figured it out by now, Chadwick, these two beautiful women have a special attachment to one another!” exclaimed Darrin. He clapped his hands together with approval.

Chadwick mumbled a few undecipherable words before he eagerly took another bite of the red, delicious apple.

“Shut up, Darrin!” yelled Joanna as she stormed out of the area. Kelly was stunned by Joanna’s rude behavior. Suddenly, her shoulders sagged.

“Kelly, don’t take it so hard,” Darrin whispered soothingly. “Joanna, well...she doesn’t handle her emotions too well since the death of her partner, Candace.” He tried to comfort the alienated woman. By now, Sadie had arrived, and wondered why Kelly seemed to be so upset.

“I don’t understand how she could be so cold...” Kelly didn’t bother to finish.

“Joanna still blames herself. She actually thought she should have been able to save Candace from the lethal disease that killed a huge portion of the population,” explained Darrin. “But that’s absurd! There was no cure, and containment of the microorganism was impossible! It scurried across the globe within days, wiping out most of mankind. How could she possibly blame herself?” questioned Kelly. She longed to learn more about the deep, mysterious Joanna.

“I’ve been a colleague and a friend of Joanna’s for years. She’s turned her bitterness and resentment into hate,” added Sadie.

“Hate is a strong and useless emotion. And what purpose would this serve?” queried Kelly. Darrin

looked over at Chadwick, then Sadie.

“If you hate yourself, it makes it a lot easier to hate everyone around you,” murmured Sadie. Joanna’s friends remained quiet for a moment. Kelly was astounded by this unwarranted burden which Joanna took on so bravely.

“Hate deteriorates the spirit and leaves only emptiness, a complete void. I cannot believe Joanna holds harbor to such a destructive feeling within her inner being.” Kelly’s elite composure returned with vigor.

“You’re wasting your time, Kelly. She’s a block of ice,” added Sadie.

“I do not give up that easy,” stated Kelly. Both men chuckled at Kelly’s show of resolving determination.

“There’s nothing like a woman’s scorn!” commented Sadie.

“I need to speak with her immediately,” mumbled Kelly. Instantly, she stood up and left the area.

In the meantime, Joanna once again closed her eyes and tried to erase the horrible images that raced about her mind. The nagging feelings of helplessness inched its way inside, eating at her vulnerable soul.

“I understand now why you shun me,” said Kelly in a soft voice.

Joanna instantly opened her eyes and searched Kelly’s hurt-filled face for forgiveness. But then her inner instincts spewed forth, leaving behind a resentful woman. “You know nothing about me!” she sneered.

Immediately, Kelly moved to her side, then hesitantly placed her arms around Joanna’s waist. As unforgotten memories overwhelmed her senses, Joanna anxiously shoved Kelly aside.

“How could you blame yourself for her death? The entire world was sickened with a horrible and lethal disease. No one had a cure...no one...not even you, Joanna.”

Joanna frantically grabbed the sides of her aching head, and could stand the pain no longer. “I should have saved her!” shouted Joanna.

“It was too late for her; it was too late for the others. You can’t blame yourself for living!” shouted Kelly.

“Why me...why did I survive and she die?” Finally, Joanna’s defenses broke down.

“Why any of us, for that matter? Is this not the path of fate which we chose? You must learn to let go of the past, Joanna. Elysium is your chance for a new beginning...with me.”

It was then Kelly ever-so gently kissed Joanna’s forehead, then eyes, and finally her sweet, tear-stained lips. Joanna’s hunger was real.

“Stay with me here in Elysium,” whispered Kelly. Her tender lips touched Joanna’s ear ever-so lightly, sending shivers of intense excitement. Kelly’s beautiful eyes spoke the truth.

Joanna, confused and scared, could not comprehend the magnitude of Kelly’s outright commitment. She quickly turned her face away.

“I need to be with my friends,” mumbled Joanna. Within seconds she was gone.

“You can’t run from the truth, Joanna, no matter how hard you try. My feelings are sincere and meaningful,” murmured Kelly.

Joanna could not look at Kelly. She was afraid of the unexpected feelings she felt for this illustrious woman. She arrived outside just in time to greet the remainder of their small community. They, too, were awestruck by the beauty and peacefulness which dwelled within the elite city of Elysium.

“Where have you been?” demanded Josh in a rude tone. He glanced quickly up and down at Joanna’s disheveled appearance. Instantly, his tight lips turned downward.

“None of your damn business!” Joanna retorted. Suddenly, Josh grabbed her arm. She tried to break his grip.

“Well, well, well...what do we have here? It looks as if you already had made yourself at home in someone’s bed. Who’s the lucky one?” But before Josh could throw out any more vicious, hurtful words, Joanna slapped his cheek. Just then Kelly appeared.

“That’s enough! We’re a peaceful society! Your intentional and pointless accusations are irrelevant, and frankly, Mr. Brady, we condone such violent tendencies here in Elysium. Joanna need not feed into your male antagonistic ego any longer. In other words, my dear sir, she does not have to address your inquiries.”

Darrin and Chadwick tried to hide their smiles. Veins bulged in his neck. Josh was consumed with rage. The other members began to whisper amongst one another, shaking their heads in wonder.

“You...you knew all along how much I cared for you, yet you tossed my feelings aside,” he whispered through gritted teeth. Then quickly dashed away.

“You don’t have to defend me—I’m not a child.” Joanna stared hard at Kelly. Kelly did not back down.

“If you are not a child, then quit acting like one.” Joanna turned on her heel ready to leave.

“Joanna, wait! May we speak with you?” asked Helena Curtis.

Joanna took a deep breath. “Yes, what is it, Helena?” she asked. Joanna glanced at the small group of people. Over the past few years, these people become her true friends—and most importantly, her family.

Helena looked stunned by Joanna’s abruptness.

“I’m sorry, Helena. I didn’t mean to focus my frustrations toward you, or anyone else, for that matter. Please accept my apology.” Joanna tried to relax.

“Joanna, if we want to survive, we have no choice but to join the population here within the perimeters of Elysium. The number of refuse blocks is rapidly diminishing. We will surely freeze to death if we stay inside the warehouse. Besides, Elysium looks to be a promising future for us all.” It would seem Helena and the others had already made up their minds. Of course, Helena was right—they were doomed if they decided to stay behind.

“I’m delighted that you all made such a wise decision,” Kelly piped in. Joanna’s eyes, once again, turned to Kelly. “Provisions will be made for each one of you. Samuel Jennings will be your advisor. He will help you become acclimated with Elysium.”

Just then, a young man, who seemed to be no more than twenty-five years of age, stepped up then slightly bowed.

“Welcome to Elysium!” he said in a loud, boisterous voice. “I am Samuel. Please, follow me and I will show you to your living quarters.” Helena and the others anxiously moved along with Samuel, bombarding him with all sorts of questions.

“It would seem your friends are happy knowing they still have a purpose and a life,” Kelly remarked. “Why can’t you, Joanna?” She moved a bit closer.

Joanna’s heart began to beat faster. Do I deserve such happiness? She slowly inched back away from Kelly.

“We all deserve a chance at happiness. Don’t deny yourself the pleasure of living by hiding in the past. I care deeply for you, Joanna, more than I have ever felt for anyone else.” With one swift movement, Kelly opened her arms and embraced Joanna.

“Yes, you’re right...I have to leave the past behind...and start again,” whispered Joanna.

Chapter 5

Josh remained distant from his fellow members. No conscious effort to blend in with the population of Elysium. Each day, he became more bitter and hateful towards Kelly. He spent countless hours alone inside his unit, brooding. His physical appearance deteriorated.

“Josh, you look horrible! You need to let go of your obsession with Joanna,” commented Darrin. Darrin listened attentively to Josh as he ranted and raved about how he had been deceived.

“You weren’t deceived, Josh. Joanna never promised you anything. Of course, I have to admit, she should of come clean from the first moment she knew you had a crush on her.” Darrin scratched at his head.

“What do you mean?” Josh’s eyes glazed over. His greasy, slick hair stuck to his sweating head.

“Josh, Joanna is into women, not men. You’re not her type. Understand?” Darrin laid his hand lightly upon his friend’s shoulder. Josh mumbled a few words then abruptly pulled away from him.

“What’s wrong with you, dude? You’ve stepped over the edge and you’re tumbling down into a black pit of hate. This isn’t healthy,” explained Darrin.

“Healthy? You speak of healthy? I’ve spent the last few years trying everything humanly possible to convince Joanna of my well intentions. But, no, she wants no part of me or my honest emotions. She’d rather be with a woman than me!” shouted Josh. Instantly, Darrin stepped back. Worried lines pulled across his face. Josh’s top lip curled. Suddenly, he grabbed the double edged knife from its holster hidden inside his boot.

“What do you think you’re doing, Josh?” Darrin flattened against the pulsating rocks. Josh held up the shining knife.

“Something I should have done a long time ago,” he hissed through gritted teeth.

“So, I take it Kelly is the one for Joanna,” snarled Josh. Darrin’s heart raced inside his ears.

“What difference does it make just...just put down the knife!” Darrin did not move.

“It’s Kelly, isn’t it?” he whispered in a harsh tone. Josh rolled the gleaming knife within his palm.

“Kelly, but...” And before Darrin could finish his sentence, Josh dashed out of the living unit. Darrin stood stunned for a moment. His swirling thoughts rushed to Joanna and Kelly. I’ve got to warn them. In the meantime, the two women had been cultivating the fields. It was indeed tiresome, but most rewarding.

“The people of Elysium depend on this delicate process of harvesting—an important food source.,” Kelly said. “I am very glad you took an interest in the land. It is critical that the vegetation is kept vitalized. Without it, we would surely perish.” Her face streaked with sweat and dirt. But Kelly’s loveliness never ceased to amaze Joanna. She smiled as Kelly spoke.

“Did you hear me, Joanna?” Her bright white smile was captivating. Joanna could feel the butterflies erupt, once again, inside her stomach. “Or are you thinking about something else?” teased Kelly. Joanna couldn’t hold back the emotions. She felt more alive in the last month living with Kelly, than she had in the last few years of her dreary life.

“There you are!” cried Darrin out of breath. The magic spell between the two women had been ruined.

“It’s Josh...he’s gone crazy...he knows.” The words tumbled from Darrin’s mouth.

“What in heaven’s name are you rambling, Darrin?” asked Joanna. As the two women focused on Darrin’s confusing story, no one noticed a body looming close behind.

“Aren’t you two the cozy couple?” spat Josh sarcastically. Instantly, Joanna turned to face him.

“What are you doing Josh?” Sweat lined his brow. His lips were drawn tight.

“Why, Josh Grady, it is good to see you out and about. Your life in Elysium can be pleasant if you—”

But Josh was not the least bit interested in Kelly’s candid conversation. “Shut up, Kelly! You’ve caused enough trouble!” But before either of them could protest to his obvious display of rudeness, he roughly wrenched Joanna by the hair and yanked her flailing body against him. The silver blade was cold upon her unprotected neck. His breathing quickened. His eyes wild with madness.

“How does it feel to have someone you desire torn from within your reach? Do you know how many years I longed for your attention; a bit of your time? Do you know how many years I waited patiently to bed with you? Do you?!” he screamed. His hand grew more rigid. The sharp knife lightly cut then pierced her soft skin.

“Aaagh!” cried Joanna in pain.

Josh snickered. His tongue deliberately dragged along the side of her face.

“Come on, Josh. None of this makes any sense. Let her go!” begged Darrin. Josh grunted. And dug the point deeper.

“No, wait! Josh, take me instead. I’m the one you hate. I’m the one who took Joanna away from you. It’s me, Josh, leave her alone.” Kelly nervously inched closer.

“Stay back! First, you’re going to see your love mate die before your eyes, and then you’ll join her for all eternity!” he laughed hysterically.

But it was within that brief moment of sureness that gave Joanna the chance she needed to break free. Surprise and training was on her side. The impact to his unprotected groin had been just enough for Josh to double over in misery. While he eagerly grasped his throbbing manhood, Kelly hurled a powerful roundhouse kick to his face, instantly breaking his nose. Joanna seized the opportunity and retrieved the deadly weapon.

“You just don’t get it, do you? I won’t give up until you’re both dead!” sputtered Josh. Bright red blood flowed freely from his swollen nose.

“You won’t get another chance, Josh Grady,” announced Kelly. “Protocols must be followed. Our peaceful society must remain intact for Elysium to survive.” Suddenly, two men grabbed hold of his arms.

“Where are you taking him?” asked Darrin. Josh’s struggle was futile. The taller of the two quickly jammed the hypodermic needle into his neck rendering him unconscious.

“Take him to the main building. See that he is restrained,” commanded Kelly.

“Should we flash his memory?” Kelly nodded slowly. She glanced at Joanna. Joanna’s eyes flew wide open by the reality of Kelly’s condemning words.

“We do not tolerate violence here in Elysium. We find no need for punishment; only strict adherence to protocol.” Kelly backed off as the two hefty men roughly dragged Josh away.

“What did you mean by ‘flash’ his memory?” mumbled Darrin. He watched his comrade disappear.

“We use a high-tech lazer to disintegrate pinpointed memory cells,” explained Kelly.

“Will he be all right?” asked Joanna. It was then she looked for some sign of mercy from Kelly.

“Please do not judge me; he chose his own destiny, Joanna.” Joanna felt confused by her sudden mixed feelings and her underlying relationship with Josh.

“Joanna, Josh crossed the line. Must I remind you he was about to slit your throat without giving it a second thought? And when he was finished with you, he would have taken my life and Darrin’s, too.” Kelly was taken aback by Joanna’s unwarranted coldness.

“So...if his memory is erased everything will be as it should, right?” questioned Darrin. He stared hard at Kelly. Kelly let out a huge sigh.

“Unfortunately, it’s not that simple Darrin. You see memory cells inner lock with one another. When you destroy one cell, it doesn’t mean the same thought could not exist somewhere else within the brain. Our minds are more complex than we could ever imagine. I’m sorry.”

Joanna closed her weary eyes. A few sad tears inched their way down her rosy cheeks. “I don’t understand what happened to him, Kelly. Josh was always hard headed, but he wasn’t crazy!” Joanna silently begged Kelly for answers.

“Can you help him?” whispered Joanna. Darrin put his arm around her sagging shoulders.

“I’m not sure. I cannot explain in good conscious what happened to your friend.” Kelly took a step toward Joanna.

“Can I go check up on Josh?” asked Darrin. Kelly nodded. Within seconds Darrin was on his way to the main building. Kelly drew Joanna in close, and embraced her with loving arms.

“Do any of us down here really have a future?” questioned Joanna. She snuggled against Kelly’s warm

embrace.

“I guess it depends on your definition of the word ‘future.’ I have tried very hard to live one day at a time, and I hope you will do the same, too, Joanna. Please do not waste time wondering what our world will be like in years from now. No one knows how long our energy source will last. We can only speculate.” Suddenly, Joanna lifted her head to meet Kelly’s soft and inviting lips.

#

It had been almost a year since the vicious attack by Josh. Since then, Joanna and Kelly shared their waking hours together entwined with purpose. And evenings were savored consumed with selfless adoration for one another.

“I realize now how hard it must have been for you,” said Joanna. She lightly touched Kelly’s cheek. She loved this woman more than life itself.

“I’m assuming you’re referring to Josh?” asked Kelly. Her fingers lingered along Joanna’s naked leg.

“Yes,” she whispered. Joanna laid her head against Kelly’s chest. She could hear the beat of Kelly’s heart.

“It is quite difficult to accept the reality of what happened to the world we once knew, Joanna—the people we had grown to love and the ultimate freedoms we took for granted. We cannot make those same devastating mistakes within the sanctity of Elysium. We were given a second chance.” Kelly grinned and gazed lovingly at Joanna. Kelly, indeed, spoke the truth, and Joanna knew it to be true in her heart. And so together, they welcomed and embraced the unknown future that laid waiting amidst a new and adventurous world.

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