

The Unraveling

VOLUME ONE
OF THE
Erotopian Chronicles

[EXCERPT]

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E a r t h t o E r o t o p i a

*“Sex on Erotopia is the cornerstone
of civic and spiritual engagement. Its
priestly class doesn’t seek to save souls.
It celebrates the arts of pleasure.”*

—Ulrich Von Zeitler,
*First Report to the Senate
Select Sub-Committee on
Intergalactic Affairs (2049)*

-VALA-

THE LANDING SPIDER ROTATED IN SLOW CIRCLES as it floated downward. With a rising sense of disbelief, Vala Cortes stared out of her porthole and took it all in. The thick northern forests rising into the high mountains with their craggy snowless peaks. The western prairies rich with crops and spotted by picturesque hamlets. Another quarter-turn, and through her porthole a vast eggplant-shaped body of water came spilling out from a narrow band—the Midriff Ocean, which girdled the planet at its equator and separated it into two roughly equal halves, Civside and the Wild.

She knew something, not much, about the planet's geography. Von Zeitler had briefed them before they left. He'd told them how places on Erotopia were named for body parts and soul parts, external geography pinned to interior experience. The two land bridges a dozen miles apart that joined the northern and southern land masses were called the Suspenders. The largely landlocked body of water between them was the Bay of Sighs. The watercourse flowing into it after tracing a serpentine course through the southern valleys, down from its source high up in the Shadow Mountains—the River of Forgetting. As she gazed down at the approaching planet, she wondered what the view had looked like before the massive engineering project that had transformed a necklace of lakes into the Midriff Ocean and separated what had been a conjoined land mass into two mostly separate continents.

The scrolling data readout had them down to seven thousand feet now. She looked back out the porthole, and the planet's

capital city and only true metropolis came rising up to meet her. Kailara, ‘our beating heart’ in Erotopian, a sprawling cheery jumble of brightly-hued low-rise buildings, fields, meadows, trees and lakes, all luminous in the unpolluted air. There, to the north, was the Temple of the Divine Nectar, a magnificent Taj Mahal-like double-domed structure. Below it, at the city’s geographical center, was the generous green space of Mosshard Garden, a bucolic gathering of meadows, gardens, and copses of thick trees.

Vala experienced an odd awareness: Her spirit was leaving her body. She felt waft-y, drift-y, lighter. She knew it wasn’t actually happening; she’d turned a sensation into a story. In truth, her spirit was about to come alive, not bail out on her—she was probably just releasing some of the anxiety that had been building up for months and now was boiling over. She couldn’t help but wonder, though: Was this how people felt when they were dying?

She stole a peek at her travel mates, whose faces were glued to the other two portholes. Jahangir, the expedition’s leader, was looking relatively chill. Her boyfriend Darius kept saying, “I can’t fucking believe this is happening, I can’t fucking believe this is happening.”

After the fourth repetition, Vala thought, *I can’t fucking believe you keep saying that*. She gritted her teeth and looked back out the window. They were no more than a thousand feet up now, and descending too fast for her liking. “Are you guys scared?” she asked into the porthole.

“Not I,” Jahangir replied from behind her. “My butterflies are flying in formation.”

“Hell, no,” said Darius. “I’m a warrior.”

Of course the guys wouldn’t cop to being afraid. So here she was, on her own again. The closer their module came to touching down, the harder her heart banged up against her rib cage. Why had she said yes to this? Back on Earth, she’d rarely traveled beyond her home turf, and now she was about to settle down on a planet in a distant galaxy that everyone else called Erotopia, but she’d dubbed Fuck-o-Rama. A culture based on sex and pleasure—how would

that play out? Things were sex-crazed on Earth too, of course, but people there tended to sweep it under the carpet, into the alleys, under the sheets of dark bedrooms. They didn't rub it in your face, and that was good; a person could get on with their life. Here they did it in the road. Literally, if von Zeitler was to be believed. *Jesus*.

For the millionth time, she wondered if she was overreaching. If there was one thing she was certain about, it was that she was living inside a chrysalis; it was her life's mission to bust free. But Fuck-o-Rama, with everybody watching? Not likely for a woman who specialized in shadows. She was screwed, and not in a good way.

Flags were coming into view, flags everywhere, dotting the fields and boulevards and roofs in a rainbow of bright colors. But no, she caught herself: They weren't flags, they were pennants. *Banderines*, not *banderas*. Flags were a call to team and tribe—they were martial and unitary. Pennants were diverse and festive. You marched under a flag—you partied among pennants.

The landing zone was circular, two dozen yards across, and surrounded by a meadow of blue-green turf that stretched into the distance on all sides but one, where it was bounded by a short ceremonial wall and, just beyond it, a densely vegetated area.

Three people, two pale women and a dark-skinned man, were staring up at the descending craft. One of them, the blonde, offered a small wave. Vala's heart went *ka-thunk*. But then she realized: This wasn't first contact. It was the Earthling Bree Tavendish.

The spider hit its mark dead center, pulled there by Erotopian technology that had Earth scientists totally baffled. The landing mat was rubbery and trampolined them into a soft landing. Bounces became shimmies became trembles, and finally stillness. Vala un-buckled herself, stood up, and shook herself clear of nervousness as best she could. Jahangir released the door lock and the thick portal swung open. She was the second person out, two steps behind Jahangir and immediately ahead of Darius, who kept pressing up against her from behind. Her knees went wobbly as she stepped off the clanking metal ramp. She looked back to Darius for support,

but his attention was elsewhere, on the vast excitement of their new adventure, on anything and everything but her. She returned her gaze forward. *Maybe Jahangir*—he seemed to sense what she wanted because he reached behind him without looking back and took her hand at exactly the same moment she reached out for his.

The newcomers lined up across from their welcome party. Bree was wearing an elegant ankle-length forest-green dress with cut-outs at the breast and crotch. Vala tried not to stare at the Earthling's vulva, which was thatched with straw-colored fur.

The two groups contemplated each other in silence. Then Darius leaned in toward Jahangir. Vala promptly mimicked the gesture from the other side—she wanted to know what he'd say. She immediately regretted the move. For one thing, it was none of her business, and for another, the two extraterrestrial members of the welcoming committee, those two sex-crazed Fuck-o-Ramans, were contemplating her with bland undecipherable expressions that she found utterly terrifying. She couldn't begin to decipher what they were thinking, or what plots and plans they might be cooking up. And now the first thing they were seeing was her breaking a rule, transgressing a boundary, eavesdropping on a private conversation. Thirty seconds in, and she was already fucking up. *Dios*, she could be stupid!

But the die had been cast, the crime committed. She'd heard what Darius had whispered to Jahangir. "Sweet Jesus, fuck me. Damn, this is gonna be good!"

Bree stepped forward. "Jahangir? You, of all people? We picked up your ship's signal a while back, but I never dreamed you'd be on it. What brings you here?"

"I applied and the Committee chose me," he answered with a smile and shrug. "They wanted an entrepreneur. They've given me a provisional license to explore the commercial opportunities."

"That had to be a compromise solution."

"That's right. The left wanted full diplomatic relations, the right wanted to invade. I was the man in the middle."

“You come in peace though, right?” she said carefully, as if to correct a possible misunderstanding.

His gaze flitted toward the Erotopians standing expressionless behind her, then back. “I come in peace and love,” he answered smiling.

“Yes,” she said, “I’m sure you do. What are they saying about me? There’s no communicating through a wormhole—I’m on the silent end of a news embargo.”

“You’re globally notorious. Some people want to try you for treason. Others want to”—he looked down modestly—“well, you know.”

“Fuck me?”

Jahangir’s eyebrows rose a tiny bit. “That’s right.”

“I’m not surprised,” she said, then added with a twinkle, “Which side are you on?”

Jahangir hesitated and said, “Neither. You’re a person. You’re my friend.”

Bree’s amused expression suggested that she knew the real answer and was fine with it.

“The *Post* has taken to calling you ‘the Ex-Patriot,’” Jahangir said.

Bree shook her head. “Jesus, Earthlings. So happiness is treasonous now?”

“It’s out of fashion, at a minimum. You’re one of the reasons I was chosen. They thought I might be able to talk some sense into you.”

“Good luck with that. But I sure am glad to see you.”

Sharing a smile, they fell silent.

Vala decided not to rule out their having slept together. Jahangir had quite a reputation, and Bree was the sort of woman, attractive and accomplished, who’d attract his interest. They plainly had a good connection.

A butterfly was circling around Vala, the biggest butterfly she’d ever seen. It was a good six inches across, and its wings were irides-

cent, scarlet, gold and indigo. It seemed somehow intelligent, almost like it was checking her out, wondering if this strange creature merited alighting on.

A new wave of panic swept over Vala. Why couldn't she be like that butterfly? (Which appeared to have decided against her and was fluttering away.) She imagined how the scene looked from above, the clean and elegant geometry of it—the three Earthlings here, the two Erotopians there, and Bree in her right place in between.

“We’re wearing our translation implants,” Jahangir said. “Your people, too?”

Bree nodded. “We can do better than that, though. We’ll chip you with Erotopian technology, which translates perfectly across all languages. You’ll be able to talk with anyone. For now, though, this will work.”

Introductions followed. Jahangir cleared his throat and said. “Hello, I’m Jahangir Persad.” He gestured to his left. “This is Valentina Cortes, Vala for short.”

Her heart bungeed into the basement at the sound of her name and then settled back in its usual place, pounding even harder.

Jahangir swiveled to his right. “And this is Darius di Selva.”

Her guy hammed it up as she’d thought he would, dipping his knee in a theatrical half-bow. “At your service,” he said, and laid his biggest and most dazzling smile on them. His red-carpet smile, Vala called it. It was weaponized—it bowled people over. She remembered the first time she’d seen it. She’d been dancing at the Limelight Club; it had knocked her for a loop. And now here she was, holding hands with Jahangir, and it was starting to feel awkward, disloyal at a minimum and on the edge of cheating. She wondered what the Erotopians were making of the odd imbalance—two of the Earthlings holding hands, and the third one completely on his own. For all she knew, they were reading a wildly false meaning into it. About status, maybe, or exclusion. There was simply no way she could know. There wasn’t merely a culture gap between Earthlings and Erotopians—the abyss was galactic. Just that morning, barely

an hour before they'd clambered into their landing module, Jahangir had showed her a checklist of possible problems he'd developed. His "Fuck-Up Manual," he'd called it. She'd noticed the second listing first because it was plainly about her: *Gratuitous Attacks of Modesty*. And then, immediately above it, Jahangir had written, *Cultural Confusion: We Say 'Tomato,' They Say 'Asparagus.'*

Bree was introducing the two Erotopians. "The High Priestess Kri'Zhalee," she said formally. "And the High Priest Kri'Bondai."

They looked to be in their mid-thirties. With her olive complexion, high cheekbones and full lips, Kri'Zhalee had the dramatic good looks of a Mediterranean beauty. Kri'Bondai was tall, broad-shouldered and square-jawed, with ebony skin and a penetrating gaze. Their bodies were draped in what Vala at first took to be thick silver-gray cloaks, but then she looked again and wasn't so sure. The material was shimmering and swirling—it seemed to be almost alive. And then she realized: It *was* alive. Kri'Bondai and Kri'Zhalee weren't wearing clothes; they were draped in their own energy.

Their cloaks shifted into higher gear. The swirling became more energetic, more animated, more erratic too. Their coverings dropped away to reveal, in the briefest of now-you-see-it-now-you-don't spotlights, different naked body parts.

Kri'Bondai's broad chest and six-pack abdomen.

Kri'Zhalee's firm and sizable breasts.

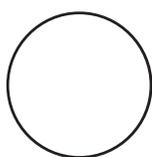
Her black-haired bush, which seemed to be enveloped in a low fog, her sex so rich and fecund that it was exuding an aerosol mist. (But Vala had to be imagining this.)

His large-side-of-average phallus, erect and pulsing directly at her. (And there could be no imagining here.)

And then the display was over. The cloaks calmed down and clammed up, leaving the High Priest and High Priestess draped from the neck down in shimmering silver-gray once again.

"I say, *goddamn*," Darius stage-whispered to Jahangir.

- DARIUS -



ONE OF THE GREAT DELIGHTS of Darius di Selva's life was seeing a beautiful woman naked for the first time. During his adult years, this blessed event had happened with bracing frequency. Women went for him—he had looks and charm, and persistence. He'd recorded his conquests while in college and in his junior year had stopped counting at one hundred—it had seemed like a benchmark of sorts. Since his graduation, his throughput had slowed, but the total had kept rising.

Kri'Zhalee's body rivalled any that he'd ever seen. That, plus her face and hair, put her in a category Darius called "museum quality," the Everest of a rating system he'd developed deep into a night of serious drinking with some fellow lacrosse jocks. Her bush was especially remarkable. It seemed almost alive, like a small vital animal breathing.

He wondered if he'd have sex with her. He hoped so, and figured the chances were good. Erotopians were conspicuously promiscuous; as a sexual High Priestess, Kri'Zhalee would, if anything, top the charts here, too. He recalled a quip of Jahangir's that he'd shared with them en route. "We're like the explorers who crossed the Atlantic on the Mayflower. Only they were the Puritans, and we're the Impuritans." The two men had laughed; Vala had gotten indignant. "I'm not impure," she'd protested. "I'm a goddess." Of course she'd go there; the poor woman had been schooled by nuns. A part of her still believed the ideal woman was a virgin.

The sight of Kri'Zhalee's body was still lighting up his brain.

That extraordinary pussy, like a humid land in a misting cloud-forest! Everything about her was intimidating. How would he ever find the nerve to hit on her? According to Von Zeitler, they had alcohol here. Probably not tequila (back home, margaritas were the ticket), but liquor was liquor—he'd find something that would do.

-KRI'ZHALEE-

↑ HERE WAS SOMETHING OFF about the Earthlings' auras. They were shrouded and heavy, also fragile and tremulous. There was sleepwalking in them, and cloudiness, and grieving too.

Over the course of their long history, Erotopians had been visited nine hundred and seventy-six times by beings from other planets. They'd welcomed blobs of gelatinous protoplasm, stick-like creatures three times their height and one-tenth their weight, beings that were walking, talking sex organs. They'd encountered species without bodies that were pure energy. Every one of these visitors had raised for Erotopians the same threshold question. Should they or should they not grant them entry? The three new Earthlings had made it through the initial test, but now that the High Priestess was experiencing their *l'shavas* in person, doubts had arisen again. There was way too much confusion here—and confusion, when habitual, tended to normalize lashing out. It metastasized into violence, and violence was a virus. It could propagate.

Their l'shavas are worrisome, the High Priest mind-messaged her.

His words came through with bell-like clarity. *Are they hiding something, do you think?* she responded, using the same modality.

From themselves, maybe.

Might they be Hagorrhs? Shall we verify again? A heartgasm?

His “yes” rang inside her like a gong. They began immediately, in intuitive harmony, pulling into their heart centers alpine energy from above and equatorial energy from below. When they had the two pleasures joined together—purity and passion, witness and wetness—and the ball was spinning and golden, they propelled it toward the Earthlings in a blazing flare of love.

Their heartgasms hit home. The Earthlings' *l'shavas* softened and flashed yellow light. A nervous system explosion shivered Darius's

shoulders, coursed through his torso and wobbled his knees. Vala went rocketing up the arousal ladder to a shallow six. Jahangir's Inner Temple opened wide and snapped shut. His response was so intense that Kri'Zhalee worried for a moment that she and Kri'Bondai had overdone it—the Earthling was clinging to his breath like a man on the edge of drowning. But then he managed a deep inhale and his breath became normal again.

The High Priestess observed with a sense of relief. He was okay, and the Earthlings could love.

In a single voice, the two sex wizards said, "On behalf of the Nine, we greet you."

-vala-

A GUST OF SOMETHING HOT, like a desert wind, blew over Vala. It had come from the High Priest and Priestess—yes, definitely from them. She felt a wild stirring in her body. She felt it where she had sex, and she felt it in her belly, just above and behind her navel, and she felt it most of all in her nipples, which had gone all erect and tingly and were straining at the lace of her bra.

Little quivering antennae—that’s what they were, she decided. Scouts, sniffing out their new environs. Her anxiety started to evaporate, and the beginnings of a smile teased life into her lips.

She imagined her nipples sniffing the air, noting its musky, perfumed quality.

Her attention went to her hand, which was cocooned inside Jahangir’s. She let her hand go soft, a small experiment. Jahangir noticed and wrapped it up tighter.

She liked this man, how he paid attention.

She wished she could tell him about her nipples.

She wanted to be touching someone—she wanted someone to be touching her. Her crotch felt stirred up and swollen. Back home, her body didn’t work that way. There, if she found someone attractive, her heart expanded early and her spirit along with it, but her genitals didn’t get involved until she and her new man had gotten horizontal and stayed that way awhile. And now here she was, barely landed on Fuck-o-Rama, and her body was already raring for action—and weirder and more disturbing still, she seemed unable to banish Kri’Bondai’s sleek and muscled body from her misbehaving mind. She’d only seen it for a moment, but what she’d seen had

sunk in deep. His dark chocolate skin, his sculpted form, his erect and elegant phallus. This last bit was especially jarring. She kept trying to shoo away the image—sought intervention from the Holy Mother, even. Nothing helped. Still Life with Cock had a will of its own. It resisted—it persisted.

Why? And then, in a flash, she had it. It had to be Lola's doing, Lola her alter ego whom she'd first discovered when she started dancing at the Limelight Club. Unlike Vala, who was more shy than not, Lola was an exhibitionist. She loved to tease guys—it thrilled her to display her body. She got turned on by the look they got in their eyes that told her their everyday reality had fallen away—they were in a new realm now, and all they saw was ... *her*. When that happened, she wasn't a piece of meat in a strip club any longer. She was a dream come true, perfection made flesh.

Vala was a mortal woman—Lola was a goddess. She was shameless, and she was wanton. And now it was Lola who was saying, *Damn, that man is gorgeous!* Yes, Vala decided, that had to be the explanation. In a backwater of her psyche, Lola was yawning, stretching, saying hello. She was thrilled to be on Erotopia and staking out her right to be sexual. Preparing to claim dominion, even.

The High Priest was gazing at Vala as inscrutably as before. Fearfully, she hazarded a closer look at his face but made no progress—she couldn't begin to fathom what he was thinking. She asked herself: Could a High Priest mind-read? The notion seized her with panic. What if he was reading her mind right now? What if he knew that she, Vala—or, rather, Lola—was fantasizing about him like a sex-starved obsessive? She kept seeing his body, his hard penis. If he could see into her, if he could *actually* see into her, might Goddess strike her dead right there.

The High Priest's energy cloak sparked red light and spread open like a curtain. There, again, was that muscled body—and there *it* was again, his phallus in the actual flesh, in its standard upright position. Moments later the gates closed over again—modesty was restored unto the land. Vala breathed a sigh of relief because the

sight of his body was gone, and also because the strange compulsion that had caused her to fixate on his body seemed to have vanished as well. Lola had taken mercy and backed off—Vala’s mind was free to roam again.

A wild possibility occurred to her. Maybe the High Priest *had* read her mind—and maybe, even more incredibly, it hadn’t been a bad thing. Maybe that reveal had been his gift to her. A naked message, you might say. *Thoughts and dreams never need to be hidden.* Maybe that was what he’d been telling her, this High Priest, this teacher. *Honor what is. Don’t empower shame.*

Her eyes came up to meet Kri’Bondai’s. Unblinking, he looked back. *Dios*, he was hard to read! But he seemed to be smiling now, and friendlier.

- JAHANGIR -

MEANWHILE JAHANGIR HAD GONE PALE. Until now, Erotopia had been strictly notional for him, a frothy brain concoction. Now that chapter had ended. This place wasn't an idea; it was reality. He could fall in love here—he could die. Nor was this the only reason he felt daunted. Forty years earlier, his parents had migrated from Jaipur to San Jose to start a new life. That had been their grand adventure. His was a hundred times more ambitious—a trip to another planet, not another country, with the eyes of all Earth on him. And to top it off, just now, there'd been the unexpected and unsettling unlocking of his sex vault. Jahangir loved sex; it was one of the reasons he'd come here. But what he'd just experienced, although it had lasted only a moment, had been positively alarming. Pleasure that intense could drive a man insane—it could consume him, strip him of his humanity. In the flames beyond the shadows, he'd sensed monsters.

Bree came up close and gazed into his eyes. "Are you okay?"

This close in, this tender, she felt more familiar now—an Earthling, not an Erotopian.

"It's just ... is this really happening?"

She leaned forward and kissed him on the lips, so lightly that his nape hairs stirred. "My dear, dear man," she said. "It is." She took his hand and brought it to her naked breast. "You are welcome here. Truly welcome. Can you feel it?"

He gave a tiny head-shake no. *All these doubts inside my head.*

"When I came here, I came home," Bree Tavendish said. "You're home now, Jahangir Persad." She placed her hand on his and pressed

down. He felt the soft flesh and hard nipple in the palm of his hand, and began to relax. If this was home, he'd take it.

He was feeling aroused. He knew full well that Bree had offered him the mother-breast, not the sex-play version, but a soft lovely tit was a soft lovely tit, and he'd been wanting Bree for some time now. On Earth, their relationship had been strictly collegial. He was an investor in a natural-language translation company, she a key employee, and neither had felt inclined to sponge away those boundaries. Jahangir had noticed her looks—of course he had, an attractive person was one of life's delights, right up there with the satiny sheen of his bespoke suits and the creamy lattes he liked to brew up on his six-thousand-dollar Marzacco. Tall, with broad shoulders and a fit, athletic frame, Bree had an oval-shaped face, cornflower-blue eyes and thick, long flaxen hair that she liked to wear plaited in an elegant French braid. She hadn't lit his erotic fire, though—her looks spoke more to him of health than sex. They'd socialized twice after meetings, just the two of them sipping drinks together in a quiet, dimly-lit hotel bar, and he hadn't thought to hit on her.

He hadn't been surprised when she was selected for the maiden voyage to Erotopia. A communications expert was required, and no one was better versed than Bree in the translation system they'd be using. It had been the subject of her doctoral dissertation (*Like Esperanto on Espresso: The Social and Cultural Implications of a Universal Translation System*), and she'd helped write the software, too. He hadn't expected her not to return to Earth, though. Nor had he anticipated the enormous fuss her staying behind would cause. For close to a week, the entire global population had bubbled over with speculation. Had she been abducted by aliens? Shut down by a virus? Fucked to an Erotopian frazzle? Then the authorities had ended all the conjecture by releasing a letter von Zeitler had brought home with him. In it, Bree had declared her love of sex, her love of a man (an Erotopian man), her love of her new country—and her intention to stay. Her love affair with Wyldermon, she wrote, was one for the ages, the most romantic connection ever. Never before

had Erotopians been visited by a humanoid species with whom sex was anatomically possible. In their two bodies, the two species had found each other at last, Erotopians and Earthlings, cosmic twins joined from far apart.

In her letter, she described a bout of wild lovemaking with him and three of his male friends that had produced something she called megagasms. “Goodbye, Mum,” she’d written. Her final words. “I’ll miss you.”

What had come to be known as the Tavendish Manifesto was received with guffaws by some, envy by others, and much self-righteous outrage from the right. If one were to take all their huffing and puffing at face value, she was a deserter, a traitor—and, of course, a slut.

Jahangir had responded more positively. The letter had sparked his sexual interest and transported Bree across the invisible line that separates platonic friends from prospective bedmates. More than six months had passed since then, six months with him feeling a buzz of desire every time he thought of her, and now here they were together, here on Erotopia, and she was smiling at him guilelessly, and his hand fit perfectly on her breast.

“We don’t do reassurance like this back home,” Jahangir said.

“You barely do reassurance at all back home,” she answered drily.

“And here, you do it all the time?”

“We do whatever it takes,” she said. “The animal body cures damn near everything.”

“I like how your animal body feels.”

“I like how it feels, too.” She smiled back.

They stood unmoving for a time. He was lost inside the bubble of the two of them and only dimly aware of the others with him. He wondered what it would be like to have sex with Bree. Fun and athletic, probably. There’d be lots of easy laughter and affection. Rewarding too, if those megagasms she’d referred to were real.

A vast sense of relief washed over him. Back home, his selection by the Committee had made him an overnight celebrity. Not one

single thing about this had pleased him, and he'd been especially unhappy about the scrutiny his love life had drawn. He had two primary polyamorous partners, Jonah and Marie. Their non-exclusive arrangement produced a steady stream of lovers passing through his door and a lesser number through theirs. He was totally comfortable with his lifestyle, but he hated, he absolutely *hated*, how he'd become tabloid fodder. A week before they'd left, *The Rag* had published a picture of him dining with a prominent Silicon Valley executive who'd shared his bed later that night. The attention felt obscene. Fame was like a jail to him. Here, his celebrity status was a full galaxy away. Here, he could be ordinary. Here, he could be free.

"Your provisional license," Bree said. "What will make it permanent?"

"Business opportunities that are likely to, quote, 'generate significant revenue without having a significantly adverse impact on Earth morals.'"

"And the opportunities they have in mind?"

"The Committee's public talk was about minerals, spices and such, but I'm pretty sure they've got their eye on tourism. Sex tourism. The Committee can't officially sanction that sort of thing, of course—they can't be publicly endorsing sin, but it makes sense, right? Erotopia may or may not have minerals and spices, but it definitely has women. Beautiful, exotic, sex-loving women. Guys go on sex tours to Thailand although sex workers are horribly exploited there. What would they pay to have sex with genuinely happy women who would tear down porn's fourth wall and give them, up close and personal, the perfect sex of their dreams?"

"Women will want it, too," Bree mused.

"If it feels right, they will," he agreed. "We've legalized gambling—we've legalized marijuana—the time has come for sex, it seems."

Bree nodded thoughtfully. "Erotopia would be the perfect way to do it. You're making money, and you're keeping all that immorality off-planet. Hell, you're keeping it off-galaxy!" But then a confused look crossed her face. "I get why the Committee would want an

entrepreneur. I also get why they'd choose you. But Jahangir Persad, sex tycoon? I'm not seeing that."

"You're right, I don't want to run a sex tourism business. Or even launch one, for that matter."

"Then why did you apply?"

"I had a brain bomb." She looked at him puzzled, and he elaborated. "Four times in my life, I've had a really big idea—I call them brain bombs. Each of the first three launched a business; together they made me a wealthy man. When this one arrived, I had to pay attention."

"And the brain bomb was?"

"Reality programming. *X-rated* reality programming."

Bree's eyes widened. "Here. On Erotopia."

"That's right. Just imagine the demand—Earthlings having sex with hot extraterrestrials!"

She nodded thoughtfully. "You're right, it could be huge." She hesitated. "But I thought you were here to explore commercial opportunities, not launch one."

"I sold it as an add-on. I seized the moment."

"And the Committee approved? They're not exactly sex-positive."

"I had a memory lapse. When I pitched the reality show to them, I somehow forgot to mention its X-rating."

"Quite an oversight, that," Bree said, laughing. "What will you do, spring it on them when you get home?"

Jahangir nodded. "I'm thinking two versions, one for the kiddies and one for the grown-ups. Strange things have been known to happen back on Earth. The X-rated material may be stolen and distributed against my will."

"And you'll just happen to have a bank account on the Cayman Islands." Jahangir didn't speak—instead, he blinked loudly. "You criminal mastermind, you."

"Deals with the devil, darling." Jahangir shrugged. "Deals with the devil."

“X-rated reality entertainment,” Bree mused. Her gaze fell on Darius and Vala. “That explains these lovelies, I presume?”

Jahangir nodded and turned to face his companions, who were standing alongside each other a few steps behind him. Darius’s arm was around Vala, and he was whispering in her ear. His heart skipped again at the sight of them. His surprise surprised him—he kept being waylaid by how beautiful they were.

Vala heard Darius out, then tilted her face upward for a kiss.

“Scene One of *The Erotopian Chronicles*—‘*The Lovers Arrive*,” Darius announced when their kiss was done. “How was it?”

“Great,” Jahangir answered. But he didn’t mean it. He needed them to be lovebirds—this had looked chaste and tentative, like a kiss between strangers. And now, to make matters worse, Darius was looking a trifle unsettled, and Vala seemed terribly forlorn, as if her exchange with Darius had confirmed a terminally sad intuition she had about her prospects for happiness in this short life. Still, it was ungodly how good the two of them looked, how beautiful and sexy. Not too far into the future, if he played his cards right, their names would be in lights on the virtual marquee—their sweaty, undulating bodies on display to the world—their sparkling, ecstatic eyes lighting the way for billions of rapt and turned-on followers.

“You looked so beautiful, doing that,” Jahangir said. “I’d love to see you kiss again. This time, though, please bear in mind this grand, romantic adventure that you’re on. And better yet, you’re getting to share it together!”

“Ah,” she said, and her voice had an edge, “our famous fresh start.”

“I think I get it,” said Darius, nodding. “You mean, like, put some tongue in it?”

- JAHANGIR -

A MAN AND A WOMAN JOINED THEM, arriving via the arched opening in the ceremonial wall. On Earth, he might have passed for Tibetan; he had straight dark hair that fell down to his hips. He was naked above the waist—his nickel-gray trousers contrasted sharply with the terra-cotta tone of his skin. She was slender with close-cropped orange hair, green-and-gold tattoo sleeves, and expressive sea-green eyes. Her peek-a-boo dress was a scarlet twin of Bree’s green one. Hugs all around among the welcoming committee, concluded by a prolonged and tender kiss between the man and Bree.

“This,” she announced when they were done, “is Wyldermon. He’s a Wild guide, a Wild guard and my Best Beloved, the reason I am here.”

“A Wild guard?” Vala quavered. “Why is guarding necessary?”

“Hagorrhs,” Bree answered. “Renegade tribes still live in the Wild. Some of them badly want in.”

“What’s a Hagorrh?”

“They’re us with a will to Power Over, us with a will to dominate regardless of consent.”

A chill ran through Vala. Here was another fine fantasy gone. And to think that she’d thought she’d be safe.

Minutes earlier, the three eronauts had been outfitted with translation chips—the process had been no more painful than a pinprick. Jahangir had no trouble understanding Wyldermon, who bowed low upon being introduced and said, “May He be with you in His pleasure and His power.”

He brought his hands to his pelvis and flicked them outward toward the new arrivals. It was, Jahangir realized with a start, the motion one makes when sowing seed.

“And this,” Bree continued, “is Cymanthea. She’s a second-degree Celebrant.”

“A what?” Jahangir asked.

“A Celebrant. She’s well along on the Priestess path.”

The woman stepped forward. “Welcome.” She cupped her small exposed breasts and raised them in greeting. “May She be with you in Her pleasure and Her power.”

Jahangir took the hint and sowed seed back at them, a gesture that was mimicked moments later by Darius and Vala, boldly by him and nervously by her.

“Wyldermon and Cymanthea,” Bree said, “are here to help us with your Welcome Waterings.”

“Our what?” Jahangir asked.

“It’s a welcome ritual,” Bree explained. “Things are very different here; we need to help you adjust. There’s culture shock—and it’s not just that. Like, there’s the air.”

“Yes, the air!” Jahangir echoed. He treated himself to a deep inhale. The scent was ambrosial and intoxicating, humming in the air and in his body. “It’s amazing,” he said. “It makes me want to fly. It makes me believe I *can* fly.”

“It’s what happens when millions of people, for hundreds of generations, have led rich and fulfilled lives,” Bree said. “It’s the scent of no suffering. The scent of human happiness. You’d have the same air on Earth if you’d made wiser choices.”

“Emotional air pollution,” Jahangir said. “I hadn’t realized.”

“That,” Bree said. “And no petroleum. And no heavy industry.”

“This is heaven, life before the Fall. That’s what you’re saying, right?” Jahangir inquired.

Bree disputed his assertion with a firm shake of her head. “That’s what I thought too, at first. But then I came to realize that Erotopia isn’t heaven, not as conventionally understood. Heavens

are steady-state, and Erotopia isn't. We're not under the illusion that we've 'arrived'—we're always seeking to become wiser. Heavens are safe—there's no negativity there. Here on Erotopia, we have Hagorrhs. And the shadows that live inside us, too." She paused and then added, "Don't misunderstand—these negatives are good. Heavens choke on their own goodness; they can't survive their perfection. It's the grit that makes the pearl."

Darius said. "I thought this was sex camp. That sure sounds like heaven to me."

"Ah," Bree said, "but we're not just happy boinking bunnies here. The sex is part of a larger scheme. It's one of the main ways we express our commitment to pleasure and our commitment to celebration. We're not a sex culture; we're a wisdom culture."

Kri'Zhalee stepped forward and addressed the Earthlings with ritual formality. "Visitors: Do you consent to join us for your Welcome Waterings? Anything you do will be within your boundaries of pleasure, comfort and safety."

Jahangir nodded yes.

Vala swallowed hard and spoke her first words since arriving. "Will it involve sex?"

"If you'd like."

A long pause followed. Then she nodded.

"Darius?"

"Duh," he said and looked anxiously at Vala.

A small battalion of butterflies escorted them to the wall, which was covered with deftly painted murals portraying people having sex, *lots* of people having sex, in positions ranging from the missionary-mundane to the miraculously acrobatic. Twosomes, threesomes and moresomes in bright hues, all turned with a fine artistic hand. One tableau in particular caught Jahangir's attention. A man was on his knees fellating a second man, this one standing, whose face was buried in a woman's crotch. Her thighs were scissored around his neck, and her back and neck were arched in ecstasy. They were circled by a ring of children who were holding hands and danc-

ing. Jahangir felt a clutching in his gut. Weren't we supposed to be protecting kids from the sights and sounds of erotic high jinx, not inviting them to gather round the sexpole?

The archway was ornamented with bas reliefs of vulvar decorations—painted fluting lips along each edge and, at the apex, a sculpted oversized clitoris. Jahangir smiled at the sight of it—Vala grabbed his hand anew and put it in a death grip. They passed through the gate and arrived at a sea of vegetation that stretched out toward the horizon on both sides and rose up dozens of feet above them. Bright flowers—purple, teal, coral—winked at them through the foliage. Three narrow footpaths made their way left, right and center through the shrubbery.

A light breeze had come up, fluttering the leaves and tickling Jahangir's cheeks like a feather-soft brush. "Bree, you go with Jahangir," Kri'Zhalee instructed. "Wyldermon and Kri'Bondai, you take Vala."

The High Priest nodded, took Vala's hand and led her to the leftmost path. Kri'Zhalee and Cymanthea bracketed Darius and guided him to the path on the right.

"Thank you, Jahangir!" Darius called out as he headed into the greenery. "I'm a prisoner of love!"

"More like a prisoner of lust," Jahangir said quietly to Bree.

"Aren't we all?" she responded, and led him into the jungle.