

Earths in Space

Vol 2

We Must Evolve

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A work-in-progress excerpt.

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TEASER

The vice president destroyed civilization, but he didn't mean to. He simply neglected to seal his containment suit properly. Oh, and the whole initiative kind of was his idea in the first place.

Zanna Fuentes was his deputy press secretary, but now she had a new job—ambassador to the next Earth.

She stared at the vessel that would bring her there, along with nearly five-hundred other survivors. It sat in the basement of the Department of Scientific Advancement, where a bunch of paranoids had constructed it in secret a decade earlier. The body was an obese cylinder capped by hemispheres on both ends. The technicians looked like specks against the grainy yellow hull.

That thing was going to be her home for many thousands of years. It was her future, her entire civilization's future.

A military official joined her on the observation deck, his hands clasped behind his back and his posture too perfect. "How are you holding up?"

"No symptoms yet," Zanna said.

"I meant otherwise...with all the loss."

Zanna watched the distant technicians conduct their final safety inspections. She

hoped they didn't mess anything up.

"I'm just trying to focus on the future," she said. "What else can I do? If I—no, we're going to have a new life on a new Earth. That's all."

Would that Earth be advanced enough? They had no way of knowing. At least it had plenty of time to catch up.

Zanna realized she didn't know the man's name. She wondered if she should ask him. "How do we know this ship won't miss? If everything's in constant motion, and we're all asleep, we could end up in a sun and..."

"Our launch schedule takes the Earth's orbit into account, as well as the other planets in its solar system. It's all been mapped out. No worries, ma'am."

"No, I just—I know we've got more than five-hundred people still out there..."

"We're taking care of those details. Are you comfortable with your assignment?"

"Of course. I'm happy to do my part."

"Good, because we're running low on diplomats."

The mammoth vessel gave Zanna a chill, which she found appropriate. Thousands of years, in that thing.

"Is this all really happening?" she asked. "Have I just gone crazy?"

"I'm afraid not, ma'am," he said. "The dead are rising, and they're hungry."

She turned to face him. "I'm sorry—I never caught your name."

He shook her hand. "Major Bob Moran."

Zanna smiled, which required more effort than before. "Nice to meet you, Major Moran. I'm sure we've got a great life ahead of us on our new Earth."

ACT ONE

Evolution was a real thing. Amena knew this for a fact. She had witnessed it in action on an Earth that no longer existed. That giant swimming eyeball was forever etched in her memory. She saw it, felt its slimy tentacles as they ensnared her, and regrettably killed the poor thing, though she never learned from what it descended. Or did a race of giant eyeballs already exist deep within her Earth's oceans? But those snakes were clearly evolved, the way they stretched their mouths unnaturally wide. Then again, that could've been a species of snake that had remained hidden in rainforests or was driven to extinction long ago, and those little dinosaurs might never have gone extinct over there in the first place...

Amena swiped her paintbrush across a side wall in *The Patrick Henry's* control room. The dull metal got old on day one, and she finally found time to rectify the horrid situation—rectify it as much as her limited artistic talents allowed. Intricate murals were beyond her abilities, and she didn't have that much time anyway, but she could slap assorted streaks of color up and down the walls. She preferred detailed images that merited close inspection—the sort of artwork she'd find in the older sections of museums—but she settled on abstract expressionism. It was color.

Surely people were capable of evolution. If those animals could evolve on that ancient Earth, then humanity probably had the same ability. They never got the chance on that world. Civilization died young there, lasted for a teensy fraction of the planet's ten-billion years. But on some other Earth...

That crazy Onella's words kept punching at her brain: *"You want to see the universe? I've seen it. And I can tell you—I can assure you—it's not worth it. Nope, it's downright worthless. I've been on Earth after Earth after Earth, and you know what I found? Nothing special."*

And she just kept going: *"Yeah, some worlds were starting to shape up into things of beauty. They really, truly were. But here's what always happens, without fail. Meddlesome mega-jerks from the ugly Earths drop in and mess it all up. It's like no Earth has a chance."*

Amena splashed more paint on the wall. She went with orange this time, mainly

because she hadn't used that particular hue in a while. Variety was grand.

Paint fumes were not. She hopped into the comfy chair behind the enclave of desks, took half a second to remember which laptop operated the ventilation system, and she amped up the fan to full power.

She wouldn't have needed to paint the two side walls if they took after the front one, which had the nifty little ability to turn invisible. It gave her a fantastic view of her world, which sure beat her feeble attempts at painting. The elegance of each cloud formation surpassed every single one of her haphazard brush swipes. And the bright sky popping out against the void...yeah, she didn't mind conceding artistic defeat to nature. But she'd continue painting anyway.

A man traipsed over her view. Gilmore was out there, finishing up repairs to the thrusters that were destroyed a few weeks ago in his efforts to save everyone's lives. They weren't merely efforts, though. He did save everyone, as he kept reminding them whenever appropriate.

He wore one of the spacesuits with which Sela had fiddled. Thus, his magnetic boots allowed him to walk across the invisible hull without worrying about falling off and drifting through empty space for all eternity. In lieu of a helmet, the suit projected a field of hard energy around the wearer's head—non-luminescent, of course, so they didn't look like glow-in-the-dark space people. The technology was similar to what the transport beam utilized. The scarlet tint was less pronounced, but noticeable. A tint was better than a glare, though. Overall, the spacesuit presented a more streamlined appearance and lacked the bulk of its predecessors. It was basically a comfortably fitted khaki-colored bodysuit with a CGI top.

The force-field helmet came into view as Gilmore paused and gazed through the sloped wall. Amena heard him through one of the laptops' speakers.

"Are you having fun filling my ship with toxic fumes?" he asked.

Amena affixed a tiny throat mic to her face and switched it on. "Fan's running. What do you think so far?"

"It looks like you haphazardly flung your paintbrushes every which way."

"Good eye. Yep. It's called abstract expressionism."

"And what precisely are you expressing?"

“Colors are fun.”

“Ah. And here I thought you were expressing your aversion to good taste.”

“Go do your work, you.”

“Yes, better I do it than Sela.”

“And be nice.”

“That will depend on her.” Gilmore strode across the wall and out of sight.

Amena swiveled her chair, stood up, and examined her artwork. She considered it an improvement over the dull gray. Yep, definitely that, though still plenty of room for further improvement.

Another voice rang through the laptop’s speaker. What’s this time. “Who’s up there?” he asked.

“Me.”

“Good. You got a moment to come down to the attic? I want you to take a look at something.”

“Sure. What something?”

“There’s a spot on Pluto.”

Amena floated onto the balls of her feet, propelled by her massive grin. “I’ll be right there.”

Sela sat on *The Patrick Henry’s* hull and stared at the sun. It shone red through her helmet, which reminded her of the actual red sun she had seen from the now-dead Earth. Thanks to that planet, she could infer her Earth’s lifespan was in the neighborhood of ten-billion years. Science already assured her it wouldn’t last forever. But observing an Earth in the process of falling apart, knowing it exploded shortly thereafter...

She never did get a chance to study the causes. Age was a catalyst, the thing that spurred on the requisite destabilizing activities and launched the sequence of events leading to the end. What, exactly, were those activities, those geological processes? She had acquired some data, but it died with the planet because that lunatic interfered. The only silver lining was that the people weren’t around to suffer their world’s fate, but considering they went extinct billions of years earlier, it wasn’t much of

a silver lining, was it?

Her own world might perish in a similar fashion. Maybe in five-billion years. Maybe in five-hundred. That Earth went all that time without people, so she couldn't consider it part of the same experimental group. Too many varying factors. One certainty, though—without people around to stop it, the planet did explode.

“Sela,” Gilmore said through their radio link. “What are you not doing right now?”

“I'm contemplating how we might prolong the lifespans of the Earth and sun.”

Gilmore tightened the last few screws of his masterful propulsion work and shoved the units back into their casings. They had painted each compact unit as black as the rest of the octahedron. The casual observer would hardly notice the minor protrusions wrapping around the wide center of the ship, right where the faces met.

“I asked what you were not doing,” he said, rising from his knee. His stiff, outstretched arms bobbed as he lectured. “I will tell you. First, you didn't show up until the work was nearly complete.”

“Are you suggesting there's any aspect of the work I could have performed better than yourself?”

“Not even remotely. Second, you finally do show up and decide to spend the majority of your time not working. Listen to me, Sela. You always do this. You start something and then leave me to finish it.”

“But that's how our partnership operates. I get us rolling with the big bold ideas, and you smooth out the technical details, thereby freeing me to come up with bigger and bolder ideas.”

“Do you assume I have nothing better to do with my time?”

The question got her mind racing in a different direction, and her face transformed into mush as she gazed at the blood-red space surrounding the crimson sun.

“Such as...?” she said. “This is what people like us do. We don't raise families. We're lost in a party. Neither of us excels at making friends. All we have is this, and everyone might be better off for that fact.”

She never did take Kaden up on his offer to visit his school, and she never extended any invitations to show off her own sphere of existence. They shared a life-

and-death adventure in that canyon—they saved each other’s lives—and how did she choose to spend her time back home?

“Sela!” Gilmore grumbled. “Work.”

“Yes,” she said, standing up. “I’ll work.”

“Oh, God!” Amena spun around and squeezed her eyes shut, hoping that might purge the horrific image from her retinas. Sadly no. She intended to leave immediately, until she realized she had already announced her presence.

Whit and Jem stopped making out. “Come on in, Amena,” he said.

Amena climbed into the attic, which usually served a single function: to house a powerful telescope that went a bit beyond big. It stretched across most of the room, with increasing plumpness closer to the lens. The lens was too rotund for any window, so Whit had installed a huge flap in the roof and basically converted his attic into a state-of-the-art observatory.

Not like he needed the space for storage. He had a whole mansion full of empty rooms for that. However, this telescope—and its many assorted computers—did need room to spread out. He had hired the world’s smartest genius to build it a few years ago, and once Sela got going, new ideas kept her going. Eventually, the telescope became considerably more than a telescope.

So, usually, this room was intended for stargazing, not for a middle-aged man and young woman to demonstrate their unsavory relationship.

“I am so sorry about...” As Amena blushed, her face began matching her hair.

“No big deal,” Jem said. “Not like we were having—”

“Agh! Don’t say it!”

Jem smirked. “What horrible thing is going to happen if I say—”

“Don’t! Please don’t.” When Jem said nothing further, Amena removed her hands from her ears. Traumatic mental images averted, so long as she changed the subject immediately. “So...spot on Pluto. Tell me everything.”

Jem hopped off his lap, and Whit rolled his chair to its proper station. He pressed his face against the eyepiece as he zoomed in on the image and tapped a few buttons on the keyboard directly below.

“Always liked Pluto,” Whit said. “I could always relate. It’s eccentric. Doesn’t do what all the other planets—wait, not a planet anymore. Always forget that.”

“Oh, right,” Jem said. “I always forget that was a thing.”

“Still a dwarf planet, though, so to hell with it. I’m calling it a planet. Anyway, take a look, Amena.”

Whit rolled aside, and Amena leaned in for a look. Pluto filled the edges of the lens, but a satellite upstaged it. Not a natural satellite—too long and smooth and metallic.

“Do we know how large that ship is?” Amena asked.

“Oh, it’s large,” Whit said.

“It’s like huge,” Jem added.

“Computer estimates the total surface area at about a square mile,” Whit said, “but for all that mass, I’m only picking up faint energy readings.”

“Which means something’s still running in there.” Amena squinted at the object. The hull seemed slightly pixelated. She doubted the super-telescope was to blame.

“Keep in mind, my information’s about five hours out of date,” Whit said.

“Right. Because light’s such a slowpoke.” Amena lifted her head. “So step one is to pop over there and get the real-time view, and we’ll take it from there. Or I guess technically step one would be to gather the troops, and step two would be to pop over there. Two whole steps! We’re on a roll. You coming with us?”

“Not this time,” Whit said, reclaiming his telescope and tuning out everything else. “Curious about Neptune now.”

And that was it for his attention, so Amena and Jem left him to it. They descended the stairs and entered a hallway full of doors they had never seen open, not that there was anything to see. Amena tried her best to focus on that waste of space. Yes, she thought, mentally berate Whit for that.

“He actually can get pretty industrious sometimes,” Jem said.

Amena wondered if “industrious” was a euphemism. It didn’t sound like one, but a lot of euphemisms tended to take her by surprise.

That kiss was ingrained in Amena’s mind. It nauseated her on a number of levels, the age difference being a big one, but even worse was the notion that this

bright—well, sometimes bright—young lady would choose to spend such quality time with an unstable wealthy man prone to erratic behavior. Jem was no gold digger. Outside of the salary she drew from this work, she never spent any of his money. The two of them just kind of clung to each other for unfathomable reasons. Amena understood precious little about it, but she was pretty darn sure it wasn't healthy.

“Jem, let's talk girl-to-girl.”

“I guess we would have to.”

“Huh?” Smirking? Why was Jem smirking at her?

“You sure can't talk woman-to-woman, can you?”

“I—what?”

“I've never seen you date anyone. Not once in like a year and a half. When Kaden showed up, I had hope, but he's obviously in your brother zone. Have you ever had a boyfriend?”

Amena faced forward. “I've dated.”

“Anyone more than once?”

“I—can't we just focus on Pluto for now? That's the mission. Our job.”

“A cold, empty not-quite-planet thrills you, but you can't stand the touch of another human being.”

“I'll have you know I'm a highly accomplished hugger.” Amena reminded herself she did not need to go on defense. “Jem, look, forget about me. The issue at hand here—”

“The issue is I have a heart.”

Amena thought she detected an accusatory tone within. “Are you suggesting you're blazing new territory there?”

“New to you.”

“I have a heart.”

“You have a muscle that pumps blood. People are just these cute little novelties to you.”

“We're all—every individual is a novelty.”

“But God forbid they get too close.”

“Jem, why am I singled out here?”

“Nice pun.”

“No, no, look. Everyone here, we’re all busy universe-trotters without much in the way of love lives.”

“Mariana goes on dates between trips. They all annoy the hell out of her, but she keeps trying. Gilmore has an ex-wife, but it’s kind of like how Pluto’s an ex-planet. He still sees her once in a while. Oh, and Sela and Kaden will be getting together any second now, you wait and see. And Ballard—well, he’s just obnoxious.”

Amena vetted several potential responses before selecting the most efficient one. “He is. Yes. Ballard is certainly obnoxious.”

An unsettling mischievousness spread across Jem’s face. “Do you think he’s pretty?”

Amena gagged.

Jem continued, “I have to admit he’s a good-looking man. I mean, those arms.”

“Stop.”

“The chiseled jaw. I’d do him. Just once. For all you know, I—”

Amena blurted out, “Whit finds Pluto thrilling, too. It’s not just me.” She picked up her pace, leaving behind the source of traumatic mental images. “I got calls to make.”

Mariana did not enjoy her lunch. She might have. The salad ranked above average, but her company didn’t fare so well. He nattered on about too many trifles.

“...and I made the catch, and our kickball team won the tournament for the second year in a row.”

Mariana helped liberate an entire planet a few weeks ago.

“We’re determined to go for the trifecta,” he nattered.

Mariana also discovered evidence of a long-lost civilization that had experienced hardships unfathomable to the kickballer. The last remaining record of that people only existed because of her efficient translation and transcription skills.

“And I have to say, it’s a nice trophy they give out. Has a good heft to it. I like trophies with a good heft.”

“Want to say.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“Don’t beg.”

He decided saying nothing was the best course of action.

“You want to say it’s a nice trophy because you want to impress me.” Her phone rang. “Excuse me. Note how I didn’t beg for anything. Simple command. ‘Excuse me.’” She answered it. “Yes?”

Amena was on the other end. “Mariana! There’s a huge vessel in orbit around Pluto. Want to go?”

“Yes.” She put away her phone and returned her attention to the tall man sitting across from her in the thoroughly average dining establishment he selected. “You’re a pretty guy. I was considering sleeping with you. But I see no future beyond that.”

She stood, and he followed suit.

He needed to tilt his head back to look into her eyes. “I, uh, appreciate your honesty. So you think I’m pretty?”

“Don’t.”

“Okay.”

She shook his hand. “Have fun with your kickball.”

“Uh, thanks.”

Mariana dropped some bills on the table to cover her share of the meal, and she left.

Kaden dropped some bills in the big blue mailbox. His martial arts school would continue to have electricity, insurance, and a roof for another month. Hooray.

He had just stopped in and found his protégés running a superb weapons seminar. It left him feeling proud and anxious, but the anxiousness dissipated once he glanced at the number on his ringing cell phone.

“How’s space?”

“Pluto!” Amena announced.

“We’re going to...?”

“Yes. The planet, not the mythological figure. Ex-planet. Poor thing.”

“When do we leave?”

“Right after we rescue Ballard.”

Bullets flew over Ballard's head and cut into the overgrown trees across the street. He ducked behind the pusher's car as glass shards rained down. He briefly considered returning fire into the dilapidated convenience store, maybe even diving into the gas station attendant's booth, which was a place of limited interest to anyone who wasn't driving a bulldozer.

But he decided he could use this unexpected ambush.

The car door was locked. No problem. Ballard had borrowed a device from Sela's lab, an abandoned prototype she had left collecting dust in a back corner of Whit's sub-basement. It never even made it into the octahedron. He didn't understand why. Looked plenty useful to him. The little braniac probably got distracted by a shiny object or something.

The device resembled a long black glove. It ran the length of his arm and tightened around his considerable muscles. He pressed the stud on the palm, and his arm jerked and his heart jumped. He decided it felt right. It felt like power.

He dug his fingers into the car door, ripped it off its hinges, and flung it aside. He found the weaselly pusher twerp hunched over, cowering, with glass sprinkled all over his back as the gunfire persisted. Ballard reached forward, latched onto that hoodie, and yanked the pusher's face to his. He held on while the bullets kept whizzing over their hair. Good.

"Tell me who your supplier is, or I lift."

"No way, narc! A cop can't—"

"I'm not a cop. You see what I did to your door? I'll—Ah!"

Unbearable heat engulfed his arm as the glove sparked and circuits popped. He tore it off as he fell back, which gave the pusher twerp plenty of time to draw his own gun. But he didn't have time to fire it, on account of the arrow that sank into his passenger's seat and spewed sleeping gas.

Several more arrows sailed between the wooden boards that partially covered the former store's windows. Not one hit an actual person, but that was a deliberate choice on the part of their shooter, who preferred to sedate rather than impale.

The gas seeped out the windows and dissipated. No more bullets emerged from

there, but a few more shot down from the roof, at least until a masked man with nunchucks clobbered the snipers.

Amena kept an arrow nocked as she stepped around the bullet-ridden vehicle. A ski mask covered most of her face as well. “Police are on their way. You got something against them?”

Ballard clutched his arm as he climbed to his feet. “I was helping them out.”

“Do they know that? Sure didn’t sound like they did when I left my anonymous tip.” She flung her arrow near the fellow lurking behind the attendant’s booth, and the fellow took a nap. “Anonymous tip. Now there’s a thought.”

“How’d you find—” He realized he already knew the answer. “Mariana.”

“Yeah. And the transport keeps a log, just FYI. Interesting you decided to spend your shore leave in a county that just so happens to have one of the highest per-capita crime rates in the nation. What were you hoping to accomplish?”

“I’ve been tracking down a drug kingpin...”

“Most people who want to bust drug dealers, step one is applying to their local law enforcement agency.”

“I’m not exactly hireable.”

“So, what, you become a vigilante?”

“You’re the one wearing a mask.”

Amena ripped it off. “We’re cleaning up the mess you created.”

Ballard gestured to the dilapidated gas station, as if designating it Exhibit A in his losing argument. “Look at all this garbage we’re taking off the streets.”

“For a night. Maybe. You going to press charges? If you want even a chance of them staying off the streets, you better be prepared to divulge exactly how you met these creeps in the first place and how many laws you broke along the way.”

“So when it’s some other Earth, we get to break whatever laws we please. When it comes to protecting our own—”

“We use the systems already in place. And no, no, no. Once again, no. We never break ‘whatever laws we please.’ That was a conquered Earth. We were rescuing them.”

“And I was trying to rescue innocent victims—”

“Anonymous tip! Or volunteer your skills and work with the police—with—rather than risk getting arrested or killed—”

“I knew what I was doing.”

“How’s the arm?”

Sore as hell, and the sirens were giving him a headache. “So I put a little too much faith in Sela’s brains.”

“No, you stole from her, and you didn’t even have the sense to steal something she had finished. Now put your transport pin on. We’re going to Pluto.”

“Pl—?”

“Your objections have already been anticipated and soundly rejected. Put your transport pin on.”

Kaden strode forth from the building, appearing oh-so-right about everything in the world. “Wipe that look off your face. Your captain’s giving you an order. Nice shooting, Amena.”

“Nice nunchucking. So how many nuns could a nunchuck chuck if a nunchuck could chuck nuns?” She cringed. “And that sounded far less offensive in my head. Promise.”

“I’m sure the nuns will forgive you.” Kaden smiled, but it faded when he turned back to Ballard. “What did I just tell you?”

Ballard put on the transport pin.

It wasn’t enough for the farmboy. “Did you wipe that look off?”

The sirens grew louder. “Let’s bicker upstairs.” Amena grabbed the guys’ arms and pulled them closer. “Really don’t want to get caught at a crime scene when there’s a Pluto to save or people to save from Pluto or whatever’s going on. We’re going to find out. Yeah, let’s do that. Up, please.”

The three of them disappeared from the Earth. Amena decided Ballard’s behavior proved nothing. Mankind might be capable of evolution, but individuals might have the option of abstaining.

They soared straight through the sky and into outer space, carried by a scarlet column of energy that directed them into the octahedron’s open tip. There, Sela operated the control board on the elevated circle surrounding the launch pad.

“Thanks, dear,” Amena said as her sneakers touched down.

“My pleasure,” Sela said. “How was the vigilantism?”

Ballard mumbled something incoherent as he opened a hatch in the launch pad. He stepped down the ladder into the rest of the ship.

“*That* fantastic,” Amena said, following him.

Kaden, however, went up. He pulled off the ski mask. “Hey, Sela.”

Sela smiled and tensed. “Hi, Kaden. Sorry, can’t talk now. I have to make sure the ship is ready to travel. Good to see you, though.”

She slipped through the railing, hopped onto the lockers outlining the pad’s circumference, and slid down to the launch pad itself. She descended the ladder, leaving Kaden alone and feeling vaguely foolish.