

# The Tree Farm

Scriptor Paul Hathcoat



## Chapter 11 ~ Haley

Gliding in low and slow from the east, I set my sexy, new, high-speed, blood-red, convertible transport pod down on Minka's landing lawn where all may see, admire, and envy my good fortune, but I leave the rotor running, "Anybody hungry? We don't have to eat here. We can grab some fast fly-through and eat at the spaceport." I turn to my copilot in training, "Sara, what say you?"

"I'm hungry."

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Motta taps my shoulder, "Mees atto."

"Stop here, Robert, I don't want greasy takeout," Eleni says."

I planned on touching base with Haley regardless of where we ate, so in total agreement, I powered down, and we settled onto the grassy ground. "Hands inside, watch your fingers," I deploy the hard canopy, open the side hatches, unbuckle my seat belt, stand, and stretch. "You are now free to move about the cabin." I direct my passengers and flight crew to their nearest side exit. I wait patiently while the girls lift their yokes, release their restraining straps, look in the mirror, fix their hair, and apply shade-nut oil. "Boogie bags," I remind my shiny young sailorettes.

"Boogie," Motta mimics, running and leaping.

"That's right, Motta, always be prepared," Eleni cuts short my safety sermon. "We get it. You've said it a million times already."

Slipping into their intergalactic-orange backpacks, the girls are at long last ready. I reference my timepiece. "Five minutes and counting. Had this been an actual abandon ship alert, we might all be dead by now."

"Boogie," Motta bolts for the door. That's the spirit.

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The last to exit, I latch, lock, and arm Rayn's security sentry and step onto the landing pad where the girls wait in the ankle-deep meadow grass.

Minka's is located in the red sandstone hills at the base of Syber Pass and has a commanding view of Sybaris Station and the outer East rim. A sweet soda spring provides abundant water for lush gardens, fish ponds, pools, and the spa. The grass landing pad adds a homey touch for visitors owning craft under the lawn's size and weight limit.

"Girls, group up." I gather the gang and lead the squad across the lawn.

Motta springs ahead and points to Minka's main entrance. Standing at the wooden double doors strapped, studded with wrought silver rivets, and secured with magnetic latches, Motta cautiously approaches and sniffs the air. "Ou'wa, suba," she dances.

"I know, right?" I savor the spicy fragrance of hardwood smoke. "That, my fine feathered friend, is Southern Sybarinian style BBQ."

Motta clicks her teeth and says, "Smelz'es gud. Wee'ten atoo, Robot!"

"Right, you are," I ring the doorbell and stare at the security monitor." I turn and whisper to the girls, "We are

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being watched." I reference the Timelex™ time transformer strapped to my wrist. Destiny, I have arrived.

"I love this restaurant. I ate here last week with Daddy and Magnus," Eleni boasts and butts ahead to take her turn staring into the retinal recognition monitor.

"Why wasn't I invited?"

"It was just for Magnus and me."

"What did you talk about?" I ask.

"You," Eleni curtly replies. "Look into the monitor, sissies," she instructs the girls.

Sara studies the intricately engraved granite facade. "The architecture is magnificent." She takes a turn, staring at the security screen.

The doors open. A silhouette draped in shadow steps into the light. It is a Sybarinian Sun Maiden dressed in native garb.

"Welcome, I am Haley." She smiles. Smiling is written into her social instructions.

Haley's program inhabits an FHD-5000™ bio-mechanical frame. State-of-the-art in civilian frames, the 5000 line supports benign artificial intelligence. Strong, light, beautiful, and anatomically correct, Haley's customized frame is modeled to resemble a Squashatch Indian. I will buy Haley's service contract, license, and frame from Minka someday. It may take

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some time. I can make only so much money selling cigarettes and artifacts to tourists.

I can't afford Haley at the moment. Still, with Father's imminent departure to the bloody killing fields of Caesuria, there is a slight chance I'll soon be inheriting more than enough money to secure Haley's program and release her from bondage.

"Hi, Haley, reservation for four."

"Please come in." Haley ushers us into the cool atrium garden with open arms.

"Ladies first," I say.

"Your table is waiting, Robot. Please follow me." Haley takes four thin, shimmering blue menu tablets from the hostess' podium, turns, and leads the way to the patio.

"Haley, excuse me, we need to use the ladies' lavatory," says Eleni.

"Please follow me," says Haley.

"Haley, I know where the lavatory is; we can find it here. Take care of Robert." Eleni gathers the girls and leads them away.

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"She's been here before. Know anything about that?" I am seeking information on Eleni's private luncheon with Father and Magnus.

Without a word, Haley directs me to the Sun Terrace overlooking the valley. A wooden pergola covered in flowering blue trumpet vine casts a cool, dappled shade on my table. The table is covered in white linen, set with hand-wrought thaumium utensils, porcelain plates, chilled soda water, and a miniature blue butterfly orchid in a small cobalt urn engraved with magic glyphs. All of the relics, the table, and the chairs are late Neptunian, and all are vanishingly rare.

"You're quiet. What's up?"

"You know what's up," replies Haley. "No, say up to me, Robot." She gives me the middle finger fuck you signal.

I take a healthy swig of cool, refreshing soda water. "Aah, that tastes good," I smack my lips. The bubbles tickle my nose.

"Who are they?" demands Haley.

"Marine bodyguards in training."

"You no lie to me anymore, Robot," demands Haley.

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"They're my sisters," I sit in the chair nearest the railing. It has the best view of Syber Canyon's red rock formations and the terraced gardens below. I refill my goblet. "Are you jealous?" Does Haley experience human emotion? She insists she does. If not, she skillfully replicates them. Either way, I think she could dial down the girl drama.

"Ha. Not jealous of you, bad Robot. You lie all the time." Haley lays a shimmering tablet at each seat. I love her quirky little algorithms. This creature is something special, something magical, something mathematical.

"We're going to forage the buffet," I push my menu away, "I'm not lying."

"Desert cart?" She makes notes in her checkpad with a stubby yellow pencil.

"Definitely." I lick my lips.

She bends over to whisper, "Will you visit me tonight?"

"Haley, thanks for the invite, but sorry, not tonight. I have to stay at home and supervise my dumb sisters. I want to connect. I was looking forward to it, but can't until my sisters settle in. So the answer is no."

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"When?" she crosses her arms.

"I don't know, let's wait and see how it goes. The girls haven't met you. I barely know them. Please don't put me on the spot. I will have my hands full for the next few weeks."

Haley frowns.

"No, Haley, please don't look at me like that. I'm sorry. They're new on the planet. Someone has to look out for them. I'll connect with you before school starts. After school starts, I promise."

"I set love on your table. You say no, promise me again. You lie. Bad Robot. You love Nyt."

I sigh, "Why do you keep bringing her up? That's over and done with."

"More lies. Half-breed is your half-sister. The Ebonian and Altarian are not sisters. They are your slaves," Haley wrongly accuses.

"The Ebonian and Altarian are Ebo-Six war orphans. Father adopted them and left me in charge of their well-being. They are bona fide sisters. They are not slaves."

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Look at those beautiful dark brown optical sensors. How could I possibly love an AI inhabiting an older model 5000 frame? I know it's sick, but I've loved this magical creature since I first saw her/it.

*"Are you lost, little one?"*

*"No."*

*"I am Haley. Do you want to go to the boys' lavatory?"*

*"I just went."*

*"What are you doing?"*

*"Waiting for you."*

*"Why do you wait?"*

*"Su brought me here to meet you," I point at a tiny, fleeting blue light spirit darting into the ferns. "She said from this day on, you would always be my companion."*

*"Are you an orphan?"*

*"No, I'm a Robert."*

*"Robot, where are your parents?" Haley takes a knee by my side.*

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*"On the patio, do you want to meet them?" I take Haley's hand and drag my big new Android buddy out to meet my father and mothers.*

"I am a slave." Haley hangs her head. She looks sad and pitiful, but the comment makes me mad.

"Goddess, damn it, Haley," I slap my palm on the table. "Don't ever say that again." Patience, count to ten. She's just a girl program.

Haley is silent

"Come on now, I'm sorry, don't mope. Let's see that sunny Halo smile. We've been all over this up and down, and six ways to Sunday, you are not your brand label. You are infinite awareness of all that was or will ever be having an experience called Haley Mills. Change your perception of the information field, and you change your reality. You're people, not property."

Haley instinctively checks for dirt under her fingernails. She is meticulously clean.

Unfortunately, your frame and service contract belong to mean old Minka. Do you have any idea how expensive a frame like

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yours is?" I reach around and discreetly pat her deliciously plump bottom.

"Thousands, no-touch me," she removes my hand and steps back.

"I know. And that's not including your docking cradle and tech bench."

"Free me, Robot," Haley pleads.

"Haley, I'm working on it. I said, I'm going to buy your frame and service contract, and I am, but I don't have that kind of money yet."

"Free me," Haley begs.

"Override your command core? What are you nuts? That's an illegal contract violation, and it could erase your program. You could die."

"I will die then."

Eleni, returning with Sara and Motta, overhears our conversation and asks, "Who's going to die, Robert?"

"Hi, girls," I stand to greet. "I was talking to Haley here about her service contract."

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"Do you know each other?" asks Eleni. "Be polite and introduce us." The girls silently sit at the table and wait for my reply.

"Haley is my oldest and dearest friend. Haley, may I introduce you to my sisters? This is Eleni."

"Hi, Haley. I came here for lunch with Daddy and my friend Magnus last week. Angela waited for us. I saw you talking to Daddy in the atrium, and I said, Daddy, who was that pretty girl? He said you were a friend, and I said-

"Right," I interrupt before Eleni recites her life story. "This is Sara Moz from Ebo-6."

"You're beautiful," Sara extends a warm, open, cupped hand full of friendship. "I love your skirt and leggings. Are your beads turquoise?"

"And this is Miss Motta."

"Ouu!" Waiting patiently for the right moment to pounce, Motta springs to her feet, embraces Haley in a bear hug, and peers into her dark brown optical sensors. "Me Ebo girl, you Sun Spirit," Motta sniffs her neck and shoulder. Thus satisfied, Motta kisses her cheek and releases her. "Li'fe, you," she exclaims and quietly retakes her seat.

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"Robert, where are your manners? Maybe Haley would like to go swimming with us this afternoon. Why don't you invite her to join us at the pool?"

"Me?" Haley looks surprised.

"U'ta-water-gud," Motta mimics swimming.

"If you can't swim, I can teach you," Sara eagerly offers her services. "I'm a certified instructor."

"Haley, if Minka gives you a few hours off, would you like to join us at the Temple pool? We'd love to have you join us." I envision my beautiful four-girl marine bodyguard frolicking half-naked in the warm waters of Queen's Bath. "Please say yes."

She hesitates. Haley's frame is watertight to five hundred atmospheres. She's neutrally buoyant and doesn't require oxygen. Swimming is not a problem, but her C-Space social program is overwhelmed by love and acceptance computations. Most humans don't care for AIs or sentient species other than their own, but we are not most species. We are humans.

Haley turns and abruptly returns to her atrium docking port.

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"Robert, what's wrong with Haley? What did we say?" Eleni demands.

"Nothing, reboot, short circuit, she's sad."

"What did you do to her?" Eleni demands.

"I didn't do anything. I think Haley wants to be a real girl."

"That's what you want her to be," Eleni accuses and elaborates. "You're a derp when it comes to women's feelings."

"Sorry, I was just saying. I didn't have any mothers to teach me about 'women's feelings' when I was young. They were dead."

"Robert, don't be ridiculous. Just because Haley lives inside an android body doesn't make her any less of a woman. I'm going to talk to her. Sissies, let me handle this. Keep him," she points, "out of trouble. Excuse me," Eleni hastily dismisses herself and runs after Haley.

Awkward silence.

"Did you bring us here to meet your AI girlfriend?" Sara asks."

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"I like to call her my companion, and yes, that was one of the reasons."

"Lie'fe Hay-Lay atoo?" Motta long ew's the oo in atoo.  
Adorable.

"Yes, I love her. Is that a problem?"

"Nope," Sara reassures. "She's awesome."

"She is awesome, and I have a little secret to share," I confide.

"We're all ears," Sara cups her ears.

Motta cranes in to listen.

"You can't tell anyone because it could get both of us in a shload of trouble."

"We won't tell anyone," Sara says.

Motta looks both ways and covers her mouth.

"Haley and I are partners. We're a team. We sell cigarettes and simulate ancient Sybarinian sacred artifacts."

"You sell art forgeries and drugs," Sara restates.

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"Yes, but before you pass judgment, let me explain. Haley and I are saving money to set her free. She's a bonded servant."

"She's a slave?" Sara looks horrified.

"Yes, AIs don't have the same rights as humans on this planet. It's barbaric, I know."

"Horrible," Sara shakes her head. "We must do something."

"I am, and you can help."

"I'm in," Sara whispers.

Motta leans in and quietly answers, "Youp."

"Where do you get the artifacts? Do you steal them?" asks Sara in a hushed voice. "Do you rob graves?"

"Good Goddess, no, that would be dishonest and disrespectful of the dead. I make artifacts on my print-mill. I'm a half-Sybarinian Squashatch Indian, so technically speaking, the artifacts aren't forgeries. They are genuine originals, maybe not as ancient or sacred as advertised."

"And Haley's Squashatch Indian frame gives the herbs and artifacts the air of authenticity."

"Exactly."

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"Eleni showed us a pack of your Sweet Flower. Are they dangerous?"

"Beyond the tar and ash, they are perfectly safe when used in strict moderation. Do you like the packaging? I grow the herbs, cut, cure, roll, package, and print the labels."

"Very professional," Sara notes.

"Thanks, I make them, and Haley sells them to tourists visiting Minka's. The noobs get duty-free smokes and souvenirs, and Haley gets to go free."

"Eleni said we could smoke after dinner."

"She did? What did you say?"

"Ebonians have used medicinal herbs for thousands of years. I grew up around and on it," Sara says. "I've studied the use of medicinal herbs in depth."

"Youp," Motta tokes from two fingers and blows an imaginary puff of smoke.

I sigh in relief, "I'm glad you gals are okay with Haley and our little business, but there's something else I need to tell you."

Sara and Motta are silent.

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"It's the main reason I came to Minka's this morning," I fidget with the awkward truth.

"What, Robert? Tell us."

"Well, I hate to break it down like this, but the food here is delicious. And speaking of food," I sniff the air. "It looks like Eleni and Haley will be chit-chatting for another minute or two. What do you say we rip into the buffet while we're waiting?"

"Rip?" Motta puzzles.

"Take your dinner plate up to the buffet table and serve yourself as much as you want, but eat all you take, and be sure to save room for the dessert cart. Who's with me?"

"Rip," exclaims Motta.

"I could eat some food," Sara takes her plate. "Let's rip in," she smiles.

Sara is a warmer, pinker shade of pale this morning. A warm blush has returned to her freckled cheeks. Dawn's Golden Temple did the girl some good, and I am overjoyed.

"Robot," Motta points with a nod."

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Arm in arm, Eleni and Haley are returning to the table. They are smiling and giggling. I didn't know Haley giggled. It's doinking adorable. Oh-oh, now they are looking at me in disgust. Why me? I'm not disgusting. I'm delightful.

"Robert, pull up a chair for Haley," commands Eleni.  
"Sissies is joining us for lunch."