

Excerpt from *Artificial Absolutes*

A New Adult Science Fiction novel by Mary Fan

From Chapter 1: All the More Perfect

What the hell am I doing?

The thought crossed Devin's mind for the hundredth time. But asking was the only way to quiet the chaos in his mind. Besides, he fit the criteria for a good husband—good family, promising future...

And stupid.

What kind of blockhead randomly decides to propose and rushes to ask immediately? Sarah deserved better. She deserved something thoughtful, something that had taken effort.

Devin took the ring box out of his pocket and opened it, then looked around the apartment. How she kept everything so pristine was beyond him. Other than the digimech she'd left on, everything was where it ought to be. Sarah was like that in every aspect, flawless except for some quirk that made her all the more perfect in his eyes. Every hair in place, except for the one lock falling beside her face. Always precisely four minutes late. Her apartment decorated so crisply it might have been done by a computer but for a bizarre painting that appeared to represent some form of bird.

There was nothing out of which he could fashion a romantic scene. Sarah had professed many times that, in spite of the cynicism of modern times, she was still an idealistic dreamer who loved the sweet formulae of yesteryear. So what the hell was he doing with nothing but a ring and a question?

I should leave. Go home and plan something that spoke to how well he knew her. Write a speech about why she was the One and ask her properly. *All right, I'm leaving.*

The elevator *dinged* outside, followed by the precise *clackity-clack* of high-heeled shoes approaching.

Shit.

Devin stood, devoid of any semblance of a clue, as the bolts of Sarah's computerized door retracted. The door slid open. Upon seeing her, he instinctively did exactly what he'd come to do. "Sarah DeHaven, will you marry me?"

Fuck!

He expected shock. He expected mockery, or horror, or even disgust, but nothing could have prepared him for what she did.

She froze.

"Sarah?"

Sarah stood halfway through the door, her hand inches from the security scanner, motionless.

"Sarah!" Devin rushed to her and put his hands on her shoulders. "C'mon, baby. I'm sorry I scared you."

Sarah didn't move. She was cold, stone cold. She didn't even blink when he looked into the voids of her eyes.

Devin probably had about as much medical knowledge as a repair bot, but even he knew people weren't supposed to seize up like that. He grabbed his slate and pressed the emergency icon.

After a second that seemed to stretch into hours, a response: "Kydera City Emergency Response Center."

A willowy arm reached around him and took the slate from his hand. "I'm sorry. There is no emergency. It was a false alarm."

Devin whirled. Sarah stood beside him, calmly folding his slate.

"Sarah! Are you all right?"

Sarah reached into his pocket and dropped the slate, standing close enough that he could feel her breath. "Of course I am. I'm ecstatic. You proposed." She picked up the ring, which had fallen out of its box when he'd dropped it in alarm. "It's beautiful, Devin."

Devin opened his mouth, but couldn't respond. The anguish of waiting followed by the horror of seeing the love of his life seize up robbed him of the ability to communicate.

Sarah knit her mildly arched eyebrows. “Baby, why do you look so scared?”

Devin tried again to speak. “I-I thought you were... you seized up. I thought—”

Sarah laughed. Something about that once-mellifluous sound chilled him. “I was shocked. That’s all. The apartment was supposed to be empty. We never talked about the future. I didn’t think you were the marrying kind. Baby, your proposal was the most unexpected, irrational act of randomness. Can you blame me for being surprised?”

“You were cold. That’s not... I’m calling the hospital.” Devin reached for his slate.

Sarah put her hand on his arm. Her grip was somehow light and firm and utterly unyielding. “No.”

“Sarah, please, I—”

“I said no.” Sarah’s grip hardened.

Devin dropped the slate back into his pocket. He couldn’t force her. “I just want to make sure you’re okay. I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to scare you.”

Sarah’s expression softened. “There’s no reason for concern. A different girl might have screamed or fainted. The fact that I froze should come as no great surprise. It was only for a few seconds. I understand why you panicked, but I assure you, I’m fine.” She put her arms around his neck, leaned in, and kissed him. “Of course I’ll marry you.”

Devin’s mind reeled. He couldn’t forget how stiff she’d been, how empty her eyes.

Sarah put her hand on his face. “I love you, Devin. I said I would marry you. Doesn’t that make you happy?”

She held up the ring. Devin automatically took it and placed it on the hand she gave him.

Sarah regarded it and looked up with a warm smile. Her eyes had regained their usual vivacity, glimmering like the twin onyxes he knew so well. The woman of his dreams, the love of his life, agreed to marry him. Everything was perfect, so why the hell was he so edgy?

Devin attempted a smile. “I’m sorry. I was worried about you.”

“That’s sweet.” Sarah wrapped her arms around him in a close embrace and whispered, “We’re going to be so happy.”

Devin wanted to believe it. Moments before, he would have. Disquiet lingered within him. For reasons he couldn’t explain, he felt she’d changed. The words that once would have sounded melodious seemed deliberate, the smiles calculated.

Meanwhile, her demo track looped. Sarah kissed him again as the song approached its third verse:

“Games of fate and games of choice

“Twisted, tangled, intertwined,

“Who is right, and what is real?

“All shall fade within a mind.”

From Chapter 3: What the Hell?

Jane had never been afraid of heights. As a child, she'd enjoyed alarming her mother by climbing the tallest Venovian evergreens on the Colt estate. Comparing her size then to her size currently, she probably wasn't much higher up. It was a little different hanging from the underside of an elevator with only a hastily slammed hatch between her and a killer robot.

Well, this sucks.

That she'd caught the bar after sliding down the hatch could only be attributed to super reflexes reserved for times of great danger or to the grace of the Absolute. If only those super reflexes or that divine grace would allow her to reach the conduit Devin had mentioned...

The faint lights along shaft's walls let her vaguely make out the conduit's square entrance. Jane saw another bar under the elevator, parallel to the conduit's top edge. She'd played on jungle gyms when she was little and remembered the motion of swinging her body to catch a bar an arm's length away, but she'd forgotten how much the friction burned her palms.

She grabbed the bar and swung forward. Her face banged into the wall.
Ow.

After taking a moment to let the pain in her face subside, she extended her body as far as she could, barely touching the conduit's floor with her foot.

Dammit! Wish my legs were longer. Good thing I wore flats today. And pants. If I had to do this in heels and a skirt...

The inane thoughts kept her from freaking out. Something about talking to her brother had done away with the panic she'd felt before. She wasn't about to let it take over again.

The conduit was only half her height. Even if she could stand, she would probably fall backward if she tried.

Why are utility conduits so small? Are maintenance workers all midgets or something?

A small handle below her, right by the conduit, looked within reach. She grabbed it with one hand. She had to let go of the bar under the elevator to enter the conduit, but the thought was too scary.

Above her, the machine whirred.

Jane had never been remotely religious, but in a situation as unthinkable as the one she was in, even she prayed, albeit facetiously.

Hello, Absolute One. Please let the machine be too big to fit through the hatch. And please keep me from falling. In return, I will compose a magnificent motet for You. So be it, truly.

Jane closed her eyes and let go of the bar. She bit her lip to stifle a yelp as she dropped her body weight onto one arm.

She reached up with her free hand and pressed her forearm into the conduit's cold metal floor. By pulling, bending, and twisting, she managed to fold herself into the conduit.

She collapsed against the wall in relief. *Whew! Made it!*

Jane listened for the machine, half expecting it to appear right behind her. Instead, a *beep* emitted from her pocket. Wondering what the hell it was— and why the hell she didn't know the contents of her own pocket—she reached in. She pulled out her company-issued videophone.

Oh, right. This thing.