

*Rox stopped, pivoted, and dropped into a defensive stance ...  
Snow and pain threatened to blind her as the wind picked up,  
but she tracked the wolf as it paced fifty yards away from her.*

*A low-pitched growl slipped through the silence like a personal  
message as the wolf stretched its lips back over curved teeth.  
Healing from one of its bites would be painful. She felt others move  
into position around her, but Rox didn't take her eyes off the wolf.*

In a world where humans are evolving, people are more curious than afraid. They look for answers from a handful of scientists who try to uncover why some develop abilities while the vast majority do not. For most humans, it's an exciting time, but for Evolved Ones – EOs – it's a game of hide and seek that ends with far too many of their kind disappearing, permanently.

Four years ago, Rox awoke without a single memory and the involuntary ability to heal. Speech and most of her higher level cognitive functions were working, but everything about herself felt unfamiliar. Plagued by insecurity and confusion, she leaves the only home she can remember in search of her true identity.

The Evolved Ones Trilogy:



“I loved *Awakening*. Rox is an engaging and dynamic character – I can't wait to see how her story develops. Highly recommended.”

Alice Clark-Platts, founder of The Singapore Writers' Group & author of *The Flower Girls*

visit our website at:  
[www.marshallcavendish.com/genref](http://www.marshallcavendish.com/genref)

 Marshall Cavendish  
Editions



THE EVOLVED ONES  
**AWAKENING**

BOOK  
ONE

Marshall Cavendish  
Editions



# THE EVOLVED ONES AWAKENING

BOOK ONE



NATASHA OLIVER

For Review Only

THE EVOLVED ONES

# AWAKENING

BOOK ONE

NATASHA OLIVER

## CHAPTER ONE



### Hope

Her hands were at ten and two on the steering wheel as her right knee bounced to the rhythm of her thoughts. She checked the fuel gauge, but without the engine on, the dashboard was dark. Instinct told her there was enough gas to make it back to the last rest stop she passed. But then again, maybe not. And even if she made it back, then what? That was the nagging question she hadn't been able to shake. What next?

Her jaw felt like she had been using it as a nutcracker with the amount of tension she carried. She traced her finger down the shallow crevice that had formed a wrinkle in the center of her brow. The fine lines around the edges of her eyes said she should smile more, but over the years there hadn't been a lot to smile at. Fear and the need for answers kept her moving. She was surprised she hadn't developed a permanent crook in her neck given how often she looked over her shoulder. But for once, it wasn't what was behind that frightened her, it was what lay ahead.

Indecision was the mother of time wasters, and Rox had been in the car for over an hour deciding whether to

get out or to drive back the way she had come. Ok, maybe just five minutes. But the problem with a retreat was that she would be traversing ground she'd already covered. A life on the run was a hard way to live. In the past eighteen months, she had stolen, lied, and deceived more people than she had in the four and a half years that her short memory was capable of stretching back. Was that really the kind of life she wanted to return to?

If Rox turned back now, her future would hold more derelict boarding houses and shelters with women who had survived the kinds of horror no human – evolved or otherwise – should have to endure. Sometimes, the grass on the other side wasn't greener.

Sometimes it was.

She pulled the photo from her backpack and slipped it into the pocket of her cargo pants. She didn't need the car's internal light to see; everything in her pack could be identified by touch: one change of clothes, an empty water bottle, a stolen hairbrush for her tight curls, and a flashlight. She had eaten all the snacks, and the little bit of money remaining from her last under-the-table job was tucked away in the bottom of her sock. Finding good hiding spaces was the third rule of living on the run.

The internal light switched on when she opened the door and she used it to tie her curls into a ponytail, making sure to tuck the ends up into a bun. She dropped the keys in the cupholder by the gear box because if things worked out in her favor, someone would return the car to its original owner. However, if things didn't, there was no chance of losing them in what lay ahead.

Rox got out and let her eyes readjust to the darkness when the door closed. She was at the road's end. Literally. The bite in the air promised snow. She inhaled deeply, hoping that somehow a deep breath would calm her nerves and stop the doubt about this plan from resurfacing. She wasn't sure what awaited her, but there was little point in thinking about that now. This felt like her last chance, and she was going to take it.

She walked carefully. It would be easy to step in the wrong place and twist an ankle. She could heal it, but why waste the energy? She used the flashlight and kept her head down. About a mile in, and a half-dozen *no trespassing* signs later, she stopped to catch her breath.

The couple back at the gas station said it was unseasonably cold, but this was Rox's first time in Connecticut. Or so she assumed. Without a lifetime of memories, it's hard to know much about yourself. And that's what had brought her to the end of a very dark road that opened upon a heavily wooded area. A very dense and obviously "privately owned" wooded area. She was in search of help, and the only people she had left to turn to were somewhere ahead of her.

It wasn't that long ago the world woke up to Darwinism in practice. There had been no rioting or violence, but people were curious. Why were some evolving and not others? Would the rest of humankind follow suit or was this a singular event? And why were most evolved human abilities passive? Like the ability to see music or taste color. There were a few whose brains could process information at the rate of a computer's central processor, but mostly

everyone considered them highly intelligent and not necessarily evolved, even though they were. Rox did hear of someone who could regulate her body to withstand sub-zero temperatures while completely naked, but scientists hadn't been able to uncover how she was able to do that.

Interest in the evolved quickly waned as no one came forward with any spectacular abilities. That was good for a while, but it didn't stay that way. Rumors were that the evolved were starting to disappear; they had become the easy target of doctors and scientists looking to create a name for themselves.

Halo was an organization that helped evolved ones who were in trouble. Or that's what the "majority" of people said. Ever since Rox had decided to seek their help, her thoughts ran fantastical, dreaming that they would help her recover her memories. Perhaps even help find the family she may (or may not) have. The only key to Rox's "possible" identity was a worn photo of two kids, one of which could be her or just as easily be the model in a stock photo.

That's the problem with hope: when it was all you had, it became nigh on impossible to let it go.

Rox curled her toes into her feet to warm them. If she had the money, she would have purchased boots, but the shelter had given her a pair of used running shoes, and she didn't want to waste money on buying something she didn't technically need.

Dried wood crunched as she passed another *no trespassing* sign. A cloud reduced visibility as the first flakes of snow fell. The good news was that she doubted she could

die of hypothermia. With her abilities, at best, she'd go into some kind of stasis and awake during the first thaw. Of course, during her hibernation, a wolf could find her and decide to eat her.

Could she regenerate lost tissue?

The weak energy source of small rodents darting through the underbrush was the first signs of life she sensed since turning off the interstate and following the car's navigation system to the end of the road. Natural energy was attracted to Rox, it flowed in and through her of its own accord. But artificial energy vibrated along the base of her skull like a chisel and hammer.

The wind picked up, and she flipped up the hood on her jacket. The material was thin and provided little warmth when she was outside for any length of time, but it was another "gift" from the shelter. First rule of living life on the run was that eventually everyone needed a coat; second rule was the need to protect said coat like you would the password to your bank account – second lesson she learned the hard way.

She should have been a hell of a lot more frightened than she was, but Josh had trained her. He had been there when she first woke four years ago and had nothing more than muscle memory and habit to guide her. Speech came easy even if she struggled to make sense of it half the time. But Josh was patient. He was the anchor she needed, and he trained her for the eventual fight he believed would happen between evolved humans and the non-evolved. But somewhere along the way, his help turned into manipulation, and her only choice was to run.

A breeze tore a blanket of leaves from their resting place and sent them across her path. Would it be so bad to go back? She could sleep in a warm bed, one without bugs. She could eat food for the taste instead of the hunger. The clothes she wore would fit and not carry the stench of someone else's sweat woven into the fabric. And she would belong. Tears welled at that thought. She missed belonging.

But it hadn't been real. Not authentically so. Josh had manipulated her mind to create the life *he* wanted. And she wasn't sure which was worse, living on the run or living a life where her every word was twisted to please another.

Yes, she did.

And that's why she was walking in the middle of the woods at 3:23am seeking help. Because sometime during the last year and a half, she had realized that going back to Josh or continuing a life on the run weren't her only two options. Someone somewhere had to know she existed. She was old enough to have set down roots – or at least leave footprints. She would have had a job. A family perhaps. And she had a photograph. Be it real or nothing more than the hope she refused to let go of, her only real option was moving forward.



## Red carpet

Rox thought about talking to herself to combat the silence, but she was a quiet contemplator. She wasn't sure if she



had always been like that or if spending a year and a half trying to go unnoticed had become a habit.

Fourth rule: never make a sound unless you have to – also learned the hard way.

A howl echoed through the trees ahead, and her flashlight swung in a wide arc to pinpoint the sound's origin. Everything froze but the snow. The animals she sensed earlier stilled in a way that marked them as prey. She was tempted to yell “hello” but thought better of it. She had no knowledge of wolves or wild dogs, and so she hoped if she continued along, they would leave her alone.

Her head looked like it belonged on a bobble given how often she looked up and down. Something caught just below the hem of her cargo pants, and Rox kicked out, thinking it was a fallen branch. But then that something slid across her ankle much too fast to be a rodent, followed almost immediately by a click.

Air flew from her lungs, and the contents of her backpack bit through the thin coat and into her back when she landed on the ground. She blinked against droplets of cold dripping onto her face, and it took her a moment to realize it was nothing more than snow. A high-pitched whine reverberated deep in her ear canal as she lay there trying to make sense of what just happened.

Rox's body pulled the kinetic energy from the blast to aid in her healing. What felt like the first sparks of fire slipped across her forehead over the cut just above her eye.

Most people underestimate the pain involved in healing.

A sane dose of fear finally gripped Rox by the time she

regained control of her lower extremities. She got to her feet and almost fell face-first into a rotting tree trunk. The bark tore through the skin of her palms as she righted herself. She had just pulled the straps of her backpack tighter when something slammed into her shoulder with such force she spun around.

The rotting trunk scraped a trio of parallel lines down the side of her face. Her forehead smacked against a root sticking up that reopened the cut on her forehead. Warm blood slid down her face as she rolled over onto her backpack. Again.

Whoever had put up the *no trespassing* signs were serious about their privacy.

Rox felt her attackers' energy drawing closer, and it was stronger and more aggressive than the rodents clambering through the leaves. She quickly sat up, but the sudden movement threw off her equilibrium, and she rolled to the side to heave into the hollow tree trunk. As much as she wanted to lie down and take a nap, the pain racing down her shoulder sobered her, and she had enough sense to keep moving.

The keys to the car were in the cupholder.

She wasn't sure if they had intentionally shot her in the shoulder or if they had been aiming for something more vital, but she didn't want to stick around to find out. She'd died a few times in the last four years, but none of them had been by gunshot to the head.

Rox kept low and started an awkward sprint back towards the car without the aid of the flashlight. She stumbled over what felt like every root and broken bough in her path as

her attackers' energy rolled towards her like a wave coming to shore. The tip of a branch scratched so close to her eye she wasn't sure if it actually made contact. For a moment, she thought she heard something through the ringing in her ears and when she glanced over her shoulder, the clouds broke and a black shadow moved at a speed much too fast to be human.

"Shit!" Bad, fucking plan, Rox.

She wasn't about to die from hypothermia, but she was about to be eaten by a wolf. Its eyes glowed in the dark as it bounded past the rotting trunk she had fallen into. She picked up the pace, not caring anymore about a twisted ankle or a broken toe. The ringing in her ears and her breathing drowned out all other sounds as the wolf's energy closed in. She stumbled again and this time fell on her hands. Splinters split open the skin that had just closed on her palms, but her hand's discomfort was drowned out by the pain that gripped her shoulder. She sucked in a sharp breath, but was up and sprinting before she could fully assess the damage.

Energy from others ran alongside her, and she realized she wasn't going to make it back to the car. Her only choice was to stop and explain herself. But they didn't seem like the type to ask questions first given they had already shot her.

She was out of options, but she wasn't defenseless. Josh may have been an ass – a manipulating, deceitful, downright unforgivable ass – but he trained her, and she knew how to hold her own. She had no delusions that she could take a group this size, their energy signatures were just too many. Hell, she might not be able to take even one of them, but

she was done being the victim. She'd done that for too long already. She was draining the first one who came at her.



### Third option

Rox stopped, pivoted, and dropped into a defensive stance. Without thought, she shifted her weight to the balls of her feet. Snow and pain threatened to blind her as the wind picked up, but she was able to keep the wolf in sight.

The wolf slowed and started to pace about fifty yards away. It lowered its head as its lips stretched back over curved teeth. Healing from one of its bites would be painful. A growl slipped through the silence like a personal message as the others circled around her, but Rox didn't take her eyes off the wolf.

The artificial hum of a helicopter hit her moments before its blades created an updraft of wind that tossed the underbrush into the night. Its energy was almost suffocating and a dull ache gripped the base of her skull, causing the crease in her forehead to deepen. She shielded her face with her arm against the flying debris as another bullet slammed into her stomach. Pain radiated up her chest and back down to the point of impact. Rox fell forward on her palms, but her shoulder gave out and she inhaled a mouthful of wet dirt.

Frustration replaced her fear.

Someone approached. Her body felt their energy, and she was a breath away from draining them when she hesitated. There was something about it that she had never

experienced before. It felt ... magnetic.

Rox spat out a mouthful of dirt and got to her feet just as the unfamiliar energy swept through her in a pulse that stole her breath. What the hell? She squinted through the darkness to get a better look at whoever had approached when a light shot down from the helicopter to cast a cone of visibility around her and her attackers.

She turned in a circle. There were six of them. Two to her right, two to her left, the man in front and the wolf just a few paces behind him. She looked down at herself and saw a thin piece of metal sticking out of her jacket, right where her bullet wound should have been.

Rox yanked it out, and a piece of polyester from her coat stuck to it. Was that a tranquilizer dart? She would have laughed if a helicopter wasn't hovering overhead and she wasn't surrounded by some kind of hostile, military types armed with tranquilizer darts.

Another pulse of energy swept through her and her knees buckled. What was that? It wasn't the tranquilizer. This felt like pure energy, and whoever had the ability to send it through her like that was powerful. That was an *active* ability.

Rox pulled out the other dart and dropped them both to the ground. The man who had approached took another step forward, but remained well outside of striking distance. He was dressed in black combat trousers and a black vest over jet-black arms that had to be his shirt because no skin tone was that dark.

Rox got to her feet, and the wolf curled back its lip as it moved to stand alongside him. The man reached down

and wound his fingers in its fur, and the wolf relaxed.

He took a few steps closer and when he spoke, the sound came from a speaker on the helicopter. “This is private property.”

No shit!

“Is this Halo?” Rox yelled.

Another energy pulse hit her, but this time her body absorbed it as if adapting to its frequency.

A second beam of light erupted from the helicopter as four shadows descended. Red dots tattooed her chest. The shadows were similarly dressed to the man who stood beside the wolf, but their faces were painted.

“I just want to talk,” she shouted to the small group now forming a complete circle around her.

Wolf-man tapped one of the painted men on the shoulder to lower his weapon as he stepped past. He kept his hand on the gun at his waist, but remained outside of arm’s reach. The wolf pushed its way through the men, its teeth once again exposed.

“Most people call first. Send a text or something.”

To call this a bad idea was a colossal understatement. Rox had expected a few “guards” like the ones at the shopping mall where she had sought shelter on the days it rained. Maybe they’d put her in some small office while they figured out how best to help. She had even anticipated being turned away until morning, which would have been fair. But a small response team armed with explosives and tranquilizers, aided by a helicopter, had not factored into her list of cons for showing up unannounced.

Wolf-man reached down to calm his animal when

another pulse collided with her, and she flinched. But so did Wolf-man. She looked up at the helicopter, and the lights temporarily distracted her as someone moved at her back. She felt the presence a few seconds too late. A strong arm encircled her neck and pulled it up and to the side. Pain exploded against her jugular as a needle tore into her skin.

Rox swung her elbow back into her attacker's nose, and if she had stopped to think about it, she wouldn't have stepped back into him and flipped him over her shoulder.

Shit.

Rox pulled the needle from her neck and locked eyes with Wolf-man. His mouth hung, but then quickly closed as he drew his weapon. "Take her down."

Pain spilled across her back. Darts chipped the bones in her wrist as she raised them to protect her face. The last thing she remembered was the full weight of the wolf knocking her down and the needles snapping off underneath her skin as she crashed to the ground.

# For Review Only

## About the Author



Natasha Oliver earned a Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing at Goddard College and a Bachelor of Science in Marketing at Lehigh University. Born in South Carolina, USA, she has lived and worked in Japan, Singapore and throughout Southeast Asia. Natasha has published several short stories and articles, and is also a professional ghostwriter and editor. In creative writing, Natasha's focus is on adult science fiction and fantasy.