TEARDROP EDITION

BEAUTY OF ARES

SLEEPING BEAUTY INC. BOOK III



STEPHANIE VAN ORMAN

Beauty of Ares by Stephanie Van Orman

Sleeping Beauty Inc. Book 3

Teardrop Edition

Copyright © 2023, 2024, 2025 Stephanie Van Orman

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or used in any manner without written permission of the copyright owner except for the use of written quotations in a book review.

Any reference to historical events, real people or places are used fictitiously. Names, characters, places are products of the author's imagination.

Front cover image by Canva AI
Book design by Stephanie Van Orman

https://tigrix1.wixsite.com/stephanievanorman
stephanievanorman.blogspot.com
tigrix@gmail.com

Beauty of Ares

Sleeping Beauty Inc. Book 3

Stephanie Van Orman

Welcome to Sleeping Beauty Inc.

Book One: Rose Red - You can't buy a girl! But in the year 2214, you can. She can whip you into shape, design your diet, be your personal stylist, and turn you from geek to chic in just one year. What will happen if your model isn't what they promised?

Book Two: Sleeping Prince - Gage is a solarship pilot who transports Sleeping Beauty Inc. models between the moons of Jupiter. His favorite is a model named Iona. She has a contract for him. Dare he refuse?

Book Three: Beauty of Ares - Tired of hiring temporary models? Why not try an arranged marriage through Sleeping Beauty Inc.'s Gold Edition catalog? Look no further than Lisbet. She's the daughter of an 'old money' diamond merchant. She'll dazzle your contact list with her wave of black hair and her violet eyes. She'll even travel to Mars, a place infamous for its cruelty toward purchased models. After her father sells her to Vantz Bloomburg, she'll do anything.

Table of Contents

Chapter One
Chapter Two
Chapter Three
Chapter Four
Chapter Five
Chapter Six
Chapter Seven
Chapter Eight
Chapter Nine
Chapter Ten
Chapter Eleven
Chapter Twelve
Chapter Thirteen
Chapter Fourteen
Chapter Fifteen
Chapter Sixteen
Chapter Seventeen
Chapter Eighteen
Chapter Nineteen
Chapter Twenty
Chapter Twenty One
Chapter Twenty Two
Chapter Twenty Three
Chapter Twenty Four
Chapter Twenty Five
Chapter Twenty Six
Chapter Twenty Seven
Chapter Twenty Eight
Chapter Twenty Nine
Chapter Thirty
Chapter Thirty One
Chapter Thirty Two
Chapter Thirty Three
Chapter Thirty Four

Chapter One

The first sign that things were not going well was when Lisbet's mother asked her to go through her clothes to clear some space in her closet. Lisbet had not thought anything of it. Dutifully, she went through her dresses and made a pile of the ones that didn't really fit her, were likely to malfunction, were less-than-ideal gifts, and weren't that flattering to begin with. She thought there was something magical on the horizon, like a vacation or a project that would require her to get new clothes and that was the reason she needed more closet space.

No event came.

Instead, one of Lisbet's friends was goofing off on the internet looking for vintage clothing and found all of Lisbet's old clothing up for auction.

As her friend scrolled through the options, Lisbet noticed one of her dresses and said, "I used to have a dress exactly like that."

Her friend scrolled to the next picture.

"Hey, I had one like that too," she chortled.

On the third picture, Lisbet clued in that something was wrong and wisely stayed silent as her friend scrolled through pages of the clothes she'd given to her mother. Her friend didn't say anything about it. It was one of the signs that her family's money had dried up. Lisbet's mother was trying to sell a five thousand dollar dress for forty thousand. The friend closed the auction window and when Lisbet left her house, she was never invited back.

People who didn't have their own money were parasites.

It wasn't personal.

Lisbet knew it wasn't. She'd seen friends lose all their money before. She'd behaved exactly the same way. She couldn't afford to give her poor friends the same lifestyle she enjoyed.

She held her head high and hoped that it was merely a phase.

It was merely a phase when her mother stopped asking if she could auction off her clothes and started taking them without her permission. It was merely a phase when all her jewelry went missing. Lisbet knew her mother had already auctioned off all her own pieces. It was merely a phase when Lisbet's two younger sisters had their closets and jewelry boxes ransacked too.

But it was no longer a phase when Lisbet's father had her meet with a coordinator from Sleeping Beauty Inc.

A million thoughts raced through Lisbet's mind. Should she run away from home? She was twenty-six. It wasn't running away from home when you were twenty-six. Besides, where could she go?

If Lisbet ran away, she couldn't run away to her friends. They had all deserted her when they deciphered which way the wind was blowing.

Lovers? She'd had none. Her father had heavily discouraged her from having boyfriends, scolding her that the men she dated were not good enough for her. That meant that no man with a decent amount of money to his name had tried to date Lisbet. She had dumped all the poor choices according to her father's instructions. People who didn't have their own money were parasites.

She had a university degree in physics, but such a thing was only useful as a profession if accompanied by more schooling. As it was, she didn't have enough education for any job she

knew of. She blamed her father. It had been his idea for her to take a degree without an immediate practical application.

The tables had turned.

She was a parasite.

Lisbet scratched her nose and looked at the agreement the coordinator from Sleeping Beauty Inc. had brought with her. The coordinator was a woman in her late fifties named Quincy. In her prime, she would have been far prettier than Lisbet. If she was a coordinator, that probably meant that no one wanted to buy her anymore. However, Quincy was good at her job and fawned over Lisbet and her beauty to gain her favor as she looked over the contract.

It didn't really work. Lisbet knew what she was and what she wasn't. She also knew that the most remarkable thing about her was fake.

Lisbet had violet eyes. Not naturally, but she had needed eye surgery to correct her nearsightedness. The surgery would insert a contact lens under the membrane of her eye. It was an opportunity to choose a different eye color. Lisbet's eyes had been hazel, a color so muddy that she had always wished to have blue eyes like her sisters. However, when given the choice, Lisbet chose violet and got a whole new look. It became her defining trait. Otherwise, her hair was black with a tangle of curls trailing down her back. Her skin was not creamy until after she did her makeup. Her figure was fine, but greatly improved by the right dress. She was a solid seven out of ten, which disappointed her because her sisters were like their mother and managed to score nines and tens depending on the occasion.

However, Quincy thought Lisbet had a lot to offer and praised her for her beauty and spoke repeatedly about how her degree in physics must mean that she was unusually bright.

The compliments were laid on so thick that Lisbet had to swallow her disbelief, or her vomit, more than once.

Lisbet looked down at the first contract she had been offered. It was a non-disclosure agreement.

She did a double take. If she wanted to have the meeting with the client coordinator she had to promise that their conversation would remain completely secret—whether she signed the final model agreement or not.

Sleeping Beauty Inc. was a company that traded in leasing human resources in temporary contracts. They advertised themselves as renting out personal assistants for full-life makeovers, meaning that models from Sleeping Beauty Inc. were not whores. They were stylists, housekeepers, artists, gardeners, personal assistants, and more. It was just that if a purchaser happened to want to go to bed with their model, everything was above board. There were better places to get cheap sex if that was all a purchaser wanted. A model from Sleeping Beauty Inc. was a classy, inventive person (usually a woman) who would work to improve her master's life for as long as he owned her.

Lisbet didn't know if people in her family's previous wealth bracket hired models from Sleeping Beauty Inc. If they did, they didn't tell. Her first thought was that it was not a respectable enough establishment for anyone to admit to it. If her father was trying to get a contract through them, things must be even more desperate than she thought.

Lisbet didn't bother to glance at her father for his approval. The meeting had been his idea. She signed the non-disclosure agreement.

Then the truth came out.

“For the last sixty-three years, Sleeping Beauty Inc. has had a special division,” Quincy explained sweetly. “We call it the Gold Edition Models.”

She went on to explain that men from a higher tier of finances were sometimes ill-equipped to procure a wife. They were rich enough that they could marry anyone, but ‘anyone’ simply wouldn’t do. They needed a woman with a good reputation, who came from a good family, who could never embarrass them with a divorce, who would stand by them publicly, and bring a level of class to their lives that could not be had otherwise.

All of that made more sense to Lisbet than what the ads said.

“So, I wouldn’t be sold?” Lisbet asked, thinking that marriage was not a sale per se.

Lisbet’s father stayed quiet and let the coordinator answer. “Darling, you are very valuable. Priceless. In your case, your family would receive a fabulous sum of money for you, enough to save your father’s business. But I would be lying if I said you wouldn’t be sold. You would be the property *and* the wife of your owner.”

Those words rang in her head. *You would be the property and the wife of your owner.*

“That seems wrong,” Lisbet said, refusing to glance at her father.

“It wouldn’t be. Please remember that money has changed hands in arranged marriages for time out of mind. It was the common practice of royalty. You’re royalty, Lisbet. You’re priceless. Let’s see who wants to marry you.” The coordinator took an elaborate black and gold envelope from the contract package. She gave it to Lisbet with minor hesitation like she wanted to open it herself.

Lisbet opened the envelope. It was stiff in her hands, like the most expensive invitation she had ever touched.

The man was Vantz Bloomburg.

Lisbet covered her mouth.

The coordinator squeaked in sudden excitement. She had known and it had been hard for her to keep such an astonishing secret to herself.

Lisbet’s father looked sober. He had expected it. Obviously, he wouldn’t have agreed to such a thing for someone less fantastic. At least, that was what Lisbet had to believe.

There was no picture in the envelope. No one knew what Vantz Bloomburg looked like. However, he was famous. He had taken over terraforming Mars three years ago and had been in the news every day since then. He kept his face a secret from the public because he said that having a public presence was too much for him. Instead, he made everyone crazy because his work on Mars always ruffled too many feathers.

At the moment, Vantz was causing trouble because of his chosen locations for building the towers that would create a magnetic field. There was no point in putting an atmosphere on a planet with no magnetic field to protect it. It would just get blown into space without it. Two of his locations were in places that were already owned by mining companies and the government of Mars was insisting that the companies step aside and let Vantz have their land, and their buildings, and to do so quietly. The companies were furious. The compensation meant nothing to them. They insisted those locations were unequaled in their excellence. They would not step aside.

Vantz was in the newsreels fighting about it every day.

He was notorious since there was always some new rumor about him. The conspiracy theories about him were head-spinning.

Lisbet dropped the page with his name on it and the personal note he sent asking her to look at his proposal kindly.

“Wait,” Lisbet said slowly. “Did he ask for me? Personally?”

Quincy looked at a few pages included in her files before answering. “Of course. You would not be having this meeting if he wasn’t willing to pay the exorbitant fee your family has requested. Not only has he requested you, but you are the only model he’s asked for. He’s had no rejections.”

If Vantz had known to ask for Lisbet personally then that meant her parents had put her up for auction just like her clothes, just like her jewelry, and what were they saying about her? She was precious? She was priceless? Pathetic!

Lisbet shot her father a disgusted look. He had known it was coming and kept his eyes on the floor.

Lisbet did not look or speak to her father again. Instead, she let Quincy go through the contract. It named the sum of money her father would receive for her and it detailed the position Vantz hoped she would play in his life. He needed someone with a reasonable understanding of science to do some public relations work for him. Basically, he needed a public face to show the people of Mars. He needed a representative to attend functions for him on his behalf, accept awards, and whatnot. He listed what her living space would be like on Mars, giving her a suite of her own in his mansion, clothes, jewelry, respectability, fame, and more.

Lisbet felt sick to her stomach. Everything she was was exactly what Vantz wanted and she felt sick to her stomach. Her parents had raised her that way with intention. Was she just an investment to them? Like livestock to be raised?

She turned to Quincy. “Could you please tell me a little more about Vantz?”

“I hope I can,” she said cheerfully. “What’s your question?”

“How old is he?”

Quincy flipped through files on her tablet until she brought up the profile he had to fill out when he signed up with Sleeping Beauty Inc.

Name: Vantz Bloomburg
Age: 32
Eye Color: N/A
Hair Color: N/A
Height: N/A
Weight: N/A
Profession: Head Terratologist on Mars
Previous Marriages: None.
Sexual History: N/A
Sexual Preference: N/A

It went on like that. Anything else they asked him, he submitted ‘not applicable’ (N/A) for his answer.

“Sleeping Beauty Inc. accepted these answers?” Lisbet asked, not letting any of her feelings of disappointment show in how she looked or spoke.

“There’s a note from the intake worker at the bottom. It just says he’s very charismatic when you speak to him over audio communications,” Quincy answered lamely.

“Whatever,” Lisbet said, flourishing her hand and signing the contract. She stood up. “Shall we go, Madam Coordinator? I’m ready now.”

Quincy stood up with an excited, “Eep! I’m so impressed that you were able to make your decision so quickly. You are a really decisive person,” she praised.

Lisbet’s father stood and tried to place a hand on her back.

“Don’t touch me!” she hissed, stepping away from him. “With this last act, I never want to speak to you again.”

“Ah, Pipsqueak,” her father said, trying to pacify her with the name he called her when she was a child.

“Do not talk to me. A horse you raised and sold would not call you on the phone. You asked me to sell my life away and I have done it. Do not ask me for one more thing for the rest of my life.”

The client coordinator gave Lisbet’s father a sympathetic look before she covered Lisbet’s shoulders with her own coat. She led her outside into the snow and into the warm car that was waiting outside.

Lisbet did not turn around. She didn’t look to see if her family was watching her leave or if they knew she was leaving. She had intentionally missed saying goodbye to her mother and her sisters. What on Earth could she say to them when she was leaving under such circumstances?

The only thing Lisbet knew was that if she didn’t sell herself, her family’s finances would plummet even further. More doors would close to her. Maybe all the doors would close. The doors wouldn’t just close for her, but for her parents and her sisters. If she refused Vantz, she was unlikely to get a better offer from a richer man. The offer of purchase from Vantz was the exact thing her father had been praying for.

Perhaps the most important reason to sign was to prevent her sisters from having to sell themselves. She did not want Tiffania or Cassica to be forced to sign because she would not. Besides, Quincy said Vantz was paying enough money that the financial problem would be corrected.

Inside the car, Lisbet closed her eyes and realized with a sickening lurch in her stomach that she hadn’t understood what she needed to do in the years since she became an adult. She had taken a degree in university, but it had taken her longer than the usual four years because she only took a few classes every semester. As far as she knew, there was no rush. She hadn’t realized that she had to find herself a husband or her father would find one for her. If she had brought home a young man of reasonable fortune, her parents would have married her off to him instead. That would have been ideal since at least then he would have been her choice. Marrying her off had always been their plan. She simply hadn’t been aware that she was supposed to be scouting a rich husband.

Why had they never told her?

The sharp sting was because if she had chosen someone herself, she would have gotten her husband’s money for herself, and not them. With the arrangement with Sleeping Beauty Inc., her parents got the money instead of her.

She tried to tell herself that her father had always been good to her. She reminded herself of all the times her father had paid for trips, clothes, parties, and more. His diamond business had crumbled and the tables had turned. If his money hadn't dried up, he would never have sold her.

That was when the bile bubbled in her throat.

She was kidding herself.

He was always going to control her. That was why he had stopped her from dating. He wanted to control her. He gave her what she wanted and then he took what he wanted.

Except, had she ever wanted anything that her father hadn't taught her to want?

It was a paradox and Lisbet wasn't sure if it mattered if she could unpick it. She was on her way to Mars… and a man like Vantz Bloomburg wanted her. The head terratologist on Mars had chosen her out of all the models available through Sleeping Beauty Inc. Even if he was a goat man, that was still pretty hot.

Chapter Two

Lisbet was given her choice of what she would like to wear when she was in cryostasis for the trip between Earth and Mars. After all, it would be what she was wearing when Vantz woke her from cryostasis with a kiss.

"Normally," Quincy said as she took her into the shop. "Normally, the buyer chooses what the model will wear and pays for it. In your case, Vantz has said that he will buy anything you like. What kind of dress would you like to wear? First impressions are very important."

Lisbet groaned. "I don't want a dress. I want leggings and a sweater." But looking around the showroom, Lisbet could see that was out of the question. They only had dresses. "Okay," she said, getting her bearings. "Something black?"

"We can't make it look like you're going to your own funeral," Quincy rebuked, pulling out a yellow gown.

"I am not going to my funeral," Lisbet agreed firmly. "But I am not like you with your skinny ribcage and your teeny thighs. I need the black to make me look slimmer."

"I've got you," a woman called from behind the counter.

"Veronica, do not give her a black dress!" Quincy countered, taking a quick step to stop the woman from behind the counter from retrieving anything from the back.

"I've got something good," Veronica yelled back.

After some fuss, the dress was brought out, stripped of its plastic covering, and handed to Lisbet. Lisbet didn't look at it but disappeared behind a curtain to try it on.

From behind the curtain, she heard Quincy and Veronica.

"Why are you making such a fuss about what she wears? It doesn't matter. Vantz doesn't care. She needs to get going. You know that." Veronica's voice was the lightest smacking of tongue and vocal cords to make the necessary sounds.

"But… she needs to feel special," Quincy hissed back.

"She's not going to feel special. She's the excuse we need, and she has to hurry."

"But!" Quincy said again. "This is too tense. Doing business like this is too tense."

"And if we want to stay in business, we'll do this part perfectly. No part of this deal has much to do with what she looks like. It's going to take a year to get to Mars. Toughen up."

"I can never get over it," Quincy lamented. "How many times have you told your models, 'Don't go to Mars', 'Don't go to Mars', 'Do not go to Mars!' and none of them listen? And now we're sending *her* to Mars?"

"That's right. Think about Mars. Think about Vantz. We need to do all we can to help him now," Veronica said, trying to keep her voice hushed and failing.

With those words, the Sleeping Beauty Inc. employees quieted down and Lisbet finished putting the dress on. She came out of the dressing room and looked at herself in the mirror. It was good. It made her eyes bulge like balloons. She'd clearly been shopping in the wrong boutiques because she'd never tried on a dress that made her look like a black rose in the twilight.

Every dress has a purpose. Its job is to highlight a particular part of a woman's body. A dress with a slit gives away the leg. A dress with an empire waist gives away the solar plexus. Many

dresses give away the shoulders. A dress that gives away everything is not a dress, it is lingerie.

The dress Lisbet wore gave away the collarbone and the slight curve of her breasts beneath. It was made of velvet with long sleeves, a tight bodice, and an A-line skirt. It had a large cutout circle that exposed her collarbone and a touch of cleavage, but no throat. Her neck was covered with a mock turtleneck. The way the sleeves covered her hands and knuckles was what really won her.

"This will do," Lisbet said, happy she didn't have to try on a million dresses. Normally, she liked trying on dresses, but she was no longer in the mood. "What were you two talking about when I was in the dressing room? Quincy, you didn't tell me not to go to Mars."

"Did you hear *that*?" Quincy replied flippantly like what they were talking about was about as important as which door they received their dress deliveries. "That's advice for the lower-grade models. You are nothing like them. We're not marrying them off to trillionaires with priceless government contracts. You are special. You need a necklace!" Quincy declared, clearly desperate to change the subject.

Veronica rolled her eyes in the mirror over Lisbet's shoulder. "Her collarbone is her necklace. It looks perfect. It's a good dress because no one will be able to look at anything else."

"Still," Quincy said sadly. "It seems strange to take you right upstairs and put you in cryostasis without doing at least one more thing. Earrings? Makeup? Normally, we'd get someone to do your hair, but it already looks exquisite."

Lisbet decided to sit for makeup. They had a professional who seemed enthusiastic. Besides, having sponges and brushes pushed against her face, her head, the place where her thinking happened, was helpful. It took her mind off the betrayal that was as fresh as her shadow. Lisbet would have liked to think about what awaited her, what Quincy and Veronica were talking about, what would happen in the future, and how that mattered, but she couldn't make herself. Instead, she thought of her father and how much he hurt her and then she closed her eyes so finishing powder could be applied.

"How long will I be in cryostasis on the trip between Earth and Mars?" she asked with her eyes closed. The makeup artist was doing her eyeshadow.

"A little over a year, Earth time," Quincy informed her.

"Can Vantz wait that long?" Lisbet asked.

"Vantz has already been sent word that you have accepted the contract and since you've already signed it, you are already his property, so he's using you already," Quincy replied.

"How can he do that?" Lisbet wondered. "I'm here. He's there. How can I be of any use here?"

"He had a press release ready to go should you accept. Your relationship has already been made public. He invented a story about how you contacted him asking him questions related to a possible thesis for your master's degree. You talked back and forth while you were on Earth and he was on Mars. You both fell in love and now you're joining him on Mars," Quincy gushed.

How a made-up story could make a grown woman like the client coordinator gush, Lisbet didn't know. Lisbet wasn't about to gush.

"Is he going to want us to have a fancy wedding when I arrive on Mars?" she asked through pouted lips. She was having her lipstick done and it was difficult to speak through the application.

“No. Vantz may be a public figure, but he’s not a *public* public figure. You’ll have a marriage certificate to sign on your arrival in order to keep his end of the deal with your father. It should be an occasion almost identical to the one we had today, except you’ll be able to see the real Vantz Bloomburg. I envy you. Anyone who has seen him has had to sign a non-disclosure agreement vowing to never tell a soul what they’ve seen. And you get to meet him!”

Lisbet had a mirror shoved in her face and she saw the completed look.

“How is that?” the makeup artist asked.

Lisbet looked at her face in the mirror. She looked stupid. She always thought dramatic makeup made her look stupid like she was a little girl who had put it on herself and got carried away with the colors. However, Lisbet also knew that it didn’t really matter what she looked like. It was makeup. It would come off and if she didn’t let Quincy make her look the way she wanted her to look, she was going to have a fight on her hands. They had to make her look like one of their models, their products, what they promised their clients.

In the blink of an eye, she would be on Mars and then maybe she would be in charge of how she looked. Maybe she wouldn’t be. If she could do whatever she wanted then it wouldn’t matter if she couldn’t look the way she wanted now. On the contrary, if she was going to be bullied around for the rest of her life by a man who wanted her to look a certain way, she may as well get used to seeing a stranger in the mirror.

“I look perfect,” she said to the makeup artist with a fake smile.

Everyone was satisfied, including Quincy, who took her up a magical stairway like someone in a fairy tale.

“I don’t know if you know this,” Quincy said as they went up. “But normally, our models are told a fairy tale before they are put in cryostasis. I have told fairy tales to hundreds of girls going to sleep in glass boxes, but Vantz requested a special story be told to you.”

“Interesting,” Lisbet lied. Nothing was very interesting at that moment. Who cared about dumb fairy tales? Her whole life had been ripped apart in a single afternoon.

“Vantz asked that you be placed in the cryochamber with the lid put down and then to have an audio recording played for you. How does that sound? You don’t get squeamish in small spaces, do you?”

They came to the top of the stairs to a round room surrounded by arched mirrors and windows. In the middle was the cryochamber. Lisbet had never been in a room with one before. She had only seen them in movies and commercials. However, she had been in rooms with coffins before and the cryochamber looked almost exactly like one, except for the glass lid.

She clenched her jaw.

Quincy saw her and offered quietly. “Would you like me to tell you a fairy tale anyway to help soothe your nerves?”

“Just tell me the proper way to get inside. Feet first? Bum first?”

“Just like you get into a row boat?” Quincy said, offering her a hand.

Lisbet got inside. The chair inside was white leather and held her at a bit of an angle inside the box. Once inside the box, everything suddenly seemed all too real. What had they said about Mars behind her back? *Don’t go to Mars.* Her knees were wobbling and she was thinking what a tragedy it would be if she wet herself, but if the leather chair was white, that must not happen very often. The chair had a four-point harness, which Quincy helped her buckle.

“The chamber will fill with gas once Vantz stops speaking. I hope it’s a smooth transition for you.” Quincy stepped away from the cryochamber, but she had one more thing to tell Lisbet. “Oh, and don’t forget he’s going to kiss you to wake you up. That’s what all the clients do.”

The lid fell closed.

Lisbet was grateful Quincy didn’t say goodbye. It was goodbye, but it was still nice of her not to say it.

The lid was clear plexiglass and was meant to look something like a space-worthy glass casket like the one Snow White was dead in. However, there was a bar that broke up the glass, and on it was a tiny screen with instructions and information.

Vantz’s voice came over the speaker. It was deep and low with a slight accent that spoke of culture and civility. “Once upon a time, there was a land that was made of red dust. There was so much of it that it formed dunes of pink sand with jagged black rocks jutting out of it. The sky was a red haze. All the kings of the red sands dreamed of showing their power by turning that pink sand into yellow sand, making that pink sky blue. They all dreamed of it. They poured their money into plans to achieve it, but it was all for nothing. In time, they stopped trying. It was something not even a king could achieve. If a king can’t achieve it, who can?”

His voice stopped and Lisbet saw the sleeping gas drift in through the vents. The little screen in the middle displayed the words, ‘Breathe Normally.’ Lisbet did, though it took all her control to do so.

She fell asleep. The heaviness that hit her was strong. Heaviness was all she knew. Heavy eyelids, heavy hands, heavy thoughts. The thoughts were the heaviest.

Time passed.

She breathed in hard.

Warm lips were on hers.

Lisbet opened her eyes and saw black. Something was covering her eyes. A blindfold?

Against all odds, the kiss was good. It felt like the kind of kiss someone got at the train station after a long journey. She was missed when she was away. She was loved. It was a feeling she’d never felt before, just hoped for.

The feeling lasted thirty seconds before the kiss ended.

The heaviness was still thick throughout her body. By the time she reached the blindfold at the back of her head, the man who had kissed her was gone. She knew it was a man. She had felt a bit of the stubble on his chin.

He was long gone.

Lisbet slid out of the cryochamber, but she was really too disoriented to be moving around. She slid, falling on her face.

Chapter Three

Alone in the room with the empty cryochamber, Lisbet was free to right herself without anyone knowing how she had disgraced herself by falling face-first onto the black carpet. She stood up tall and took in the room around her. There were no windows. She had not been expecting any. On Mars, almost everything was built underground and she had not had time to research the home of Vantz Bloomburg before she was put into cryostasis.

The room was bare, except for the cryochamber in the middle. It was marked with Sleeping Beauty Inc.'s brand, but Lisbet noticed a stamp on it that indicated that not only she but also the cryochamber had been sold to Vantz. The walls and ceiling of the room were a deep red with black wainscotting and molding. The light came from pots above her. With the lush black carpet under her feet, she felt like she had arrived on Mars, even though she had yet to see the surface.

Outside the room, Lisbet met two people in servant uniforms. One was a young man with black tousled hair and deep brown eyes. The woman next to him seemed more ageless as her hair and eyes were both gray. They were both smooth and beautiful in their white pointed collars and black ties.

"Welcome to Castle Ares," the young man said with a smile.

"Is that what Vantz calls his mansion?" Lisbet asked, her voice a little shaky as she shook off the cryosleep.

"Not at all," the young man continued brightly. "It is what we call it in honor of him. This is Charcoal. She will see to all your personal needs. I am Beckett, Beck for short, and I will see to all your professional needs."

Lisbet didn't know what that meant exactly. What did she need personally and what did she need professionally? However, she was feeling woozy. Apparently, it was the space travel that did that to models, not the cryostasis.

Beck noticed Lisbet was unsteady on her feet and led the way to a seating area where she was placed in an armchair and given tea and sandwiches.

Beck and Charcoal both took seats in chairs next to her, which immediately meant that neither of them were low-level servants. A servant like a waiter or a valet would never take a seat next to their patron. However, a servant who was more like a business partner could do so at any time.

The first bite into a cucumber sandwich did not taste good, but Lisbet recognized immediately that that was not the fault of the sandwich. Her mouth felt strange, like she'd been sleeping with her mouth open… for a year, which was probably the truth. She swallowed a sip of tea and realized it wouldn't take another year for the feeling to pass. She just needed to keep eating and drinking.

"How are you feeling now? Are you feeling any better?" Charcoal asked her in a considerate tone.

"Well enough," Lisbet replied, knowing that these people had a job to do. Today, it was guiding her orientation to Castle Ares. She had to let them get on with it.

Beck began. "Obviously, Castle Ares is not a building like you'd expect it to be back on Earth. It is a skyscraper that was built inside a crater."

“Does that mean that it was built downwards like the buildings on Europa?” Lisbet asked.

“No,” he said kindly. “There are two levels of basement, but the rest was built above ground. It was built at the bottom of a crater that comes up around it. There are seventy-seven floors, excluding the below-ground levels I mentioned. The top four floors are above the top of the crater. Those are the floors that are used as the Bloomburg residence. Beneath, the space is rented out as homes for those working on the Mars terraforming project. They are inaccessible to us and managed by the castle’s head butler.”

“When will I get to meet Vantz?” Lisbet asked at the pause.

“Terribly sorry,” Charcoal apologized. “He was just on his way out when you arrived. He stopped and said hello to you when your cryochamber was deactivated. I suppose it wasn’t much of an introduction when you were still so groggy, but it was all the time he could spare before he began his tour of the magnetic towers.”

“When will he be back?” Lisbet pressed, touching the exposed skin over her heart that her black dress did not cover.

Beck saw the motion and his eyes lingered on her hand for the length of a heartbeat before he hefted a throw blanket from behind his chair to cover her shoulders.

Lisbet accepted it gratefully.

“I’m sorry to say that he will need to spend at least one week at each tower and there are fourteen towers,” Beck explained from his height before returning to his chair.

“He won’t be back for fourteen weeks?” Lisbet asked weakly. Hearing that Vantz wouldn’t be there for over three months was a blow.

“At the soonest,” Beck emphasized. “That’s if everything goes as smoothly as possible, which is unlikely, but Lisbet,” he continued, scooching forward on his seat and getting closer to her to further emphasize what he was about to say. “You mustn’t tell anyone that he is touring the towers. You must know *some* of the history of Mars terraforming.”

Lisbet looked at him. She knew what everyone knew, but she had been out of the news loop for the last year. All she knew was that there had been numerous attempts to terraform Mars and all of them had failed. People lived underground on Mars or they lived in domed cities. Life on Mars was hard and most people who were looking to colonize a new world quickly moved on to Ganymede or Callisto, moons orbiting Jupiter that already had atmospheres. Both moons had enjoyed success with terraforming and efforts to turn the red planet into a livable world had been one debacle after another.

The towers Beck was referring to were intended to generate an artificial magnetic field around Mars. The magnetic field was an invisible bubble that kept life-dependent gasses close to the surface. The idea of fourteen towers to generate the magnetic field had been tried several times before Vantz came along. He was using unfinished infrastructure. The logic was simple. If, for a moment, you forgot that Mars was a sphere and transformed it into a cube, there were eight corners on a cube and six faces. If you put a tower at each of the eight corners and in the center of all six faces, you had fourteen. That was why there were fourteen towers.

“Are you saying if certain people knew that he was close to finishing the towers, Vantz would have more to worry about from saboteurs?” Lisbet asked.

“Exactly,” he said, wanting to sound positive. “But it’s always a good idea to keep his exact location a secret. A lot of people want to kill him. You arrived at a perfect time to give him an

alibi and this castle is well protected. It's helpful if everyone thinks he's here with you. He left you a marriage certificate and we'll take your wedding pictures to include in a press release."

"Won't people think it's strange that he's not with me in the pictures?" she asked, still in a bit of a fog.

"Not at all," Beck said with that same smile soaking in positivity.

Was it the only smile he knew how to make?

Charcoal took over. "Vantz has always been very private about his appearance. There are no photographs of him. No one is expecting him to be seen with you, in the pictures or in person. However, there is a lovely selection of wedding dresses for you to choose from waiting for you in your dressing room. Also, Vantz has prepared a wonderful surprise for you. After you sign the wedding agreement, you will be welcomed into his private suite."

Lisbet nodded. "I'll sign it. Where is it?"

Beck and Charcoal looked at her with approving smiles that lasted all the way to the moment *after* she had signed the document.

Chapter Four

After Lisbet signed the marriage agreement, it wasn't that Beck and Charcoal's smiles completely evaporated, but they relaxed It showed they were not the sort of servants who were used to dealing with someone they had to mind their manners toward, so once the most pressing task of the day had been accomplished, they fell back into old habits. The wedding agreement had been signed, but Lisbet didn't get to look at it because Beck placed it in a metal box and shoved off saying he'd be back later to help her sync with the VR. Charcoal led her to an escalator that took her up a floor.

"This is the seventy-fifth floor," Charcoal said, leading her toward a large set of ornate doors.

They opened automatically on her approach.

"Do the doors open for everyone?" Lisbet asked.

"No one has access to these floors except you, me, and Beck. No one else is even allowed up here, not even to clean. We have robots for that. And I do apologize, but you will be living with Beck and me like we are a family. He'll be your annoying younger brother. I'll be your annoying older sister as there is no lock on your door that will keep out either of us. If it is of any comfort, this is how Vantz has always lived with us."

"So you know all about him? What he looks like and everything?"

Charcoal sniffed before answering cryptically, "I know what money looks like."

Lisbet stepped into the room. It was the grandest space she'd ever seen but in a different way. The lights to the room were out and what was visible was a wall of glass. The wall showed the pink sandscape of Mars above the crater.

Lisbet wandered to the window like a person in a dream and put her fingertips to the chilled glass. The color before her—crimson—usually denoted heat. It looked warm, but Lisbet knew it was never warm on Mars. The sand did not swirl in the wind. There was no wind. It lay flat like it was dead. Like it wouldn't move unless you kicked it with the toe of your boot. The black rocks that spiked through the sand seemed to denote sickness, like thorns coming through flower petals even after all the roses were long dead.

The sun was small in the distance, more like a star and less like a sun. There were things hanging in the sky, things like metal ships, broken and twisted. "What's that?" Lisbet asked, pointing at metal clouds.

Charcoal looked at them and said reluctantly, "They're space crafts."

"You know," Lisbet said airily, touching the glass with her fingertips. "It feels like everyone is lying to me. It's felt like that since I met the client coordinator on Earth. Like everyone wants to keep what's really going on a secret from me. I'd appreciate it if you didn't lie to me too."

"I didn't lie," Charcoal replied frostily. "They're space crafts."

"Why are there so many? They look broken."

"They are broken. Vantz will explain later. It's my job to show you around."

Lisbet went to turn away from the window as if to get on with the tour, but she accidentally looked down through the window. If she looked down, she couldn't see the ground. It was too far down. The view at that angle from the seventy-fifth floor made her dizzy and she stepped away.

“This window faces the unsettled plains. Other views from the tower show the city, Noachis. I’ll show you the buildings from another set of windows later. The sky and the landscape will look brighter at a different time of day—more yellow.” Charcoal turned on the lights.

The most notable part of the room was a huge bed. Lisbet turned toward it, the spell of Mars had temporarily broken for her. “That’s Vantz’s bed?”

“Technically, it is your wedding bed. Isn’t that an exciting thought?”

“You don’t need to psyche me up. It’s not like I’m going to be ravished in the night here,” Lisbet said, taking hold of a bedpost and swinging from it a little. She turned to look at Charcoal, but her back was turned.

“You should know that though I have access to everything here and I made that comment about the three of us living as a family, I do not live on these upper floors. I live on the fifteenth floor. I work here during the day, but not every day. I have my duties toward you and you are my top priority, but I have other work in other parts of the building. The person you will be working with the most will be Beck. He has an apartment on the floor above. Regardless of where you sleep and what title you have, you must remember that you are also a servant here.”

Charcoal’s back was still to Lisbet.

“Is that a warning?” Lisbet asked, keeping her eyes on Charcoal’s back. She wasn’t exactly clear as to what kind of warning it could be, but she liked that Charcoal seemed like she was trying to be honest with her.

“Not at all,” Charcoal said, turning back to Lisbet with another planned smile. “It’s just information on your living arrangement. Though I am on the fifteenth floor I will always be available to come up if you need me for the tiniest thing.”

She led Lisbet to the bathroom where there wasn’t really running water even though it was technically a bathroom.

Lisbet looked at Charcoal painfully before admitting, “I have no idea how to use these facilities.”

“I understand. Earth is so plentiful with water, they can use it for toilets. Here, water is scavenged from the asteroid belt and sent here in ice chunks. That’s where we get our drinking water.”

Then Charcoal explained how the sewage on Mars worked. It was messier than on Earth, but Lisbet was living in one of the finest castles on the planet and wouldn’t suffer from the same deficiencies the whole planet had become accustomed to. There was a liquid in her toilet bowl though it was not water. She was allowed to use five hundred milliliters of water for a shower, which was quite luxurious. Showers used in outer space were only allowed to use two-hundred and fifty. She was encouraged to use a hand sanitizer to wash her hands and only to use water in the sink if she was truly filthy.

Charcoal brought her out of the bathroom and showed her a sauna chamber that was intended to be used in place of a bathtub to warm up if Lisbet was chilled to the bone.

Then Lisbet was led into the closet, which was a revelation. It was huge. The walls were lined with pairs of shoes like they were books. The dresses were lined up like they were people waiting to speak to her. There were bags, scarves, coats, belts, and more. Going through it was not labyrinthine, but it was completely over-the-top. Last of all, she saw a rack of wedding dresses.

“Do you want to look through them now?” Charcoal offered.

“Are we finished with the tour?” Lisbet asked, feeling uncomfortable just looking at them.

It wasn’t that she was uncomfortable with the idea of wearing a wedding dress. As far as she was concerned, there was nothing sacred about a white dress. A dress made with white fabric was not significant. It wasn’t the thing about the wedding either.

She wasn’t even sure what was bothering her. It wasn’t as though Vantz had tried to pretend for one second that this wasn’t a marriage intended to profit both of them… Well, her family and him. Those were the two parties being benefitted. Not her.

That was it.

Even though she was in a new place. Even though it had been nearly a year since she had left her family on Earth… to her it had only been an hour. All those things that had been burning a hole in her heart were still doing that. She wasn’t in a position to be demanding about what she did and didn’t do once she arrived at Vantz’s castle, but… she was still sore and nothing that had happened so far assuaged her hurt feelings. It wasn’t like Vantz stayed to help her settle in or… She touched her lips. He’d kissed her, but that had to sustain her for fourteen weeks. It hadn’t felt like nothing at the time, but it didn’t feel like it was enough.

“There is still the dining room,” Charcoal offered, reverting back to the role of a tour guide.

Lisbet nodded. “Then let’s finish the tour and then I would be happy to try on wedding dresses.”

The dining room was not what she expected because she expected a table and chairs. There was a table. There were chairs. The wall had a dozen machines that gave the same impression as vending machines. It had the feeling of a hospital cafeteria with no nurses.

Charcoal began explaining the situation. “For starters, none of the individual suites have kitchens. Because water is in short supply here, food needs to be brought in. Thus, it is all pre-prepared and delivered. There is a little prep that takes place on the fifth floor, but then it is sent up here.”

Lisbet stood in front of a machine that had the words ‘Taco Tuesday’ written in bold yellow letters. It looked like cheese melting behind glass. Below was a touch screen that helped her customize her taco. Then there was a slot that appeared to be the place where it would be spat out, presumably from the fifth floor.

“I can order a taco?” Lisbet asked with an eyebrow in the air.

“Obviously,” Charcoal said with a bored hand on her hip.

Lisbet walked down the line. The next machine let her order pasta. The one after let her order pizza. Going along, there was a machine for nearly every region of food on planet Earth. Then the drink machines started. Half of them were fountain drinks and the other half needed to be prepared on the fifth floor and sent up. Then the desserts began.

“I can order all this food?” Lisbet asked, still stunned. The setup didn’t exactly look appetizing, but it did look interesting.

“You can only order your allotted calorie count per day. You are not allowed to turn into a walrus. If you read the menus, the calories are listed instead of the price.”

“How many calories am I allowed to have per day?”

Charcoal checked her tablet. “Sixteen hundred.”

Lisbet pulled a face. “Hopefully, I can survive on that.”

“If you start losing weight, you can petition for more calories. That’s something you can talk to Vantz about once Beck gets you hooked up to the virtual reality program. That’s another room I can show you.”

The door to the VR room looked like a closet door. Lisbet had thought it was a closet, but it was silly for her to have thought that. She had already seen the closet and it wasn’t a little cupboard, it was as big as the bedroom.

The VR room was a small room with a machine in the center. Once someone had their eyes covered by a faceplate, their ears covered by headphones, their hands in pressure gloves with portable joysticks, and they stood on the black square, they could walk in any direction and not move at all. The floor would move under them like a directionless treadmill. There was also a chair, quite plush really, for her to sit on.

“This is where I’m going to meet Vantz?” Lisbet asked.

“He does VR meetings with everyone. That’s how he keeps his face a secret.”

“Why does he do that?”

“I’m sure he can explain it to you. That’s the end of the tour. Do you have any questions?”

Lisbet looked around and thought of a few. “Why isn’t there a living room?”

“You don’t need one. You are forbidden from bringing guests here.”

“But I’ll be going places? He didn’t buy me that huge closet full of clothes just for me to sit and chat with him on VR, did he?”

“Certainly not. You’ll be going out. You’re just not allowed to bring people back here. It’s not unusual in Martian homes for the living room to be omitted. No one needs them. Martians meet in public places. The only reason you’d bring someone home would be…” she trailed off, not explaining the reasons for bringing someone home to your home that only had a bed in it. “Any other questions?”

“I notice you have an armband like mine,” Lisbet said, looking at the pink metallic bracelet around Charcoal’s wrist. “Were you also purchased from Sleeping Beauty Inc.?”

“I’m sorry. That’s classified,” she said, displaying her first touch of real disdain. “Would you like to try on the wedding dresses now? Your photoshoot is scheduled for the day after tomorrow and even though the dresses were made to fit your measurements, I was asked to get you to try them on as quickly as possible in case the one we choose requires adjustment.”

Lisbet nodded and motioned for Charcoal to lead the way back to the closet.

Lisbet walked in and started peeling off the black dress she was wearing.

“What are you doing? Aren’t you going to get behind a privacy screen?” Charcoal asked, a little horrified.

“What for?” Lisbet replied. “You’re my personal maid, presumably in charge of me and all these clothes. You don’t cook for me or clean for me. Isn’t this what you do? Make sure I look good in my clothes? Why should I go through the trouble of preserving my modesty? You’ve already informed me that you and Beck can walk in on me at any time. We need to get to work. What is the problem?”

Charcoal turned her face away and handed Lisbet the first dress without another word.

Lisbet tried it on.

Walking across the room, Charcoal picked up a red item and brought it over. It looked like a toy. It was squishy like a clown nose, but it was in the shape of a strawberry with green leaves. In the middle of the leaves was a button.

“What’s that?” Lisbet asked, buttoning her cuffs.

“It controls the shutter for taking photos with that mirror. Vantz wants you to send him pictures of everything you try on. Obviously, I won’t always be around to take pictures of you. He ordered that mirror and every time you press the button on the strawberry, the mirror will take a picture of you and send it to him.”

“Why is it a toy? That seems so old-fashioned,” Lisbet said.

Charcoal pulled a face. “If you use a voice command, it will mess with your facial expression. If we put it on a timer, it will take up too much of your time as you wait for the camera to take the picture. Having this little softy clutched in your hand is the least intrusive. Try not to be too unappreciative. Having a photographer here all the time would be really annoying. You’d have to hide behind the screen to change and you have to try on every piece of clothing in here. Vantz doesn’t just want to pre-approve your wedding dress, but every piece of clothing you wear outside. You’re his wife and you’re representing him.”

Looking around at the miles of clothes ahead of her, she realized there was a lot of work for her to do if she was going to try on each piece and get her picture taken in each one. She whistled.

“You said it,” Charcoal hissed.

Chapter Five

Lisbet was not familiar with virtual reality beyond playing slasher games in her dorm room when she was in university. Using it to meet her husband unsettled her. She thought she was going to meet him in person. Accepting the current situation stretched her since the only purpose she'd known for VR was playing simulation games. She wasn't aware that anyone used it for business meetings, or dating, or meeting their wife.

When she pulled the faceplate over her eyes, the first thing she saw was the barren wasteland of Mars. Red sand, black sky, and stars everywhere around her like glittering snowflakes suspended in the air.

She turned around. There was a flat space ahead of her. It looked like a chessboard. She tried walking, knowing full well that she was walking on a treadmill that moved at her pace. No one walked on the surface of Mars without a spacesuit. As she got closer, she saw she was approaching two high-backed armchairs.

Vantz was in one of the chairs. She got closer, she wasn't sure what to make of what she saw. He was a man, but not a man.

That meant he had the shape of a man, but the head of a stag. He wore a gentleman's suit coat with coattails, a vest, a pocket square, a watch chain, a white shirt, gray trousers, and gloves. He stood up when she got closer. His ears moved forward and backward as if he could hear her before he saw her. The antlers were something else—very tall. He was so tall that he appeared larger than life.

What he really looked like, if she was honest, was a spoiled rich man, playing a game by pulling a mounted deer head off the wall and placing it on his head as a joke.

Lisbet wasn't sure what kind of a man would do that, but when he spoke, the deer head's mouth moved.

"Welcome, Lisbet," Vantz said, moving his hand in a circular motion that was definitely a greeting without touching her. "Please, have a seat."

He offered her an armchair and she hesitated to take the seat, feeling around herself for the chair that she had been sitting in before she put on her headset. As she wasn't wearing a whole bodysuit meant to give her every sensation that the virtual world could give her, the chair did not feel like an armchair, but like the padded chair that was placed behind the treadmill.

He sat opposite her. "How was your journey?"

"From Earth?" she asked, looking at him and trying to understand what she was seeing. She knew Vantz did not want anyone to see his face. All that had been explained to her, but she didn't know what to make of talking to a stag. It felt like talking to an NPC in a video game. She felt slightly absurd. "Uh…" she hesitated. "It was fine. Uneventful. I went to sleep there. I woke up here."

"Nothing bothered you? Nothing woke you up part way?"

"No. Nothing."

"The best kind of journey," he intoned in a slight English accent. "And what do you think of your accommodations here?"

"They're wonderful," she said. Because of the situation with the bathroom, they were not as good as her father's home back on Earth, but she knew that by Martian standards, they were

excellent. Complaining would get her nowhere. She was a slave and only so much luxury was possible on the surface of Mars, even for the rich.

"I'm delighted to hear it," he said, not with a smile. His face did not exactly smile since a deer was not capable of making emotional expressions with its mouth, but kindness touched his eyes.

Was he pressing a button on his console to make his eyes look warm?

"We have much to discuss," he went on. "I have an agenda. It will take weeks to cover everything we need to go over. I have set aside one hour a day in which to meet with you for the next two weeks. I do apologize, but I have a great deal of work to do and I cannot spare more time than that. When my timer goes off, I will have to cut our conversation short."

Lisbet nodded

He continued, "I've set aside these two weeks as our honeymoon as far as the media is concerned, so no one will need anything from you other than the photographs of you in your wedding dress. A photographer will meet you on the seventieth floor tomorrow to get the shots. I sent Charcoal my recommendations after you sent me the photos of you trying on the wedding gowns. I have much to be pleased about in your presentation. You hold your shoulders correctly and will do well tomorrow modeling. Do not concern yourself overly about your hair or makeup. This is Mars and women are asked not to put products in their hair or on their faces that will need to be washed off with water or chemicals. Natural beauty is all the rage." He glanced at her curiously. "Does that suit you?"

Lisbet walked her fingers down her thigh. "Sure. I have confidence in what a photographer can do to touch up the pictures after the fact."

The stag raised an eyebrow. "You think you need to be touched up? You don't."

"Yeah, except you've seen me when? In the pictures my father used to advertise my sale? In the far away shots I used to send you pictures of me in wedding dresses? Yep, I'm sure those things left you with a really strong impression of what I *really* look like." She tried to keep her voice light, but she was still distressed over how her life had been suddenly redone.

"I saw you when you were delivered," he said soothingly. "I kissed you."

Lisbet's breath caught. "Oh. Of course."

"I've seen you, and I do not think you need to be touched up. Besides, you are going to be the most famous beauty in history." He turned his attention back to the floating agenda.

She gulped. "What do you mean?"

"I've been trying to think of the correct way to tell you this. You couldn't have been told anything to prepare you before you left Earth because the executives at Sleeping Beauty Inc. were trying to control the narrative about your departure. Honestly, I'm still struggling to find a way to broach the topic."

"What? What are you saying?" she asked, clicking her dry tongue against dry teeth.

"Sleeping Beauty Inc. sent three Mammoth ships from Earth to Mars and you were the only person in cryostasis on any of them. Here on Mars, we sent ships to meet the armada transporting you, and when they arrived in Mars' space, humanity had the first battle in space. You see those floating twisted hunks of metal in the sky?"

Lisbet remembered them and nodded her head.

"Well," he continued, "they're the gravestones of the losers. Our side won. You were delivered properly."

“I don’t understand,” Lisbet murmured anxiously. “Why would anyone care if I was delivered? Who would want to stop me from being delivered so much that they’d go to war over it?”

“It wasn’t about you,” he said with an odd breath like he was trying to suppress a cough. “But you’re part of history now. How much do you know about Mars?

“I know all about it,” she said confidently. Then she started sputtering off facts about how long each day was compared to an Earth day, what the temperature range was on the planet, what minerals were found in what geological formations, and more.

Vantz interrupted by clapping for her. “You’re a true scientist. I’m enchanted. How much do you know about life on Mars? How do human lives play out here?”

“Uh,” she muttered. “Uh… Not as much as I’d know if that story Sleeping Beauty Inc. is telling about our relationship was true. This is my first real conversation with a person from Mars.”

“Okay, let’s start small then. Do you know what there is to do for fun on a space station?” he asked briefly. “Have you traveled in space much? Do you know what space stations are like?”

“No. I’ve only lived on Earth,” Lisbet replied.

“Okay. Space stations are dark places,” he said as he pulled two golden balls from his pocket and started spinning them in the palm of his hand. “There isn’t much to do for fun. The people on board get stuck working shifts doing shipping and receiving. The work isn’t inspiring. Drugs are hard to come by. People watch a lot of TV and they have an insane amount of sex. People who live on space stations have four times more sex than people who live on Earth.”

Lisbet whistled.

Vantz chuckled. “Yeah, you weren’t expecting this to be our first conversation, but this is actually the first thing we need to talk about. Here on Mars, we have the same problem, except it’s worse. Mars is like a space station. There’s no atmosphere, very little sunlight, cold temperatures, and nothing fun to do. Except, we have a more challenging problem here on Mars than they do in outer space. Unlike a space station that only has so much floor space, nowhere to hide, and nowhere to run, we have nooks and crannies aplenty. We have miners and almost all the machinery on Mars is used for making more nooks and crannies. We have a collection of mining companies that are stripping the planet of its minerals and that’s fine. We don’t have a problem with that because that’s what humans are here for. The problem is that the mines get decommissioned and they get made into something called a pleasure palace. Have you heard of them?”

Lisbet swallowed a mouthful of disgust. “Isn’t that when they block off the mine and pretend it’s not in use anymore when people are actually trapped down there?”

“Exactly. They’ve turned the passages into a palace fit for a king, taken a bunch of servants down with them, and blocked off the entrance. They use their old railway systems to send in supplies and then they do whatever they want to their servants for as long as they want. It’s inhumane and psychotic. Do you know how often these pleasure palaces get uncovered?”

“Almost never,” Lisbet answered, thinking of the thing she wanted to think about the least.

“Yes. Almost never. It’s difficult to scan the planet, to get proper information about what underground canals or tunnels run where. The mining companies keep the government in the dark about where their tunnels go and how deep they run. And… What do you think is the worst thing about their activities?”

Lisbet swallowed. “I don’t know.”

He answered his question for her. “It interferes with our terraforming efforts. Let me explain how terraforming works. The fastest way to gain an atmosphere for a planet or a moon is to set off a series of very lethal bombs. The byproduct of the explosions will gift the planet gasses that can be worked with to create breathable air. That is how Ganymede, Callisto, and Io got their atmospheres so quickly and why Mars has none. When the terraforming teams arrived at the Jovian moons, no one was living there. They didn’t have to worry about destroying infrastructure or upsetting people’s lives with their bombs. They could just build their towers to generate their artificial magnetic poles, set off their bombs, and their moons were inhabitable in a frightening amount of time. Why do you think that hasn’t happened for Mars?”

“The mining companies are stopping it because they don’t want their mines destroyed and worse than that, they don’t want their pleasure palaces to collapse. They’re holding up permissions and dragging their bums in the sand so fiercely that no one can meet any of their terraforming goals,” Lisbet answered.

“Very good. That is exactly why terraforming Mars is so difficult. Now,” he said, standing up and moving toward her. “What do you think will happen if I merely order everyone to evacuate the planet while I bomb it? Remember, there are people trapped underground.”

“The miners will leave their slaves underground and only evacuate themselves?” she said, feeling grim.

“Worse. Everyone is refusing to leave. They’re holding people hostage underground. We’re having trouble finding them, but even worse still, if we do find them, what do we do with them?”

“Just tell me,” she said crossly.

“The Mammoth ships Sleeping Beauty Inc. sent us were all filled to the brim with empty cryochambers—hundreds of thousands of them. Yours was the only one inhabited. We need to get people out of the ground, get them in orbit, and put them to sleep. It was a big secret what we were transporting when I ordered you from Sleeping Beauty Inc. We hoped everyone would think all that kerfuffle was for you alone. I hoped everyone would believe that I had three Mammoth ships to transport my wife from Sleeping Beauty Inc. Sadly, the information leaked and we had to fight a battle in space.”

“How did that work?” Lisbet wondered, thinking of everything she knew about explosions and how they needed air to accomplish combustion.

“With harpoons mostly. That way we could get our ammunition back. They weren’t expecting us to be ready and we killed a lot of miners.”

“You couldn’t save them?”

“We tore holes in their ships and let the air out. We still don’t know the exact death count. It has only been a few days since everything happened. There are so many empty ships and dead bodies floating around, orbiting Mars. It’s completely possible that some of them will fall from the sky.”

Lisbet put a hand to her throat. That was horrific.

“Naturally, the ships will fall first. We’ll see where they land. Now, listen Lisbet,” he said, getting so close to her that she could almost see the pixels that made up his face. “You’ve already done an incredible amount of work for our cause just being aboard that ship, just being our excuse—unwittingly, I know. The situation has changed since you signed the papers back on Earth. First, I need to remind you that doing public relations for me is essentially taking up a military position in the middle of a war. I asked for you because you were the most serious

person up for sale through Sleeping Beauty Inc. I believe you can be my mouthpiece and say what I need you to say. Secondly, you need to remember all the people we're trying to save. We would not have fought the miners or killed them in space if they hadn't tried desperately to take down the ships carrying the cryochambers that will save hundreds of thousands of slaves. Don't forget, our fighting the miners protected you. Please, join our cause to save the slaves underground and change Mars so that when someone wants to run, they have air to breathe so they can run."

The charisma was so thick Lisbet was almost choking on it. She was almost crying. She was almost going to faint. "I'm…" she struggled to speak.

"You don't have to worry about anything today," he said, backing off and giving her digital room to breathe. "I said I've given you two weeks to honeymoon with me. There will be plenty of time for you to process all that I've told you. I will also provide you with information packs for you to read, so you can learn even more when we're not talking."

Lisbet was overwhelmed. She had never been asked to do anything important in her whole life. "I… uh…" she fumbled, hearing how vague she sounded when she spoke out loud.

His brown stag eyes didn't show any emotion she could understand. He just looked at her with an expression as dead as the glass eyes of a taxidermied deer head mounted on the wall. "Don't worry about a thing. You're the new Helen of Troy, the new Cleopatra, and the new Joan of Arc whether you do anything or not."

The only thing that happened in Lisbet's mind at the moment was that she was going to be one hell of a disappointment the moment the photographer pointed his lens at her. She was not beautiful. What Vantz was saying was nonsense. He bought her for her mind, for her father's reputation and crumbling riches, for courage he was swearing she had, but everyone else was going to look for a beautiful woman and they were going to be crushed when they didn't get it. She wasn't even allowed to wear makeup!

Vantz turned away from her and brought up a large floating screen rimmed in red. "Let me ease your scientific mind by taking you through the required phases of terraforming a planet. Since Ganymede is three-fourths the size of Mars, we'll use Ganymede as an example. I will also be sending you papers to read on the subject. You were a physics student. You should eat it up."

"Wait," she said, interrupting him. "What do I look like to you? In the VR world, I see nothing when I look down."

"You look like a crash test dummy."

"Literally?"

"Yes. What were you expecting? We haven't had time to configure a different look for you."

"Your Helen of Troy looks like a crash test dummy?" Lisbet said slowly and deliberately.

He did not reply.

"How was *your* appearance generated?" Lisbet demanded.

Vantz sighed and then answered. "I scrolled through a list of possible body types, then I chose the body that was called The Classic Gentleman. Then I went through a list of possible heads, discarded all of them, and chose this one from a hunting game. I mashed them together and got something similar to this. But I did all that years ago. A gentleman with a stag head has been my avatar for the last seven years. What you are seeing now is a fresh skin one of my

friends cooked up as a wedding present. You should know that the way I look now has nothing to do with my actual appearance."

"Well, obviously you are not a deer man," Lisbet huffed, completely unaware that it sounded like she said he was not a *dear* man.

Vantz smirked.

"I suppose what I look like in VR doesn't matter to you," she retorted.

"It doesn't," he said simply and turned his head to a floating red-rimmed screen he'd made appear in the air beside his head. He was looking at the agenda he'd made. "You can choose an avatar with Charcoal later. Do you have any other questions for me?"

"When are you coming back to the castle?" she asked.

He made the red screen disappear with a flick of his wrist and turned back to Lisbet. "You should know that you should never expect an in-person meeting with me. I thought Charcoal and Beck made it very clear that I have a ton of work to do and I need you to make it 'seem' like I'm in the castle with you when I am elsewhere working. That is the most important part of your position. Is that clear?"

He didn't want to be with her?

A man like him did not want to be with her?

Suddenly, Lisbet felt the weight of the Sleeping Beauty Inc. bracelet around her wrist more heavily than before. It was a thin thing. It was supposed to be almost undetectable, but the VR controls strapped to her wrist made the bracelet cut into her skin. It was heavy and it was biting her.

Vantz had bought her. Even if she was his wife, she was still his slave. It was in the contract that if she didn't obey, he could electrocute her. She needed to obey.

She nodded compliantly.

"You don't need to look so concerned," Vantz said kindly.

"I wasn't aware that this machine could translate any of my facial expressions," she responded.

"It can't, but I've been talking to people through virtual reality for a long time and I know how you're feeling from other markers. I'm not expecting you to obey me blindly. That's why I've blocked off so much of my time to teach you what I'm doing, and by extension, what *you'll* be doing."

"And you did not bring me here so that I would be your wife?" she asked, stunned. She thought all Sleeping Beauty Inc. models did tours of their master's bedroom.

"In name only," he answered dryly. "Considering the work I'm doing, buying a woman and forcing her to go to bed with me is the last thing I'd ever want to do."

He kept talking, but Lisbet was too overwhelmed to keep listening.

Chapter Six

Lisbet's first impression of Vantz had been good. Actually, he had blown her mind apart. He reminded her of guys she knew in university who were too busy working on their papers and projects to be interested in romance. Except, he was better. If he had chubby cheeks, he hid it. If he weighed as much as an obese walrus, he hid it. Whatever was wrong with him physically, he made sure no one saw it.

Maybe there was nothing wrong. Maybe he was just trying to evade assassination.

He talked to her more, heightening the intrigue about who he was and what he was doing, but he also gave Lisbet papers he had written about Mars and how it had to be transformed.

Lisbet was very impressed. Everything he wrote roped her in when she read it. She told herself she wasn't in love with him. She told herself she had never been in love with anyone, but the tingling sensation she got when he spoke to her grew.

She wasn't in love. She was interested—piqued.

Later, when she was out of her meeting with Vantz, she tried to choose an avatar with Charcoal and it turned out to be a frustrating experience.

"I don't like any of these body types. None of them feel like me," Lisbet exclaimed in frustration over the choices Charcoal brought up on the screen.

"So none of the digital renderings of women have as beautiful a body as you. How tough," Charcoal remarked sardonically.

Lisbet felt like clocking her. She didn't match the ready-made body parts because Lisbet felt she was too far from the ideal. She didn't want to do what Vantz was doing, having a ghost avatar on VR that did not resemble his body. She wanted something that represented what she was really like so he could see her.

However, Lisbet didn't want to explain all that to Charcoal. She was really starting to get the feeling that Charcoal didn't like her, which was terrible because Lisbet only knew three people in person on the whole planet. Sadly, she was fairly certain that knowing the photographer who took her wedding photos didn't count for much. That left Charcoal and Beck.

Not only that, but the photographer had been a professional who knew his work well. When he showed Lisbet the photos, he had made her look like someone who was already in a history book with the pinkish light of Mars illuminating only half her face. At least, his work was such that Lisbet didn't feel crushed that Vantz, and the rest of Mars, would see her ugly side.

"How do I get a rendering of my own body then?" Lisbet asked. "There's got to be a way."

After a moment's hesitation, Charcoal answered, "There's a way. You'll need to get Beck to help you. I can't do work that sophisticated and I really don't have time to spare for something as pointless as what you look like in VR. It's not like Vantz cares what you look like," she huffed, turning off the screen they were working on and moving to grab her sweater and her bag. "If you don't need me for anything important, I have other work to do."

Lisbet rubbed her temples. Whatever was bothering Charcoal was out of Lisbet's control. She had done nothing to antagonize the woman. The only thing that made sense to Lisbet was that Charcoal was jealous of her position. Perhaps she had even tried to convince Vantz to use her instead, but she had been overlooked in favor of Lisbet who could provide an excuse for the armada leaving Earth. It made sense if Charcoal was cranky about it since the reasoning had

been so impersonal. Meaning, it wasn't as though Vantz liked Lisbet more than Charcoal. It had been a business decision.

Lisbet scanned the woman and found the Sleeping Beauty Inc. brand bracelet around her wrist.

"How long ago did Vantz buy you?" Lisbet asked with a drawl, hoping to get a deeper clue to the woman's hostility.

"Vantz didn't buy me," she said coldly as she snapped her sweater around her body and fastened it with magnetic closures. "Please send me a message if you need anything in the future."

She left the dressing room crossly.

Lisbet watched her go and thought that whatever pea was in her pudding, it was enormously unfair. If she left, she was basically putting Lisbet in solitary confinement. Lisbet's meeting with the photographer had been a one-time thing. Beck was working on the floor above and Lisbet had yet to visit him. Vantz had told her that after their honeymoon, he wouldn't have the time to spend to bring her up to speed all the time and that Beck would be her new professional contact. Basically, he would be her boss, while Vantz was her boss's boss.

Lisbet sat around and read the info packets Vantz had given her. He sent her information about the magnetic towers, but he also sent her information about the pleasure palaces. Lisbet read personal accounts of what had happened to survivors (always servants who escaped), but most of the time, the information was redacted. The big black rectangles over the text caused a chill up her back and made her afraid as she sat by herself in the skyscraper-like castle. She didn't feel safe because Mars as a whole didn't feel safe. Under the sand, people were trapped, tortured, and hopeless. When she reached her limits from reading the scientific papers and then from reading the court documents, she went through the automatic doors of her bedroom and took an escalator up to Beck's workshop.

Any excuse would do.

The avatar was the best excuse she had.

When she strolled up to the door, the doors opened automatically. The workshop was mostly screens displaying maps of Mars, maps of canals, maps of caverns, maps of cities, maps of mines, and more maps. Beck was in a cage in the corner with a VR helmet on his head.

When Lisbet came in, he pulled the plug on what he was working on, disconnected his gloves, pulled off his helmet, and came forward. "Hello Miss Lisbet, is there anything I can do for you?"

"Uh… How are you? Am I interrupting?" she asked hesitantly.

Beck was wearing a white collared shirt with black trousers. He was thin in that way young men are thin, with the angles of his bones sticking out from under his shirt, especially at his shoulders and his elbows. His Adam's apple in his throat was enormous, like he hadn't quite grown into his neck yet. Looking at the dark twists of his hair against his throat made her think he was beautiful like India and Italy had the most exquisite child together.

The most notable thing about his appearance was a line of screens attached to his left arm. They were attached like watches on straps with the screens on the inner part of his arm. They took up all the available space from his elbow to his wrist. At his wrist, there was one more bracelet. It was dark gray but also had a little hint of pink to it. It was a Sleeping Beauty Inc. brand bracelet. Was he a slave too?

He pulled something from his shirt pocket and said, “It’s time for my cigarette break anyway.”

“You smoke?”

He nodded. “Not nicotine. It’s a doctor-prescribed anti-anxiety medication. It’s supposed to help me with my nerves.” The thing in his hand was a narrow tube that looked dark and metallic like tungsten. He flicked it strangely with his fingers by snapping it briefly in half before putting it in his mouth and inhaling sharply. When he exhaled, there was a strong scent of cinnamon. Cinnamon buns?

Now Lisbet desperately wanted cinnamon buns and she had already eaten all her allotted calories for the day. She swallowed and tried to stop her tongue from sweating. “I just got out of a meeting with Charcoal. Uh… she doesn’t like me very much.”

“That’s too bad,” he said, like whether or not that friendship worked out was on the very edge of his concern.

“There’s no chance of getting a replacement?” she asked tentatively.

“You could take over some of her duties. She doesn’t do much for you anyway. She’s just supposed to take care of your clothes and arrange your medical assessments. You’re due to have your initial one soon. Once that’s taken care of, you’re unlikely to need much more from her.”

“But she was supposed to help me get a digital rendering of myself for my meetings with Vantz and she bugged out. She told me to come to you for help,” Lisbet said, trying to sound factual and not emotional.

She had been wondering what kind of tone she ought to take with Beck. She was definitely older than him. She was twenty-seven while he looked to be more like twenty on the nose. Flirting seemed out of the question, but how else could she get him to do what she wanted? Everyone always said you catch more flies with sugar than vinegar. She just had to take care not to add too much sugar.

He inhaled his cigarette again before blowing the smoke away from her. “You’re only going to have meetings with Vantz for two weeks, less than that now. After that, you’re unlikely to see him even in VR. We’re all very busy. Why is it important?”

“He’s my husband. I want him to see me for what I am,” she answered plainly.

Beck squinted, scrutinizing her face. “I’m not sure I understand. He knows what you look like. He’s seen you. It’s part of your job to take pictures of yourself for him. That’s what your camera mirror is intended for.”

“I know. I just want him to see me when we talk,” Lisbet said, feeling like she wasn’t adding anything new. She was just emphasizing how she felt.

Beck looked at her again. “I still don’t understand. I get that you want me to do a 3D rendering of your body, but… I don’t really have time and I don’t really get why I should do it at all. Vantz wouldn’t give me time off from my other duties to take care of that for you. And why should I give you my time off? Like everyone else, I need my rest.”

“So, you’re saying that you would do it if it was during your break and if I did something for you in return?”

He raised an eyebrow. “I don’t know what you could do for me in exchange.”

Lisbet knew what he meant immediately. Most of their needs were provided for. She couldn’t cook anything for him. They all had the same resources for food. All his needs were provided for. She couldn’t give him anything. He didn’t need anything.

“Listen, I don’t want you to do anything for me,” he said breezily, still smoking like a stovepipe. “I need you to give me a reason why you want me to do it.”

Lisbet frowned. What could she say? Only the truth. Even though they were on a planet with hundreds of thousands of people, they were also completely alone. “I like Vantz and I want him to like me. How can he like me if I look like a crash test dummy? Also, looking like a crash test dummy makes me feel expendable. I don’t like that. I know I didn’t come here with any grand ambition. It was just a financial exchange. I know that, but I still don’t like looking like something that is going to be crashed into a wall intentionally.”

Beck looked around uncomfortably. “We’re all going to be crashed into a wall intentionally. Didn’t Vantz explain? We’re going to set off so many bombs on the planet that everything here will be gone. The mines will collapse, the buildings will topple, and the magnetic towers will be swallowed during the earthquakes, but they’re designed to still give off their magnetic current even when underground. Everything that is here will be destroyed for the sake of giving Mars an atmosphere. That’s what we’re trying to do. Didn’t he explain that?”

Lisbet felt foolish. Of course, that was what Vantz told her. Of course, that was what was going to happen. “We’re not going to die, are we?” she asked, suddenly feeling fresh horror wash over her.

Beck grabbed her hand with his free one and pulled her toward him to stop her from reeling. “Of course, we’re not going to die,” he said sternly, turning his voice into an anchor. “Everyone is going to be evacuated—including you. You’re going to help with the evacuation process. Relax. No one will be left here who is willing to get aboard an escape pod. Okay? Are you steady now?”

She put her hand on the worktable beside her and tried to get a grip.

“Want a drag?” he said, offering her his cigarette. “It will relax you. That’s its job.”

“No… I… Why would you offer something like that to a stranger? How do you know what diseases I have?”

He huffed and took another puff on it himself. “I’ve seen your medical records. You have nothing. I may be a stranger to you, but you’re not a stranger to me. I helped Vantz choose you.”

“Oh,” she said, a little lost for words. “Would you like to have lunch with me sometime? You could tell me more about yourself so we’re not strangers anymore.”

He looked at her like she was more of an alien than he initially suspected. “I’ll do the digital rendering for you, but don’t get your hopes up so high that you expect it to be beautiful. The rendering is going to be quick and dirty. Go to your meeting with Vantz, put on something you like, and then come up here. The more form-fitting your clothes, the better.”

She thanked him.

He turned off his cigarette and got back in his VR cage while she went back to her bedroom.

Chapter Seven

Lisbet was back in her VR cage listening while Vantz gave her a sliver of his mind.

“Beck mentioned that you went to visit him regarding a digital rendering of your body. You should know that everything he said is true. It’s a waste of time. However, he raised an important point about your understanding of the part you’re going to play in all this. I think I ought to explain it more thoroughly,” Vantz said with very little emotion.

In the VR world, Lisbet looked at Vantz from her chair which felt less comfortable by the minute. He looked like a cross between the hunter and the hunted while she still looked like a crash test dummy.

He continued. “The phase we are in right now is the one where we’re pretending to still be working on the magnetic towers. They’re finished. Right now, we’re placing bombs all over the planet and pretending that the movement of materials is associated with the building of the towers. You’re my alibi while bombs are being placed and known pleasure palaces are being dismantled. We’ve started various evacuations, most of them are classified because they involve removing people from underground fortresses against their will, but now that we have enough cryochambers, it’s time to begin that phase.”

“I can’t wrap my mind around how expensive a hundred thousand cryochambers would be,” Lisbet said, rubbing her forehead.

“The cryochambers intended for the slaves and the general population of Mars are not like the one you woke up in. They don’t have sweet little leather chairs inside though there is a little padding. It’s just a box with a few restraints and filled with the necessary gasses to put a person into cryostasis. They don’t even have clear lids. You’re a princess. Your chamber is different. You should know that Sleeping Beauty Inc. has had quite a lot of their models go missing on Mars, and where they’ve gone is not a mystery.”

“They’re underground,” Lisbet supplied.

“One of the regular locations where we’re leaving bombs is in dismantled pleasure palaces. If anyone touches one, it will go off. Mostly the explosion will be a warning to other pleasure palaces and to everyone that it is time to get off world—that we’re not messing around—if the battle in space didn’t teach them that. Once the bombs start going off, people will start evacuating in greater numbers and you’re going to be the face of that operation. All you’re going to need to do is read the cue cards. You’ll be in the third wave of evacuations. We’re only doing four waves, so you’ll be with the second to last group. Your leaving should scare more people and be the push some of them need to get on pods. Obviously, we weren’t going to allow the general population to goof off in our space station as governing them while we’re working would be a pain. But I wasn’t planning on putting you to sleep with everyone else. I was planning to send you back to your parents on Earth, but after seeing that you’ve made no transmissions to them since your arrival, can I assume you’d rather not go home to them?”

“Uh… yeah. I don’t want to go home to Earth. I have been reading about the newly finished space station that’s been built to orbit Mars. I’d like to go there. Surely, I wouldn’t be hard to govern and you still might be able to use me as a spokesperson.”

He cocked his head. “That’s a fairly grand gesture, but it would be even grander if you went to sleep with everyone else.”

“It would probably be hypocritical of me to convince everyone else to go to sleep while I wasn’t willing to,” Lisbet conceded.

“Hearing that you are going to go to sleep along with all the ordinary citizens of Mars will boost morale and probably convince more people to do it. Thank you. But are you sure that is what you want?”

She nodded, but completely out of place in their conversation, she chuckled. She couldn’t help it. “This is bizarre,” she chortled, finally losing a bit of the composure she’d tried so hard to keep steady.

“What is?”

She laughed outright. “You’re this fabulous trillionaire. You know what women think of trillionaires?”

“What?” he challenged.

“They think they have this huge stack of sexual fetishes and that they’re hiring a slave girl to satisfy their secret desires so that she can’t talk to the media and smear their image. When I signed the papers, I thought you bought me for sex and you liked the idea that I was watched so carefully by my parents so that you could have a silent virgin all to yourself.”

“Is that so?” he said, his expression as unreadable as any stag’s.

“Yeah. So, I get here and it turns out that you have no dirty little plans for me and you are using me as part of your exceptionally noble goals.” She giggled like she was about to hyperventilate.

“Noble?” Vantz repeated, his voice round and low. “This is not noble because there is no noble way to get Mars terraformed. The mining companies will not empty out their pleasure palaces if we merely ask them to. When the bombs go off, it will be because someone messed with them. People will die. The mines will collapse and we will not know how many people will die or in what way they will die. Some of them will be crushed and others will merely have their supply routes cut off and who knows what madness will ensue underground when that happens before they die en masse? A lot of people will lose their lives in this operation. I can’t predict how many.”

“Then why are you terraforming Mars this way?” Lisbet asked bitingly, stopping her laughter and replacing it with sobriety.

“There isn’t another way,” he replied harshly. “There have been more than five attempts to get Mars terraformed. Everyone who can has been making plans, trying things, making proposals. The only plans that have been tried have been the top ones, but they have been thwarted by the mining companies and that is what will happen every single time. Every effort is being put into mapping the underground canals. We’re trying to find the pleasure palaces, but new ones are being made all the time. We aren’t going to find *all* of them. I will be a mass murderer and you, and every other woman who dreams of being splayed out on a silk bedspread by a rich madman, have no idea what life is like for those poor wretches trapped underground. Those slaves would rather be dead than continue to satisfy the warped needs of their masters who can electrocute them for noncompliance.”

Lisbet held up her wrist. “So, you trap me with the same trap, and you think you’re different from them because you won’t take me to bed?”

He looked at her and breathed deeply. She hadn’t put his head on a wall with that comment. He was merely giving her a moment to think about what she’d just accused him of. When he

finally spoke, he said, “I’ve lived on Mars all my life and I know a lot about bloody hands. I don’t think my hands are clean and I no longer care if they’re clean or not. The only thing I know about myself that matters anymore is that I am going to be the figurehead who changes all this. It’s like putting my head in the guillotine with the rest of the aristocracy and dropping the blade myself. I am giving this project everything I have. I have thirteen dollars in my bank account and it doesn’t even belong to me. I’ve sold and traded everything at my disposal to transform Mars into a planet where the air can be breathed and the mines collapsed. I am willing to ruin myself utterly for Mars.” He breathed deeply as his eyes wandered the space around them, the surface of Mars that was still unchanged. “Is there anything sexier than that?”

Lisbet couldn’t answer. A man like him was ignoring her? For a moment, the idea burned her like fire. She reminded herself to breathe, but the blaze inside her kept burning.

Vantz turned his black eyes back on her. “And what about you? You were willing to ruin yourself utterly for your family's fortune. Your father’s business was diamonds. His business will be closed by this time next year. Diamonds are rocks in outer space. My understanding was that he was merely trying to square off his debts and he was willing to sell you to save his own skin. For someone that empty, that shallow, and that self-serving, you were willing to sell yourself.”

Lisbet crushed her eyelids together in pain as the burning inside her turned against her. What he was saying was undoubtedly true. She bit back her emotions and managed to choke out, “You must think I’m a fool.”

He stood up. “On the contrary, I think you’re lovely. If only I had one person I was willing to ruin myself for. I think that would be the greatest height of magnificence a human could achieve. You’re exactly my type of woman. Even if you look like a crash test dummy here because that is the default, I still think you look beautiful.” He reached out for her.

She took his hand. It wasn’t much like touching a real person because she could only feel pressure through the VR gloves, but it was something. She stood up next to him.

“This is all a tragedy of ruin and despair. I’ll be ruined at the end of this. Shall we dance? Dance through the tragedy?” he questioned before he initiated a twirl.

Turning her body in a circle was weird on the round treadmill, but Lisbet managed to stay standing. She steadied herself and turned to look at him. “And we’ll never meet?”

“It’s in both of our best interests if we don’t. When this is over, there is a strong possibility that I will be charged with dozens of crimes for all the things I destroy and all the dead bodies they find. I’ll be sent to jail forever or to the gallows. The fact that I bought you, but have become a prisoner myself will release you from our contract. The divorce will be quick. You will be free and I will be caged if not killed. Try to be steady and if you find yourself shaking, please get Beck to give you a cinnamon stick. Those things do wonders.”

“Do you smoke them too?” she asked, happy for any new piece of information about him.

“I live on them. All the people in the tensest positions use them.”

Lisbet sighed, trying to move with him to music that wasn’t there. There was a feeling in the air that Lisbet had never felt before, that real love was something unfamiliar. “You’re comfortable with the idea of killing people?” she questioned gently.

He smacked his lips. “This is a war, a war like never before. We’re trying to get as many people into orbit as we can, but we’re not going to be able to get them all. For the few people who will die in collapsed caverns… it’s a shame, but it would be a bigger shame to leave them to serve their warped masters until they finish their natural lives. I was trapped in an

underground pleasure palace once. I escaped with my reasonable knowledge of science, of Mars, and my silver tongue, which has saved me many times. I know the majority of the slaves want what I'm doing to happen, whether they die or not. They want it more than anyone. It's scary. The whole thing is bone-rattling, but… if I hide my identity, I can hide my intention. After the fact, almost everything I've done, whether good or bad, can be turned against me. By then, what happens to me won't matter. People will be breathing on Mars, water will be flowing, and the face of the planet will change. If I can accomplish all that, my fate is the least important thing in the world."

"And I have no chance of meeting you in person?" Lisbet asked again, suddenly feeling like she'd never encountered anyone so grand in her entire life and she would never see his face.

He turned her around and whispered in her ear, "Why do you want to meet me? What do you want to do?"

"Well, I don't think all sexual experiences are bad," she said without a blush on her test—dummy face.

"I do," he replied. "If you're not in love with me…"

Lisbet couldn't say that she was in love with him. They had only spoken through VR a few times and only for an hour at a time. She couldn't even tell him she was attracted to him as she'd never seen him. She couldn't tell him that her heart was beating like a hammer and she wanted him to hold her at night so she could feel safe in his castle. She couldn't even remind him that they were married and that all necessary obstacles to two people getting together had already been overcome.

That was all because there was so much that she did not know about him.

She was romanced by him because she knew nothing about him except that he had more nerve than anyone she'd ever met before. That excited her so much it hurt.

Except, he knew something she didn't. As a matter of fact, he knew all the things she didn't.

He was going to keep her at arm's length. He'd warned her he would do that.

They were not together as they danced. She had to remind herself of that. She was standing alone in a room with a cage and a treadmill and he was far from her rigging bombs. It was a surreal statement. Could it even be true?

"I have to go," he whispered, letting her hand slip away and stopping the pressure in her gloves. "There's business I have to attend to. We can talk about this more later. Good night, Lisbet." He bowed, but he had to stand quite far away from her so that he didn't hit her with his horns.

Chapter Eight

Lisbet put on tight black pants and a long-sleeved black shirt with a scooping neckline for her meeting with Beck. He told her to wear something tight for her digital rendering. She tied her hair into a ballerina bun and took the escalator up to his workshop.

He met her at the entrance. He was leaning with his butt on the edge of a worktable smoking. This time his exhale smelled like apple pie.

“Come on then,” he said, waving her to his VR cage. It was fancier than hers. He had changed the hardware on it and now it had something that looked like a glowing circular shower rod with a black shower curtain swinging from it.

“There are sensors and cameras in the fabric,” he explained. “We need to let this circle you five times and let it take pictures of you. You’ll need to take a different pose for each rotation and you will need to hold the pose perfectly for the whole rotation. Do you think you can do that?”

“Yeah,” Lisbet said, stretching.

“Great.” He held the curtain open for her. “Get in and assume mountain pose.”

Lisbet did as she was told and took the simple yoga pose seriously. “How long am I going to have to stand like this?”

“Three minutes. Be brave.” He closed the curtain and started the first round of photos.

The mountain pose was super easy and Lisbet was thinking that the whole process was going to be a snap. The curtain did not move around her. Instead, the treadmill turned her around within the circle of the curtain.

“Finished,” Beck called over the curtain rod after the three minutes had elapsed. “Spread your legs and put your hands on your hips.”

The second round of shots were being taken when Lisbet heard someone enter the workshop.

“Hey, Beck,” came a less-than-friendly voice. It was Charcoal. It couldn’t be anyone else but Charcoal. No one else had access to the upper floors.

“Hey Char,” he called back, still smoking.

“Where’s our girl? I just popped into her bedroom and she wasn’t there. Is she in your room? Have you started screwing her already?”

Lisbet’s face went red but she didn’t dare move or say anything to defend herself. The machine was still running.

He didn’t answer.

“Took you long enough,” Charcoal’s voice continued. “I would have thought you would be in her panties by noon on the first day. And here we are on day five. You’re losing your edge.”

Lisbet heard him take a strong drag on his cigarette. “You don’t need to be jealous, Char.”

“I can’t help it,” she said crossly.

“You only have three months left on your contract,” he reminded her.

“I would have signed another contract,” she said desperately.

“We’ve talked about this. It’s too late anyway. What’s done is done and now that you know that Miss Lisbet is fine, why don’t you toddle downstairs and screw that guy you disabled your bracelet for? No hard feelings… on my end anyway.”

Charcoal tried to say something more.

He interrupted her. “Don’t make me electrocute you. Get going.”

Lisbet didn’t move, but sweat pooled on her forehead. That meant that Charcoal was *owned* by Beck! That was putting the whole system on its head. Charcoal was older than Beck, older than Lisbet, and she was owned by a twenty-year-old man! Clearly, Lisbet did not know anything about how Sleeping Beauty Inc. worked.

From behind the curtain, Lisbet could hear the sound of Charcoal’s angry footfalls until the doors opened and shut.

Lisbet stood still, keeping still and staying silent.

“Next pose. Bend your knees and your elbows in a slight squat,” he instructed like Charcoal’s intrusion had not happened.

He did two more poses before he pulled the curtain open and brought Lisbet out.

She glanced at him and gave him her best older-sister smile. “Why does Charcoal think you’d be able to have sex with me? Wouldn’t my bracelet freak out if you even touched me? She was very careful not to touch me when I was trying on the wedding dresses. She even used a special tool while doing up the buttons so it wouldn’t be a possibility.”

Beck put his arm under Lisbet’s nose and showed her the Sleeping Beauty Inc. bracelet she’d seen before. “I’m wearing the owner's bracelet that corresponds with yours. There’s no point in Vantz wearing it. He’s not around.”

“And he wouldn’t care if you slept with me?” she asked nervously.

“Oh, he already said he was fine with it if you and I were so inclined,” Beck said thoughtlessly as he checked the rendering on the computer monitor and kept his eyes firmly away from Lisbet. “He didn’t bring you here to be his wife. He brought you here to hide his movements, first with the Mammoth ships and now with the bombs. We’re alone. He knows people in these situations fool around. It’s how things play out on Mars.”

“You don’t seem terribly interested,” Lisbet said with a little smirk.

He glanced at her, a blank expression on his face. “Why do you think that?”

“Well, I’m so much older than you and you haven’t been overly friendly.” She started listing reasons why she didn’t think he was into her, “You haven’t flirted, you refused to eat with me even though we’re the only two people here, and you’re doing this favor for me only under extreme persuasion.”

“Huh. If that’s the way it seems… It looks different from my perspective. I offered you a drag of my cigarette. I would never do that for a woman I wasn’t interested in having sex with. I said I’d do this favor for you during my time off because I realized that if I did I could have a better look at your body, which I’m interested in seeing. And just now, I let Charcoal leave with the impression that I was out here because I was merely taking a break from making passionate love to you on my bedspread. My bedroom is right there. I think all that speaks pretty loudly.”

Lisbet put her head to the side and looked at him sadly. “And everyone on Mars is so desperate to get laid that they’ll sleep with anyone?”

His eyes were deep brown puddles of warmth as he exhaled another breath of apple pie. “I wouldn’t be sleeping with just anyone. I’d be sleeping with you.”

The emphasis he put on the last word did something to Lisbet. It put an unwanted lump in her throat.

His expression turned to amusement. “We don’t need to rush it. It’s more fun to wait anyway.”

“I’m not going to sleep with you,” Lisbet said, making sure her voice was firm and steady.

“If you say so,” he said, before putting his cigarette in his mouth and giving her a challenging glance that read, ‘If you’re not going to fool around with me, then why are you still here? We’re finished.’

Lisbet was a big girl and his amateur flirting was not going to score any points with her. He was just a tech guy anyway. “The next time I log into my VR, will I look like the rendering?”

“Sure. Sort of.”

“What do you mean? Sort of?”

“I mean that I only took five poses and it looks like you kept the same dead-eyed expression on your face in every single one of them. You’ll look like that, which is probably an improvement over the crash test dummy. So, yeah. Sure. Something like that.”

Lisbet knew she couldn’t ask him for anything more. Asking him for more would be inviting problems, so she didn’t. Instead, she walked two steps to the door before turning around and snapping, “This really sucks.”

“What sucks?”

“Having both you and Charcoal being so antagonistic toward me. It’s putting me in a situation where I have to be alone all the time. It’s not healthy. It’s not healthy for any of us. Can’t we just be friends? All of us?”

He heaved a slightly exasperated breath. “At the end of your honeymoon, you’ll be at The Boiler Room where you’ll start doing public relations work for Vantz. Didn’t he explain that? You’ll be surrounded by people. You are supposed to make friends. That’s why you have that huge wardrobe full of clothes. Have you finished trying everything on? You need to take pictures so Vantz can mark his favorites. You need to impress everyone, including Vantz, so you’d better get to it.” He paused to smoke before reminding her, “However, I have to tell you that even though Vantz is being so cordial as to allow me sexual access to his wife, that courtesy is not extended to anyone you’ll meet at The Boiler Room. Understand?”

“You’re the one with my bracelet, so you’re essentially my owner?” Lisbet fumed.

“Yeah. It’s good that you get it.”

“And you can come into my bedroom at any time?” she asked furiously.

He chuckled. “Don’t get the wrong idea. I would never force myself on you, or do anything to make you uncomfortable for my pleasure. This is Mars. We’ve all had stuff forced on us and had things done to us that made us wish for death, even the people who are free. I want to see the pleasure palaces collapse just as much as Vantz does. I won’t lay a finger on you if you don’t beg me to.”

“That will never happen,” Lisbet said crossly.

“Fine. Then it will never happen,” he said noncommittally with his hands in his pockets and his cigarette clamped between his front teeth as smoke obscured his face.

She nodded and turned to leave before suddenly turning back. “And you’re going to look at my pictures?”

“You asked me to. I can’t make the VR skin you want without looking at them. Would you rather I didn’t?”

She hesitated, thinking. “Go ahead and look at them,” she finally said. “I suppose it doesn’t hurt for you to look at what you can never have.”

He smiled and stroked the stubble on his chin.

As she walked away, she had the feeling that she hadn't made anything clear to him. What was Mars like anyway that he thought she'd be interested in a boy so much younger than her? On Earth that would never happen and she was fresh from Earth. She was still an Earthling, not a Martian. Not only that, but her parents had guarded her like bulldogs. She never even had a serious boyfriend. Saying that she'd fool around with Beck was like saying she'd fool around with the pool boy.

Lisbet stopped in her tracks.

She remembered one pool boy she would have loved to fool around with. Except he didn't seem to like her. Lisbet had walked in on him making out with Tiffania, her younger sister. Lisbet had even caught her other younger sister, Cassica, kissing a stable boy. He had been pushing her against a tree in the field and she had been giggling.

Lisbet bit her lip. Was Beck the first man who had ever shown any sexual interest in her? She covered her mouth with her hand in horror.

He was.

Chapter Nine

When Lisbet got serious about trying on all the clothes in the closet, she immediately realized why such a thing had been necessary. A lot of them were not her size. Soon she recognized that they had been purchased as part of a lot sale. Maybe a clothing boutique had gone out of business and Vantz had bought their inventory.

She used the mirror camera to take pictures of all the dresses, even the dresses that didn't fit her. She didn't know if Vantz had any favorites he was hoping to see her wear. She thought it unlikely considering how disinterested he seemed in her. However, it was part of her job during their 'honeymoon' to get ready to represent him in public.

She wanted to look nice in the pictures. She wanted to look beautiful. She wanted to flaunt how gorgeous she was with each picture she sent to Vantz, but all the pictures looked the same. She had not been a selfie girl, the kind of girl who took pictures of herself doing everything, and she couldn't boost her look with makeup or even beautiful hair. Her hair, which normally had so much volume, had none on Mars.

At some point, Charcoal came in and saw a mountainous pile of discarded clothes. "What's wrong with those ones?"

"They don't fit."

"Oh, poor you," Charcoal said coldly.

Lisbet turned on her. "For your information, some of them are too small. Besides, I'm super jealous of you, so please stop with the attitude."

Charcoal laughed through her nose and for the first time, Lisbet realized that they might be closer to the same age than she originally thought. It was the gray hair that threw her. "Why are you jealous of me?"

"You clearly have a higher calorie count than I'm allowed," Lisbet replied frostily. "I'm starving."

"Too much sex will eat your calories," Charcoal said in a taunting tone.

"I'm not sleeping with Beck," Lisbet said frostily as she put a dress back on its hanger. "I didn't even sleep with him once. He just let you think that I was because even though he claims to be unlike the master miners underground who enjoy the sexual discomfort of their slaves, he still likes it. Otherwise, he would have made the truth clear to you. He wanted you to suffer."

Charcoal rushed Lisbet. "How dare you say that! He's nothing like them!" She suddenly slapped Lisbet across the face and was rewarded by a sharp jolt of electricity at her wrist. Charcoal crumpled on the floor.

Lisbet stared at her. There was no way the slap Lisbet received had been on the same pain level as the electric shock Charcoal received. Lisbet was still standing while Charcoal was writhing on the floor.

"What voltage was your bracelet set to?" Lisbet demanded.

Charcoal collected herself. It took a minute.

"Let me help you," Lisbet said, bending to give the other woman a hand.

"Gross," Charcoal wheezed. "Keep your hands to yourself. If you touch me, I might get shocked again."

Lisbet sensibly retracted her outstretched hand. “Can you help me understand what’s happening here that’s pissing you off? I don’t get it. You wanted my job? Was that just so you could sleep with Beck?”

Charcoal rolled her eyes. “Look, I couldn’t get the job for a lot of reasons, but mostly I couldn’t get it because Mars is Mars.”

Lisbet was bewildered. “I don’t know what that means.”

“It means that it gets lonely here. Crazy lonely. I hate your guts, but I’d rather come to see what you’re doing than spend the whole day alone.”

“I heard Beck say you had someone waiting for you downstairs,” Lisbet prompted.

“I do, but he’s gone almost all the time. I only see him for a few hours at night and I’m not allowed to go to Noachis city proper because of confidentiality contracts. I could get kidnapped by someone who knows who I am and what I know and get tortured for information. At the end of my contract, me and my lover will be shipped out to the moons of Saturn where no one has ever heard of us so we can start fresh.”

“If you’re with someone, why are you so sore about Beck?” Lisbet wondered.

Charcoal groaned. “Look, you obviously heard what I said to Beck. He bought me as an assistant, but that was all he wanted me for. I broke my bracelet so I could have an affair with Tavis. I never got to sleep with Beck. I was just working as his personal assistant. He didn’t want me and I was so lonely I could die. He really isn’t anything like the miners.”

Lisbet didn’t understand. She and Charcoal weren’t that different. Why did Beck get so fresh with her and keep Charcoal at arm’s length? If everyone was truly as lonely as they claimed on the red planet, why didn’t he like Charcoal?

“But if you’re not sleeping with Beck, then I’m over the moon,” she said as she forced herself to stand.

“This is weird,” Lisbet said, taking a step further away from Charcoal. “He’s a baby. Why would you even be interested?”

“He’s not a baby. Mars is Mars. That’s why I’m here now. I don’t care how you look in your dumb dresses… just so long as Beck is as disinterested in you as he was in me. Now that you’ve said you aren’t rolling around in bed with him, I’m satisfied. Even if you decide you want him, you won’t get anywhere with him either. He’s too messed up. Sometimes it goes that way… on Mars.” She trailed out of the room, shaking out her wrist like that would empty her hand of the electricity that had cracked through it.

Lisbet stared at the space Charcoal had occupied even after she was gone. She said Beck didn’t fool around with anybody. Yet, Beck had said he wanted to have sex with her. He had said it so boldly that it couldn’t be misinterpreted. How did that make sense?

***

“Did you tell Beck he could sleep with me?” Lisbet asked Vantz that night.

Vantz had abandoned the attempt to make it look like he wasn’t smoking during their VR sessions. She couldn’t see the smoke or smell whatever he was pulling on, but his hand moved to and fro in a pattern that only matched smoking.

Vantz chuckled and gave her a sideways look. “I did, but if he’s mentioning it this early in the game, he must have downplayed his interest in you when we were selecting you.”

“What do you mean?” Lisbet pressed.

“Well, not to make it awkward or anything, but I really didn’t have the time to go through the whole Sleeping Beauty Inc. catalog. I asked him to go through it and make a list of five candidates for me. You were on the list and you were marked as his first choice, but he didn’t say a single word about why you were his first choice.”

All the air left Lisbet’s lungs. She hadn’t even been Vantz’s first choice. She had been Beck’s. It took her a solid eight seconds to get the air back in her lungs enough to reply. “He didn’t?”

“He didn’t need to,” Vantz continued blandly. “The other choices were substandard compared to you. You are a fantastic candidate. I’m very pleased with your selection. However, you’re clearly offended by what was meant to be a merciful allowance.”

“You think giving your underling permission to sleep with your wife as a *merciful allowance*?” she repeated coldly.

The cigarette Vantz was smoking was not going to the deer’s mouth. Instead, it was going to a spot under his chin in a way that came off as quite glitchy. “Even after all I’ve told you and all you’ve read, you still don’t get how Mars works yet. Allow me to take you on a tour.”

With that, the space around them changed. Instead of being on the dusty, rocky surface of the planet, they were suddenly surrounded by huge pipes running in all directions.

“This is how the majority of Martians get around. These pipes are surrounded by dirt and even if they aren’t, they’re still in caverns underground. They try to put windows in the transportation tubes, but the glass they have to use is more expensive than the metal. There also isn’t much point when the transportation tubes are underground. For most Martians, it’s dark all day every day. *You* have a room on one of the top floors and you have a stunning view. The radiation from the sun is a major problem. It’s easier to build underground than to make a skyscraper radiation-proof. You live in Martian paradise. Many of the people on Mars don’t see sunlight for years on end. It’s dark, gloomy, and depressing.” He looked at Lisbet like he was waiting for her reaction.

She gave none.

“This is the shopping district,” he said, changing their surroundings again.

The shopping district was little more than a warehouse store. There weren’t many display pictures and there weren’t many products. Lisbet hardly knew what she was looking at. Most of her shopping experiences on Earth had been in classy boutiques with sales girls who catered to her.

“How does this correlate? What does this have to do with that?” Lisbet asked impatiently.

He flicked his wrist impatiently with several terrible snaps. “I’m saying that this place is dreary and lonely. Setting the two of you up to live together as a priest and a nun was never going to work. Once you and I finish our meetings, you will be alone with him. You’d sleep with him even if you weren’t aware that I’d given my permission. As soon as you realized he could touch you without causing an electric shock, you’d go to him for comfort and one thing would lead to another. That’s how it works in isolated places. Relax. I’m merely surprised he brought it up so quickly.”

“I refused him,” Lisbet said with her nose in the air.

“Was that for me? How sweet,” Vantz said in a tone very close to mocking. “I’m not telling you to go to bed with him. You can refuse him all you like. I’m not interested either way. What is far more interesting is how many of the clothes in your closet do not fit you,” he said, changing the

subject. “I’ve been going through the images you’ve sent me and I have to tell you, you need to see how many of those outfits would be wearable with a little alteration. I can’t spare any more money for your attire, so you’re going to need to make those clothes work. Do you think you can trim the ones that are too big down to fit you? I’m sending you an information pack on how to alter clothes. I’d send Charcoal to work on it with you, but I see that she was administered an electric shock for slapping you today. What was that about?”

Lisbet looked up and shook her head wearily. “I said something rude about Beck and she couldn’t stand it.”

“Ah. Well, maybe don’t say rude things about Beck. I doubt he was rude to you and as I said, you need not slide yourself into his back pocket if you don’t want to.”

Lisbet hissed her breath in. “I just don’t understand why he had to bring it up.”

“Obviously to get you thinking about it as a possibility,” Vantz answered soundly. “One day the loneliness might get you and you might find yourself strolling into his bedroom because you’ve discovered, rather painfully, that Mars has snapped you in half and if you aren’t held by another human being, you’ll die.”

Lisbet grimaced.

Vantz ignored her and continued, “However, the day after tomorrow you’ll start your work in The Boiler Room, but if you make a romantic connection there, you’ll be shocked within an inch of your life… Once you get home. I’m only going to warn you once, do not let another person touch you. When I say that I mean, don’t let anyone touch your face, neck, chest, waist, bottom, or thigh. Some wise-cracking moron might try to see if you get shocked by trying to touch you inappropriately. You can shake hands, someone can pat your back, or put their hand on your knee. It’s your responsibility to make sure their hand doesn’t travel upwards. Watch out for handsy people.”

Lisbet nodded. She didn’t imagine it would be much of a problem. In the past, she hadn’t had many men try to lay their hands on her.

“Have you gone through all the information packets I’ve sent you?”

Lisbet nodded again. The packs had been so thorough that reading them had taken up almost all her extra time, and unfortunately, stripped her of a percentage of her innocence. Bold black redactions scared her. They were things they didn’t think an adult could take and maybe she couldn’t.

“Ah, I see the files are marked as read through our file-sharing system. Do you feel prepared to field any questions that are thrown at you?” he asked, peering at her.

“Yeah. As long as I can get a word in edgewise, I should be able to say the script you’ve given me. If the questions get weird, I hope that I’ll be able to answer to your satisfaction.”

“It’s okay if you lie to them,” Vantz said kindly. “I will back up any lie you have to tell.”

“Can I lie and tell them what you look like?” she asked. “Or will there be someone out there who knows what you really look like and will be able to contradict me?”

He huffed a breath of smoke through his nose. “No one will be able to dispute whatever you say. I have kept my face private for many many years.” He pulled up his red-rimmed to-do list that hung in the air in the VR world. “You know, I think we’ve covered everything. Would you like to skip our meeting tomorrow? Or would you like more prepping? Or would you like to play a game with me in the VR world?”

Lisbet didn’t think twice. “Play a game.”

“Then that’s how we’ll spend our last meeting,” he said cheerfully.

Chapter Ten

Lisbet may have been guilty of thinking that Vantz was secretly a four hundred pound mass and that was part of the reason why he preferred not to show his real face. He sat in a chair all the time and never moved so he just amassed weight and grew as chubby as any space slug. She may have thought that. When they met in the VR world, he could present whatever face he wanted while hiding his true appearance indefinitely. However, once she played a game with him in VR, found herself out of breath and panting as she ran on her directionless treadmill, she changed her mind.

She was running after him in the VR world and she could not keep up. They were on rough terrain with glowing bow staffs to slay hobgoblins in the purple twilight. The way Vantz's arms moved was too fast. He sent hobgoblins flying. Lisbet was impressed, but also completely outmatched. They were even playing on the same side and she was as useful as a toddler using her daddy's extra controller.

"Do you play this all the time?" she wheezed.

"No. I don't have time to play this or anything else, but I used to. This is called *Emerald War*. It's an old game. But I used to play it, so it's familiar to me," he answered. He didn't look like an elegant gentleman of the forest here. Here, he wore a skin that the game generated for him. He was a paladin and his face was hidden by a pewter helmet.

Lisbet looked similar, but she had a ponytail hanging out down her back.

That was when the message requests started coming in. Vantz stood still as he read them. "Do you mind if some of my friends join us? I haven't played for a while and someone saw I was online and now everyone wants to join us."

"How many people is everyone?" she asked dumbly.

"Five hundred and ninety-eight. This VR server can handle six hundred players at once and if I give the go-ahead, every single slot has been claimed."

Lisbet gawked. "Really? You're that popular?"

He flourished his bow staff and made the neon tips make a streaming figure eight in the air. "I am, but probably not in the way you think. They're people who are working with us. If you have no major objections, I'm going to allow it. It will be good for morale, which is especially important before the raids start."

"What raids?" Lisbet asked, out of breath and trying to keep up with him, even if she was standing still.

"Of the pleasure palaces. These guys are the soldiers who will be raiding and dismantling the pleasure palaces. We're going to start our first raid in a few days. Buckle up. That's one of the things you'll be reporting to the public on from The Boiler Room." He pressed an ACCEPT ALL button on his display screen and the area filled with players.

They looked amazing. Lisbet expected all of them to look like she did, like an avatar that was made quickly using the program, but a lot of them had specialized skins. When Vantz saw them, he changed his skin too. It only changed his armor, but he moved from looking like he was level one to looking like he was level eighty. He wore sophisticated armor with banners hanging from his spear.

Around him, the people who had joined had mostly done their avatars up following the same theme. They had black skin, blue eyes, and dark green hair. It was an odd combination. Lisbet was surprised at how beautiful they all looked.

Vantz shouted a message to the crowd saying he was only going to be available for another half an hour before his time was up. He introduced Lisbet to them and they were much less enthused than she expected them to be. They'd all been so pleased to see Vantz, but none of them seemed at all interested in her.

Vantz leaned over and whispered to her. "These people are violently opposed to slavery. They even hate Sleeping Beauty Inc. and the kind of contracts they make. It was explained to them over and over again why I was buying a woman from Sleeping Beauty Inc. to be my wife. How the company would provide us with so many cryochambers to make amends for the wrong that has been done to models under their protection on Mars. Everything was explained, but these people will never be a thousand percent into you. They hate slavery above all things. You sold yourself, so they're not fans. Sorry."

Lisbet looked out at their faces. Naturally, they were not overly expressive. She was seeing avatars, not real people, so their hostility didn't exactly reach her.

Then Vantz initiated a horde sweep. Lisbet didn't know what that meant, but she soon discovered he had put all six hundred players to fight against one thousand enemies. The first wave of attackers was like the hobgoblins Lisbet and Vantz had been fighting earlier, but soon all of them were dead, and newer, more dangerous enemies approached.

Lisbet died twice, but Vantz stayed next to her and resurrected her with an item each time.

When the really large enemies appeared, Lisbet had no idea how to fight something that large. They were dealing with ogres the size of twenty players.

Vantz stayed by Lisbet until she yelled at him. "It's not like I can die here. Go fight."

He gave her a thumbs-up before disappearing into the crowds of players.

Lisbet watched from a safe distance. He was easy to see because his color scheme was silver and blue in a sea of black and green. He wasn't the only player throwing himself at the ogre, but he was obvious. When they downed the ogre, he was one of the triumphant players who got the most experience for the kill.

The fight was over after the half-an-hour brawl. He waved to everyone, wished them luck on their first raid, did shout-outs to a few people who had been especially helpful in their negotiations, and then exited the server with Lisbet in tow.

"We have to finish up here," he said as he scratched the back of his deer neck in the space where they usually had their meetings.

She looked like herself instead of like a dusty level-one paladin and he looked like a gentleman who had frankensteined a deer head onto his own neck. Beck had been right about her appearance when he was finished with her rendering. It wasn't as smooth as Vantz's when she looked down at herself, but it was also a lot smoother than she expected from the shower curtain shots he'd taken. All in all, she felt that it was a massive improvement.

Vantz stood behind his armchair and leaned forward against the back of it. "I have to talk to you about a couple of things before I turn you loose."

Lisbet sat down and breathed hard while she waited for the storm of instructions to pass over her.

“For starters, Charcoal has had her permission to enter the top floors of the castle revoked. I had a meeting with her today and I think it would be better if she no longer had any contact with you. I think she’s likely to try and hurt you again. She has bypassed Sleeping Beauty Inc.’s safety parameters before, so I’m going to send her and her little man on their journey to Saturn early.”

“You have a ship to spare to take them?” Lisbet asked cautiously.

“Not exactly. I just mean that I’m going to put them in cryostasis early. It’s all right. It’s for their protection and yours. Uh…” he said, keeping his eyes trained on the list in front of him. “You also have to hop upstairs and let Beck cut your hair.”

“Cut my hair? Why?” Lisbet asked, horrified.

“Relax. I’m not suggesting you shave your head. It’s just really difficult for the average Martian to have long hair with our limited plumbing. You need to have it trimmed up above your shoulders. It will make your life easier and it will show how you’re settling in on Mars because the wedding photos were taken with your long hair, but before you became a regular at The Boiler Room, you got with the program and cut your hair. It will help you win the heart of the average Martian. Beck read an info pack on haircutting. I’m sure he’ll be able to do fine.”

“Okay,” Lisbet agreed, touching the hair around her collarbone that would soon be gone.

“I think that’s about everything,” he said as he closed his red-rimmed screen. “If you need anything further, talk to Beck. He knows everything that’s happening.”

Lisbet wanted to say more to Vantz. She wanted to ask him two very difficult questions and she wasn’t sure how to start. She didn’t know what answer she wanted.

For one thing, she had misgivings about working with Beck all the time. She was especially concerned if Vantz no longer had meetings with her. She didn’t exactly feel comfortable with Beck. It wasn’t that he was a bad guy. It was that he didn’t bother to disguise that he wanted her. She’d never been around someone like that and it made her feel… different.

She licked her lips. There was no point in bringing any of that up to Vantz. For one thing, when she arranged the sentences to explain how she was feeling, she sounded like a little girl and that feeling was in direct opposition to the public relations image they were making for her. She had to push all that away. Vantz had already made it very clear that she could refuse Beck all she wanted.

The second thing was difficult to mention, but she had to ask one more question. “We already talked about this, but if I only have one more minute to talk to you, then I want to talk about this again. If a lot of people die, will I be held responsible?” she finally managed to croak out.

“Of course not,” he said with a scoff. The weird flicking of his thumb meant that he had turned on his cigarette. “You’re a purchased person. It’s your job to do as I tell you to do. Lots of other models have been used as spokeswomen for other organizations. One of your jobs is to convince the audience that you’re doing this because you believe in this cause with all your heart… also that you’re in love with me. The more you can do that, the more effective you’ll be at getting people to evacuate on your word alone. Do a good job. And afterward, if the worst happens and you get charged with anything, it won’t be that hard to get out of it. I’m not allowed to make you into my scapegoat. I will be charged with any crime I make you do. That’s the tradeoff. You will not be held responsible. I will be. Feeling more comfortable now?”

“What will they do to you exactly if things go badly? Do you know?” she asked anxiously.

He puffed on his cigarette. “Uh… no. I don’t know. I don’t know how bad the damage will be. We’re doing our best to arrange for the evacuation of as many people as possible. You should know that I have teams of people working on those problems. You saw some of them tonight. And in some cases, I have whole companies working on these problems. I can’t brief you on their progress. Things change quickly. We also can’t keep the public abreast of every move we make. It will confuse them and it will confuse you. You just need to stick to the story I give you. You’ll get regular packs on how to answer current questions. You just need to say those words and put every effort into looking your best without costing me another nickel. Do you think you can do it without throwing up in your purse?”

“Of course,” she said positively.

He didn’t buy it. “The tension gets to all of us,” he said in a reassuring voice. “I’ll get Beck to get you a cigarette. Rhubarb pie I think. Practice keeping your voice steady and try not to make too many emotional appeals by crying on air every day. Remember, you’re a scientist. Sound like one. Save the tears for the really scary stuff.”

“I’ll try,” she said steadily, using her words as practice.

“Good girl. I don’t know when we’ll talk again, but I want you to know that I have every confidence in you. Do well. That’s all. Just do well.”

When he disappeared from sight, everything around him went with it. She knew she had been taught how to be a good pawn. He wasn’t asking her to be his queen. A part of her was bitterly disappointed. He was never going to see her. He was never going to meet her. But whether he liked it or not, he had given her the position of his wife. They were tied together.

She would meet him someday.

Whether he liked it or not.

Chapter Eleven

The Boiler Room was a terrible place. It was the fanciest, most elite hangout on the planet and it was literally an old boiler room. It had been part of one of the first permanent structures on Mars. It was the furnace room that kept an entire complex warm. Most of the original building was gone. The boiler room was all that was left and since people on Mars didn't have living rooms, they all met in social clubs like The Boiler Room. Lisbet read about the history of the building in one of the info packs Vantz had sent her.

Lisbet was dressed in a white dress that barely covered her knees, white heels, white gloves, and a white fur piece that was about as real as her smile.

Beck met her in front of the elevator that would take them to the second floor, which was the floor everyone went to when it came to arriving and departing. That wasn't exactly the ground floor, but transportation tubes ran everywhere.

Her underground transport took her through the pipes that were mostly as black as outer space with the occasional clear piece of tubing that let her see the Martian sky. It was red, or yellow, or brown, or black. It was like the back of a sand snake, but perhaps the sky only looked like that because of the diamond-shaped windows in the tubing overhead.

Beck sat next to her in the transport. He puffed on a cigarette that was flavored like pumpkin pie and Lisbet wondered if the isolation really was getting to her because he was looking pretty good. The seams on his dark brown trousers were impeccable. The white shirt and vest he wore suited him remarkably well. Even the line of screens on his forearm served some mystical purpose in making him more attractive. Was he really twenty? Or did the cigarette make him look more mature? He had an excellent forehead and when he rested two fingers against it in thought, she thought he looked pretty good. Better than a pool boy.

"How old are you, Beck?" she asked, wishing she could gaze out a window to hide her interest. The transport had windows, but they were traveling through an opaque tube like a train tunnel and couldn't see anything around them anyway. Just metal. As it was, she could only see him.

"I'm forty-six," he said drolly.

"Really?" she asked, perking up.

"No," he admitted immediately with a bored roll of his head. "But I don't like to talk about my age."

"Why?"

"People like to use it against me," he explained. "They tell me I don't know what I'm talking about. Children don't know what they want. Did you know facts get more factual when they're spewed by someone of maturity?"

She frowned. "Oh… Well, I won't rib you about your age then. Besides, I can't imagine what we could have in common."

He glanced at her curiously even though what she'd said was a conversation closer. "I would have thought that we have science in common."

"Are you a scientist too?" she asked, annoyed that she was so pleased to have someone to talk to.

"No. I'm a monster," he replied with a soft exhale on his cigarette.

Lisbet didn't know how to answer that. She took refuge under flippancy. "Well, it's a good thing you're on Mars. I bet a monster like you can go unnoticed because no one can see you. Thousands of tons of rocks make for pretty good cover."

The corner of his mouth twitched. "Do you like fairy tales?" he suddenly asked.

"I… uh…" she tried to think of the last time she had even thought about them. "I haven't heard any new ones recently."

"When I was working with Sleeping Beauty Inc. on your sale, I saw that they tell fairy tales to the girls as a way to relax them before they put them into cryostasis. I thought that was a brilliant idea. I've never been put into cryostasis, but I'd want to hear a little story as the drugs sunk in. What did you think of the story Vantz sent you?"

"It wasn't a very good fairy tale," Lisbet said, without thinking of whether or not Beck would consider it an insulting remark toward his boss.

"Why?" Beck asked, the curiosity transforming his face from boredom to interest.

"W-why?" Lisbet stuttered. "It was a story about transforming Mars into a livable world. He read the story to me to help me get interested in his vision for Mars, but…" she hesitated. "That's his dream. Terraforming Mars is a great dream. He's wonderful for having it and for being willing to sacrifice so much of himself to try to achieve it, but I wasn't very moved when I heard it." Lisbet did not get the opportunity to explain that she had been moved like a mountain into the sea when she spoke to Vantz for the first time.

Instead, Beck interrupted her when she breathed in and asked, "Really? What would inspire you?"

Lisbet didn't want to tell Beck what shape her thoughts took, but she didn't have anyone else to talk to. "He's not giving himself to me. He's only giving me his dream and only the fumes of that dream. He's not here giving me his flashiest smile and trying to convince me to give everything the way he's giving everything. He's an antlered head on a body that doesn't belong to him. Instead, he paid for me and he expects to get what he paid for. That's fine, but it's a little disheartening when you talk about inspiration."

"He's trying to protect you from being too associated with him if everything goes sideways," Beck said, offering the obvious reasoning. "He's not willing to let you burn yourself up in his ambition. Isn't that loving?"

Lisbet nodded. "Sure."

"You seem unconvinced," Beck observed.

"What made you drop yourself all the way down his rabbit hole?" Lisbet asked, her voice low and steady.

Lisbet turned toward him and his eyes regarded her carefully, but his mouth didn't move.

Finally, he asked, "Is that the most interesting thing about me?"

"Maybe." Her mouth was dry.

He looked at her again and then started rolling his shoulder as if to stretch. "If that's the most interesting thing about me, then I'd better keep it to myself. What I was trying to do by asking you about fairy tales was merely that I wrote a few of them wondering if I could outmatch Vantz. I thought he did a good job, but I wondered if I could do better. If you'd let me read you one before you went to bed, it would mean a lot to me."

"I'll think about it," Lisbet said, feeling particularly inflexible. "I'll call you if I have trouble sleeping."

His eyes went back to looking bored and he took another drag on his cigarette. “And who should I call if I have trouble sleeping?”

The sexual tension was thick, but Lisbet hadn’t remained a virgin through the better part of her twenties by being easy. She turned away from him and scratched casually behind her ear.

When they arrived at The Boiler Room, there was nothing to see. The entrance was underground. The only thing there was a sliding door where she was met by a pair of security guards who confirmed her and Beck’s IDs before opening the door and welcoming Lisbet into the club.

Beck had escorted her the first day, but he warned her that she would need to go alone after that. He closed the hatch on the transport and offered her a deadpan, “Good luck,” before leaving her at the door.

The security guards escorted her to the front desk where she was greeted by a woman dressed in a suit. Her hair was cut short, she wore no makeup, and Lisbet was certain she would have mistaken her for a man except that her bosom was straining her buttons.

“Lisbet Bloomburg!” the woman exclaimed happily. “I am Bridget and I am so pleased you’ve chosen The Boiler Room for your social needs. It would be my pleasure to help you arrange your visitors.”

Lisbet nodded and said she would be happy for Bridget to do so.

With that, Lisbet was brought onto the main floor of the social club. It was a hundred hammocks with glass separating them and a view of the pink sand mountains on one side. It was arranged like that because people wanted to see each other, that was the purpose of a social club, but they also wanted to have their conversations be private. A huge space divided by glass was their solution.

“When the complex crumbled into a fissure, only the boiler room was left and there was this magnificent view,” Bridget explained as she led Lisbet to a hammock.

“Are you saying we’re hanging off the edge of a mountain?” Lisbet asked, looking for confirmation.

“Yes. Fun, right? You can’t have fun like this on Earth,” she said, giving Lisbet a demonstration as to how to properly enter and exit a hammock while wearing a pencil skirt.

Lisbet appreciated the demo.

She dropped into it like it was a chair and swung a little like a lazy girl before removing her fur piece and placing it in her lap.

“You’re going to love coming here,” Bridget said enthusiastically. “Can I get you a drink?”

Lisbet had been told that even though Vantz couldn’t spare another cent on her wardrobe, he had budgeted for her to spend money at The Boiler Room. Something would look very wrong if she didn’t have a drink beside her constantly while she was there.

Lisbet ordered a soda water, which seemed like the perfect thing to settle her stomach, and prepared to accept her first visitors.

They were all reporters.

They asked her questions about her wedding.

Lisbet had a stack of lies prepared. She sounded a little lovesick as she told falsehoods about the joy of her wedding day, the beauty of Castle Ares, and all the gifts showered on her by her loving husband. They didn’t sound like lies.

The reporters asked her questions about how much she missed Earth.

Here, Lisbet didn't lie and didn't feel like she had to. She talked about how she had done everything her family had desired of her and how she felt content that she'd made her family happy by marrying Vantz. It wasn't a lie. It was the truth. It was just omitting how cranky she felt.

It was her first day, so the reporters had been asked to keep the questions light. In particular, none of them were allowed to ask her about the battle that had taken place in space with the armada from Earth or her being the thing everyone was fighting over. A few pieces of discarded rubble had fallen to the surface of Mars, but the pieces had hit open desert. Because their questions were so limited, only one of the reporters asked her a question that was even a little bit interesting.

"How do you feel about your younger sister's engagement?"

Lisbet looked up. She hadn't heard anything about either of her younger sisters getting married. She hadn't heard anything about home since she arrived because she deleted all the messages from her father without reading the subject line. The reporter was a suave man with an unshaved chin and a look about him that suggested he was a rascal. The name tag on his breast coat pocket said Osric.

Lisbet hated to admit she didn't know anything, but she didn't feel like she had much choice. She clucked her tongue cutely. "I suppose I've had my head in the clouds since I've been honeymooning. Which of my sisters?"

"Oh," he said, eager to fill in the blanks. "Your sister, Cassica, is engaged to Plymouth Rogerson. Do you know him?"

"I'm afraid not," Lisbet admitted shyly.

"He's the head of an ice drilling company on Europa," Osric supplied for her.

Lisbet bit her lip on the words that it was good that he wasn't head of a mining company on Mars. She didn't know if Europa was any better than Mars for having pleasure palaces underground. However, life had to be better on Europa as they had no shortage of water under the ice sheets.

"What else do you know about my family?" she asked, turning her violet eyes on Oscric with a smile.

He did a double-take. "Were you looking to get some information?"

"Maybe."

He took a card out of his breast pocket. "I should tell you, I'm not really a reporter. I'm a private investigator. I was hired by your father to bring you this information. You have been ignoring your father's calls. He wants to apologize to you and open a channel of communication."

"My father hired *you*?" she chuckled. Her father must have gotten quite desperate. Getting a seedy man like Osric to sidle up to her for information sharing? She chuckled.

Osric pulled at his collar. "Is there something funny about me?"

She shrugged her shoulders and looked at Osric's card like it was fascinating. "Did my father happen to tell you why I'm unhappy with him?"

"No."

"That's fine then. Listen, I'm not ready to speak to my father. If he wants to give me news, he can give it to me through you for the time being. I'll mark you as an important contact so that you can 'interview' me when you've got something to say. Please save our meetings for real info, not nonsense about me and my father making up. Please pass that on to him. If you or he

abuses this arrangement, I'll cut you off. Is there anything else you'd like to talk to me about before we end our meeting?"

He glanced at her bracelet. "If you ever want that off, I might be able to help."

Lisbey colored in shame and covered her wrist.

"It's not noticeable," Osric reassured her. "If you didn't arrive on Mars with a fleet of Sleeping Beauty Inc. ships, no one would have noticed anything amiss from your bracelet. I happen to have a lot of experience with those. I'll be in touch."

With that, he stood up and thanked her for their meeting before he strode away, placing a dozen pieces of plate glass between them.

Chapter Twelve

That night, Lisbet got a message from Beck on her Sleeping Beauty Inc. bracelet. “Come upstairs and get your haircut.”

Lisbet rolled the frozen blueberry around on her tongue until it got warm before she answered him. “In a minute,” she recorded her voice with a lazy shrug.

She was tired after her first day at The Boiler Room. Talking to people all day had been completely overwhelming after two weeks of solitude. She had been able to put off the haircut for one extra day because they weren’t allowing any filming of her on the first day, but they were on the second, so the haircut was happening that night whether she was in the mood or not.

She whined to herself that it would be better if her haircut took place in her dressing room instead of in his workshop. She was about to whine vocally with her bracelet’s microphone on when she glanced into her dressing room. The place looked like a bomb had gone off inside. Bra and panty sets were everywhere. There were huge piles of discarded clothing and only one neat little rack of clothing that she had been preparing for her days at The Boiler Room. She knew she couldn’t really wear the same outfit twice, so a lot of planning was necessary.

“I love physics,” she sang crankily as she got to her feet. “I love physics. That’s why I have a career in fashion and public relations.” She sang off-key with no melody as she ascended the escalator, lazily letting it carry her upwards.

Beck was leaning against a workshop bench smoking when she came in the clear automatic doors.

“Hi, Princess,” he said drolly as he extended his hand. A pair of very long, cruel-looking scissors sat perched there. “Ready for your haircut?”

Lisbet swung her long tangle of dark hair over her shoulder protectively. “I would like to talk you out of this.”

“Oh?”

“You see,” she began. “I’m not as appealing as my sisters. I need my hair to make me prettier. I realize it’s more practical to have shorter hair on Mars, but I’m also a trillionaire’s wife. Can’t I have a little extravagance?”

Beck opened and closed the scissors with a sharp snap before removing them from his hand and placing them on the workbench. “Hmm… I see I have some work to do before I cut your hair. You think you’re not as pretty as your sisters?”

“Of course, I’m not. It’s just that you haven’t seen my sisters,” Lisbet explained.

He laughed. “Of course, I’ve seen your sisters. Your father put all of you up for sale through Sleeping Beauty Inc.”

Lisbet gasped.

“You didn’t know? All three of you were up for sale. I read Tiffania and Cassica’s profiles. I didn’t include either of them in the list of five women I supplied Vantz. Shall I explain why you are a better choice than either of your sisters?”

Lisbet didn’t want to know.

Okay, she wanted to know.

She bit her lips together and nodded.

Beck was so businesslike that there was no way he'd embellish the story just to please her. "I'll start with Cassica because her faults are fewer. She's very pale. Pale people do not look as beautiful with no makeup. On Mars, no one can wear it because there isn't enough water to wash it off. There isn't even enough water to make the cleaning solutions. She's also not got a third of your academic prowess. She has only a high school diploma and then she goofed off working at ski resorts while you worked at university. She sounds like a baby when she talks and to make matters worse, she kind of looks like one. Such a baby face! Why would Vantz want a spoiled little girl to represent him? That is the kind of woman who is purchased because someone wants a wife and a daughter rolled into one. Even if you're not getting the relationship you expected with Vantz, at least he acknowledges you as a woman."

Lisbet dropped her chin into her chest. What Beck said was true, but it wasn't the whole truth. Cassica was a really sweet person. She would never say anything mean about anyone, even if it was true.

Lisbet swallowed. "I heard today that she is engaged to the president of an ice drilling company on Europa. Was she sold off like me then?"

Beck nodded. "It's more than likely that the only reason your father was able to get a buyer for her was because she's your sister and you are publicly married to Vantz. She might visit with her husband for business purposes later on. There are plenty of pretty-faced girls in the Sleeping Beauty Inc. gold model catalog for men who want to marry a woman with connections. She was chosen because she now has a better contact list than any of the other models. I should apologize though. After we're finished terraforming Mars, her association with you might be less than golden."

"Okay," Lisbet chirped, raising her hands in defeat. "What's wrong with Tiffania? She was very popular with men and no one has purchased her yet."

Beck snorted a laugh through his nose. "She was expelled from three schools."

Lisbet's jaw dropped.

He took a puff on his cinnamon stick-flavored cigarette. "They didn't tell you?"

"No," Lisbet said, completely forgetting to breathe.

"Well, she doesn't even have a high school diploma. If you didn't know, then your parents hid her sins well. All she has is her pretty face and her willingness to color outside the lines. That may have been something once, but not anymore. Everyone bends the rules when it suits them in outer space. You, on the other hand…" he hesitated on the words before directing his gaze on the floor and turning away from her. "Are perfect," he finished quietly.

"What did you say?" she gasped in surprise.

He turned back to her and looked her dead in the eyes. "I said you're perfect, but you'd be even more perfect if you'd forget about your sisters and let me cut your hair."

She took the scissors from where he'd discarded them on the table. She pulled her hair into a ponytail on the side and opened the scissors around a small chunk of hair. "Tell me why I'm perfect," she challenged.

His eyes moved between the poised scissors and her eyes, gauging how serious she was. Rising to the challenge, he began, "You didn't need to have your eye color changed. Your hazel eyes were fine. You are a natural beauty. I don't know what it is. Perhaps you think all women need to look like kittens to be adorable, but the lines of your face arouse feelings more noble

than baseline lust. On Mars, trust me, we've had our fill of that. All of us need a woman who is more than a kitten. Whether you understand it or not, you're perfect for the job."

He stopped talking and she let a heartbeat pass before she closed the scissors down on the lock of hair she'd set apart. The curl of black hair fell to the floor. With her fingers, she separated another lock. "Keep going," she dared him.

"You haven't complained and you could have. You could have made my ears bleed with incessant whining. Not only is life on Mars wildly inconvenient compared to life on Earth but what Vantz is asking you to do is hard. It's taking a forefront in transforming a world you don't even care about, yet you haven't complained, and you've done everything you've been asked to do. Even now," he pointed at the scissors in her hand with his chin, "you're still doing it."

She snapped the scissors shut again and pulled another bit of her hair forward.

"You loved your family. Thinking of your love for your family turns me inside out," he continued. "Your father is unquestionably greedy. A lot of people would think that a man as greedy as that doesn't deserve the love of his daughter, especially when he was willing to sell her. Yet, you gave him what he asked for—everything—and then drew the line and said he wouldn't take anything more from you. It's an elegant sacrifice."

Lisbet felt tears welling up in her eyes. She pushed them back with a strong intake of breath and closed the scissors again. The cut hair fell soundlessly to the floor. Now she only had one chunk of hair that she hadn't cut and she couldn't think of one other thing that Beck could say about her that would satisfy her enough to make her cut it. Even if it was the last bit, even if she would look dumb with only one strand of long hair, she would leave it long if Beck couldn't think of anything further to say.

His mouth hung a little open on the last thing. He had already complimented her looks, her perseverance, and her willingness to sacrifice. What else could he say?

"Sharing you with The Boiler Room is unbearable," he finally said.

Lisbet removed the scissors from her hair. What did he mean by that?

He continued. "I know that I chose you and Vantz approved you for the job at The Boiler Room. I thought I would be fine sending you there each day, but now that it's come to it, I don't want you to go. Leaving you there this morning left me feeling empty."

"Why?"

"Because it's dangerous to be there. I know he schooled you. I know he gave you hundreds of thousands of words meant to protect you in a place like that, but I still feel uneasy. The truth is that the best way to protect you is to make every person on Mars fall in love with you. Your hair is something that yells a message to the audience no matter what comes out of your mouth. It says you're not a Martian. You don't understand them. It is imperative to your safety that it comes off."

Lisbet stood there stupidly while he took the scissors from her hand and snipped the last lock of her hair.

"Let me even this out for you," he said, turning her around so she faced the door. The scissors clicked open and shut as he worked evening out her ends. "It would really help me if you'd do something that makes me think less of you."

"Like what?"

"Oh, maybe you could tell me everything you find lacking in me. That would help." His words floated over her shoulder and into her ear.

Was she beginning to get what Vantz was talking about? How the isolation of Mars draws people together whether they like it or not? Her heart was beating fast and with no one around to care whether or not she made a mistake, it was hard not to turn around and do something outrageous.

What could she do? Tell him to put his arms around her? Tell him to kiss her? Tell him to take her to his bedroom to show her what his sheets felt like on her bare back?

She scoffed. She couldn't do any of that stuff, but she made it seem like she was scoffing at him. She recovered by saying, "I can't tell you what's wrong with you. I didn't read your profile."

He wiped the clippings of hair from the scissor blades with his fingers. "You're right. You can't feel anything for me and I can't stop what I feel for you. We're going to have a delightful time together." He put down the scissors and put a handheld mirror in front of her face.

She fingered her straight hair. All the curls had been cut off. "It's even. Thanks. Is there anything else I'm supposed to do while I'm up here?"

"Yeah," Beck said, pressing some buttons on his armbands. The first thing that happened was that a little robot shot out of a bay by the wall and started sucking up the hair on the floor. The second was that Beck retrieved something from the table. "This is for you. From Vantz," he said, handing her a small rectangular box.

It was the wrong shape to be any piece of jewelry Lisbet could think of. She opened it to see a cigarette sitting in the velvet with several cartridges sitting next to it. They were all labeled rhubarb pie.

"Not all flavors taste good with the antianxiety drugs you inhale when you smoke these. It has to be something fall-scented," he explained.

"What flavor does Vantz smoke?" Lisbet wondered aloud.

"Red licorice," Beck said disdainfully.

"Hmm…" Lisbet considered how the kiss tasted when she was still waking up in her cryochamber. "He didn't taste like red licorice to me."

Beck shrugged his shoulders. "What did he taste like?"

"I don't know. Maybe nothing. Maybe the wind."

"There is no wind on Mars," Beck commented. "I'm also supposed to give you this. Vantz requested it be dug up from storage for you."

It was a sewing machine in a box with a handle.

"How are the alterations coming? Are they slow by hand?"

"I haven't really started," she admitted. "I'm still sorting out what fits well enough to be worn immediately."

"I'll leave you to it," he said, taking a puff of his cigarette and moving toward a door that led somewhere further inside.

"Is that your bedroom?" she called after him.

He nodded. "Want to see inside?" He dared to flash her a smile as he held the door open as if he was holding it open for her.

She recoiled.

He raised a cynical eyebrow at her and closed the door between them.

Chapter Thirteen

The next few weeks followed a routine Lisbet never would have suspected her life to fall into. She got up in the morning and spent half an hour trying to look pretty. At first, it was really challenging, but through constant meetings with other women, she learned a few tricks on how to look her best without makeup or dry shampoo. Then she selected an outfit from the rack of prepared clothes. Vantz asked her to set aside his personal favorites for days when she would need to make big announcements in front of cameras. Then she skipped breakfast and went to The Boiler Room. It was better if she ate brunch there and skipped lunch. It cost Vantz the same amount either way. Food prices were fixed so it didn't really matter if she ate at Castle Ares or at the club. The food came from the same place anyway. It was more social to eat at the club.

Then the interviews, meet-and-greets, introductions, and everything else began.

There were a lot of questions about Vantz.

"Was he a good kisser?"

"What did he look like?"

"How did they fall in love?"

"How did he have time to fall in love? He is the busiest man in the solar system!"

"What did they do together for fun?"

"Did he toss and turn at night under the weight of an impossible task? After all, so many other people had failed to terraform Mars."

"How did it feel to know that the first battle in space had been, in part, over her? During the battle miners swore they would capture her cryochamber and take her underground."

That was one of the heaviest.

There were a million other questions. Lisbet answered the kiss question easily. Vantz had kissed her.

"His kiss is always astonishing," she admitted wistfully. "I've never felt anything like it, like being swept off your feet suddenly… Every single time." It was in her mind to turn Vantz into a Paris to her Helen of Troy, an Antony to her Cleopatra, and a God to her Joan of Arc.

When she had to answer the question about what he looked like, she always evaded the question as deftly as she could. She decided to keep his secrets as valiantly as he did. "It's a secret. If he wanted everyone to know, he could have shown everyone his face years ago."

The story of how they fell in love was already established. "I wrote to him to fangirl over him and, miraculously, he wrote me back," she said, making her voice like polished brass. "He saw something in me that I have never seen in myself. I can't explain how much his love has changed me."

"Weren't you sold to him through Sleeping Beauty Inc.?" the reporter asked.

"Yes. He decided to do it that way, largely so he could cover the arrival of the Mammoth ships. I could have been here much sooner if he hadn't wanted me delivered along with the method of deliverance for all of Mars."

Saying that made the reporter's mouth gape, but Lisbet was answering the same question for multiple reporters. All their mouths hung open when they had their turn with her.

As for the question of how he had time to fall in love, Lisbet brushed it away with a quick, "He fits it in the cracks. Everyone needs love. That's more true on Mars than in other places."

She liked to answer the questions about how they had fun together because the answer was easy and natural. “We play VR games. He’s really fit. He’s hard to keep up with.”

When she got questions about his personal life, she squirmed. “You know that is private,” she’d feigned, refusing to talk about the anxiety he and Beck both seemed to suffer from.

But those were only the beginner questions. She was also asked about the forced evacuations of the pleasure palaces. Lisbet didn’t know exactly what the teams Vantz sent were doing or how they were doing it. The method had to be confidential, so they could do it over and over again without allowing the miners to prepare for it. Lisbet didn’t know, but every few days, Vantz would provide her with an updated map regarding which places on Mars had been evacuated. Every day, Lisbet would make a petition to the miners to please come forward and go into cryosleep while Mars was being terraformed. It wasn’t safe to remain on the planet. It didn’t matter what she said or how she said it, the miners stayed underground.

The reporters were not interested in those regular petitions to the public. Everyone was watching her for the daily report about which areas had been cleansed of pleasure palaces. The people on the surface rejoiced. The people underground were silent.

Aside from that, there were a million questions about Vantz since she was the only person who had ever seen him. They wanted to know what he smoked (apparently it was known that he smoked), which underwear he wore, his favorite food out of the canteen, his favorite book, his favorite movie, his favorite VR game, and so much more that Lisbet finally had to ask Bridget to give her a few minutes between visitors so she could keep a journal of her lies. She sent it to Vantz at the end of each day, but he only replied to her with more info packets.

She would call off visitors for an hour in the midday for a little nap where she swung in her hammock and pretended to be a little girl sleeping in the garden back home. She’d dream of green grass wet from the sprinkler and then open her eyes to the red sands of Mars. Then she would dive right back into accepting visitors until the workday ended. With the day’s work accomplished, she’d get on her transport and go back to Castle Ares.

Beck would meet her at the elevator, merely asking if anything notable had happened that day. Her interaction with him was always the best interaction of the day. He didn’t ask her anything she had to lie about and he didn’t pester her with more than just one question. He was handsome, providing a welcome face, and he demanded nothing.

After the question had been answered, he’d walk her to her bedroom doors, and then head for the escalator with a solid stride.

He never acted needy for a single second. Sometimes, she thought that he had changed his mind about wanting to take her to bed. He was so quiet, so bored, so even-tempered that it was hard to imagine any heat was simmering under the surface.

Once, Lisbet didn’t go into her room when he dropped her off. She stood outside the doors. He was already walking away with purpose. He was so determined in the way he walked, she thought he must have something important to do. On the escalator, he paused, standing still on a moving stair instead of walking up to get to the next floor at double speed. He paused, undid the buttons at his throat, turned to the side, and leaned against the handrail that was moving along with him. He brushed his fingers across his collarbone in a horizontal motion. Then he rubbed the back of his neck like he was the most exhausted person in the world.

His brown eyes met Lisbet’s violet ones.

He said nothing.

He just looked at her.

At the top of the escalator, he stepped off the stairs but he didn't take another step toward his workshop.

If they were having a staring contest, and it didn't feel anything like one, he was winning. Lisbet couldn't hold his gaze. It was too intense and too against who she was inside herself. She wasn't the kind of woman to marry a man only to fool around with his servant, even if her husband gave her the green light.

Half of her thought it was a trap.

The other half of her hoped it was a trap and that she was brilliant for evading it.

She dropped her eyes and crossed the threshold into her bedroom.

The days went on like that until Osric showed up in front of her hammock in The Boiler Room. She looked at the private investigator with pursed lips. Even though she objected to his presence less than her father's, she still had no desire to hear what he had to say.

"You're here at the behest of my father?" she questioned—bored and uninterested in hiding it.

"Yeah. There are two things I'm supposed to talk to you about. The first one is about your sister, Tiffania."

"Let me guess. My daddy managed to find a husband for her?"

"Um… No," Osric said like he wanted to deliver the news about as much as she wanted to hear it.

Lisbet found that interesting. Why would he care?

"No. What happened is that she took a temporary contract with Sleeping Beauty Inc.," Osric explained.

Lisbet struggled to see why that was a surprise. Obviously, she had. Wait. Had he said temporary? Lisbet had been sold for life.

"She sold herself for a two-year contract to a mining company executive as a public relations agent. Here on Mars. She'll be here in two weeks," Osric explained.

That meant that Tiffania had refused to sell herself for the benefit of their floundering father. She had refused to take a match as a gold model and sell herself for life. Instead, she realized that she could make money herself if she sold herself for a shorter contract. She was keeping the money.

"How disgraceful," Lisbet said with a bored click of her tongue.

"Is it disgraceful or is it something else?" Osric challenged lightly. Obviously, Lisbet had sold herself and her hypocrisy was showing.

Lisbet nodded in a way that should have let Osric know she was annoyed. "Question. Who's her buyer?"

"Antar Williams. He wants her here quickly. She left two weeks ago and she's on the fastest kind of ship they have. He probably wants to get her talking to you on his behalf as soon as possible. Probably something about his pleasure palace."

"If he wants to talk to me so badly, why doesn't he come and talk to me himself?" Lisbet questioned.

"Probably because he's butted heads with your husband one time too many to just show up and look cute," Osric answered.

Lisbet blew her hair out of her eyes. "Okay. I'll keep an eye out for her. Thanks."

Osric leaned forward. “Your father also wanted me to talk to you about something else. Are you aware of the rumor that’s going around about Vantz?”

“Aren’t there a hundred rumors going around about him? I can’t keep track of all of them.” At that moment, she wished she’d taken up smoking the rhubarb pie cigarette Vantz had sent her. It would have given her hands something to do rather than just grip her empty water glass uncomfortably.

“It’s the one about how he’s not a person at all. He’s an AI that’s orchestrating the terraforming of Mars,” Osric whispered.

Lisbet laughed. “That’s not possible.”

“Are you sure? No one has actually seen him.”

“I’ve seen him!” She stressed the lie and kept her eye contact as sincere as possible. “I sleep with him every night.”

However, something in her head was tripping. Was such a thing possible? She had not seen Vantz when he kissed her. For all she knew, it could have been someone else who laid their lips on her. She hadn’t seen him in VR. If he was an AI that explained how well he played *Emerald War*. His voice, with the slight English accent, could be a generated voice. That could explain why he was never overly emotional when he spoke. The whole idea could easily explain why Vantz had been very clear that she could never have a real relationship with him and why he needed her as an alibi. Perhaps he needed her to tell people that he was human when he wasn’t.

However, Lisbet kept her face impassive as more possibilities rocketed through her skull.

If people thought he was an AI, that would let him slip from memory for the trouble he was about to cause with the mining companies on Mars. The rumor could save the real man’s life. After all, if everyone thought he wasn’t really a person, but a form of artificial intelligence, they couldn’t punish him—formally or informally.

Lisbet let her mind linger on that possibility. Vantz was a liar. He might have even spread the rumor himself.

Whatever the answer was, one thing was clear: Vantz had asked her to tell people he was honeymooning with her. She was a purchased woman and she had to do what she was told—convincingly.

She laughed again. “What a ridiculous idea,” she breathed with a patient smile. “People will say anything these days.”

Osric assessed her from head to foot. “Are you saying he’s ravishing you in the night when he’s also logging the completion of work tickets?”

“I’m not saying anything of the sort. He sets time aside for me. It’s not the same amount of time each day, nor is it at the same time, and sometimes he runs processes he doesn’t need to supervise, but surely I’m not expected to know his every move when I spend every day cultivating contacts at The Boiler Room.”

Osric suddenly put his face much closer to hers. He put one of his hands on one of the posts of her hammock and challenged her. “I’m going to call bull on you claiming you have a sexual relationship with him. If there’s one thing I know, it’s sex and you haven’t been having it with anyone.”

She laughed again, right in his face. “You can tell that? How? Am I holding my knees too close together?”

He licked his lips and spared a glance at her knees. “Something like that.”

She nodded. “Well, I’m going to call bull on my father asking you to mention that AI rumor to me. My father doesn’t care if Vantz is an AI or a computer text box or a monster ready to ravish me down to the bone. My father’s interest in me would be complete, except that he wants to make sure I stay on top, so he stays on top with his fabulous new son-in-law. I think you are working for someone else as well as my daddy and you’re using your contract with my dad to pump me for information for another client. What do you think of that?”

Osric took a step forward, which was astonishing because he was already quite close. Then, deliberately, he placed a hand on Lisbet’s throat.

She knocked his hand away. “What are you doing?”

“I want to see how you react when a man touches you.”

She slapped him across the face. “Liar. You are touching me because you want to know if I’ll be electrocuted. Is that a little assignment from my daddy or someone else? Who wants to know if Vantz is a cruel owner? He’s not. We trust each other completely and he would never worry that I would cheat on him because I never would.”

She was a liar too. She would receive a shock for the touch Osric gave her later, but it was a hurdle she was going to have to cross later. She kicked Osric away and sent herself swinging backward in her hammock with the same motion. “Are you sure you aren’t a reporter? Who are you writing a story for? What private audience?”

He stepped back, looking confused and apologetic in a way that contradicted his seedy style choice. “Sorry. I suppose I could have just asked you.”

“No, you couldn’t have. Someone wants to know badly and they would not have taken me at my word,” she said sharply. “The next time you come here to talk to me, you’d better be ready to talk to me about your ‘other’ client. I will no longer speak to you on behalf of my father. If he wishes to contact me, he can do so through Vantz. I’m done with this nonsense. I have important work to do. Please go.”

Osric left with his shoulders up like a hurt dog.

Lisbet huffed. He wasn’t the one who would be hurt.

When she got home to her suite that night she was awarded a vicious shock that fired through her body starting at her wrist. It dropped her to the floor at the foot of her bed. It made the fillings in her teeth hurt. Rating her pain, she gave it a solid nine. She lay on her back on the floor for some minutes after the shock and stared at the ceiling above her head. Her fingers tingled painfully. How long would it take for her to recover?

Why hadn’t Vantz or Beck spoken to her about the touch, and the circumstances around it, even if they were still going to let her get shocked? Undoubtedly, a message had been sent to them both about Osric touching her. Why weren’t they asking her what happened? Beck had gone up to his room as though everything was normal when he greeted her.

Chapter Fourteen

When Tiffania arrived at The Boiler Room to make her appearance, the sensation was much larger than when Lisbet had arrived. The biggest reason why was that when Lisbet made her first appearance, the soreness of the space battle was fresh. There were casualties and many of the inhabitants of the above-ground cities had lost people who had fought on the side of the miners. Meaning that Lisbet's arrival had been heralded by a death in many households. Many weeks had passed since then, and even though the ravages of the first battle in space were still hanging in the air, a lot of people on Mars didn't have windows and they were ready for something fun. Tiffania was more vivacious than Lisbet and her arrival was so interesting! She was Lisbet's sister and she had sold herself to one of the miners on the opposite side. Everyone wanted to talk to her about her story.

Lisbet heard it from Bridget before she met with her sister. She could see her. Everyone could see everyone in The Boiler Room. Tiffania was dressed in a deep red costume with feather trim that made her look like a circus performer. It was an outfit that had been designed to garner as much attention as possible… the exact opposite of Lisbet's wardrobe, which Vantz chose to make her look classy.

Bridget told her about how Tiffania's purchase had been met with shock. Selling yourself on Earth with Sleeping Beauty Inc. had a number of different meanings. The same was true on the more civilized Jovian moons, but on Mars, a sale meant something else. Being sold to a miner on Mars meant that she could be taken underground to a secret pleasure palace and never returned to the surface. Tiffania *choosing* that path set the entire world aflame with curiosity. Certainly, if someone was choosing to go underground, the slaves there must not have it so bad.

Except that many of the noisier voices on Mars knew more about pleasure palaces than either Lisbet or Tiffania knew. She was instantly labeled as worse than a bad girl because she was labeled a stupid girl.

Lisbet didn't know what to make of the public image her sister had been immediately smeared with. She hadn't realized how important it was for Vantz to keep their relationship so public. That was why he had to marry her in front of the whole galaxy and train her to be a respectable source of information. Seeing everyone's reaction to Tiffania's very public temporary sale to someone like Antar, they were equal parts intrigued and disgusted in the same breath. They thought she was the stupidest person in the solar system, but they also wanted to see what would happen to her.

Lisbet thought of the black rectangles over the text of the court documents and her mouth went dry.

Except that Lisbet was facing a PR crisis first thing in the morning because Tiffania was her sister and her bad-girl reputation was threatening to undermine Lisbet and her evacuation efforts. Obviously, that had partly been Antar's intention when he bought her.

Lisbet went to her hammock room. The walls of glass provided the sound privacy she needed. She pointed herself toward the outward window and used her bracelet to call Beck. She told him the story and waited for his advice.

"How do you want to handle it?" he asked, sounding bored and inconvenienced.

“Do I have a choice? I would think that you’d want me to disown her right here and right now.”

Beck smacked his lips. “No. You don’t have to do that. It would look bad if you did. We need to let the people of Mars know that you want to help people who have put themselves in dangerous situations for money… like Tiffania.”

“So I’m allowed to greet her?” Lisbet asked with a relieved sigh.

“Yes,” Beck said kindly. “Take care of your little sister, but be aware of the dangers that she represents. You can’t tell her anything about your real life with Vantz, even if she is family. You have to stick to the same PR bullshit we tell everybody. You also need to know that even though she probably doesn’t have any scary stories today, in the future, if she tells you something that Antar has done to her that you can’t stand… You need to know, there's nothing we can do about it. Nothing. The location of Antar’s pleasure palace is known, but he’s not very high up on our list because his palace is part of one of the largest complexes, so we will not be rescuing her anytime soon.”

Lisbet turned and looked through the layers of plate glass at her little sister. Tiffania had blondish hair and green eyes that looked at odds with her red attire. The skin on her cheeks looked so delicate, it almost looked like glass.

“How much danger is she in?” Lisbet asked Beck, a desperate edge to her voice.

His shrug was audible over the communication line. “I don’t know. I guess it depends on how the next few months go. Whatever happens, she’s a grown woman. Do not get sucked in. She was brought here to manipulate you and trap you. Can you see that?”

It was weird for Lisbet to get a pep talk from Beck. During all the time they’d spent together, nothing he’d done had hinted that he was hard as nails.

“I need to hear you say you understand what you have to do,” he said unflinchingly.

“I get it. I’ll be everything I’m supposed to be,” she replied, trying to sound as cool as him.

“Good,” he said encouragingly before he cut the line and got back to whatever he was doing.

Lisbet turned her back on the view of The Boiler Room that included her sister. What would happen to Tiffania if her owner decided to take her into the old mines? Black rectangles floated in front of her eyes. They represented redacted information most people couldn’t handle.

Lisbet was furious… and yet… something very similar had happened to her. She had been sold off to someone on Mars. What if that someone had been less honorable than Vantz or Beck?

A tap came at the door. Bridget was waiting for permission to let Tiffania into Lisbet’s glassed hammock area. Lisbet greeted her sister with a hug she wasn’t supposed to give anyone and acted like seeing her was the most magical thing that could ever happen. She had to. There were about a million cameras pointed at her.

Tiffania looked fresh off the boat, in that she was wearing makeup and had a lot of product holding her curls in place.

Lisbet let them take pictures of them for fifteen minutes before she shooed the reporters away so she could have some alone time with her sister.

Lisbet ordered drinks for them, offered her sister a hammock, and took a seat herself. “I’m so excited you’re here,” Lisbet said. “I thought I was never going to see my family again. Now you’re here, we can meet here every day! Won’t that be something?”

Tiffania acted just like Lisbet. They weren’t sisters for nothing. “We should have dinner together,” Tiffania cooed. “You know, like a double date?”

“I’m so glad you contacted me,” Lisbet said in a hushed whisper with her eyes brimming with hope. “You’re here because Antar wants to empty his pleasure palace and secure his slaves in cryostasis, right? I’m sure we can do it discreetly. We can be so quiet that no one will even know that’s what he’s done.”

Lisbet said that. She knew she was putting words in Tiffania’s mouth. That wasn’t what her sister had come to say. She knew that, but she had to make it clear from the get-go that was what was on her mind.

Tiffania’s expression fell in deep disappointment. “I haven’t been instructed to give you that message.”

“Okay,” Lisbet said, giving her sister a gentle expression she hoped didn’t put too much pressure on her sister. “We’ll just chat then, but please pass that message on to Antar. He needs to know that kind of arrangement is possible.”

Tiffania looked blank, like she had just been thrown in the deep end and she didn’t know how to proceed.

“How long have you been on Mars?” Lisbet asked breezily.

“I got here the day before yesterday,” Tiffania said, picking up the rhythm of a simpler conversation.

“And you’re already out in public? I wasn’t ready to see a soul until I’d been here for a solid fourteen days, but I imagine I have a different relationship with Vantz than the one you will have with Antar, but here you are at a social club already. I’m delighted to see you.” Lisbet patted her sister’s knee carefully, aware that any touching anywhere else might shock both of them later. “What else is on your social calendar? Certainly, you’re not here just to see me?”

“Antar was hoping we could have a dinner date with you and Vantz,” Tiffania said, trying to sound like her social calendar was full when actually there was no one else she was supposed to see.

Lisbet leaned in and said kindly, “I have to refuse. We don’t do that. Vantz is very busy with the activation of the magnetic towers. He works all the time when he’s not with me or asleep. We haven’t been accepting invitations from anyone. You can meet me here. You can even bring Antar. I’d like to meet him, but I can’t promise that the four of us can have supper together. That’s impossible.”

Tiffania looked confused. Obviously, the first job she’d been given was to get Vantz and Lisbet to agree to a dinner date. Tiffania was stunned Lisbet was saying no to her. Lisbet had never said no to her.

“Maybe we can work something out after the towers go online. Vantz will be less busy then,” Lisbet said. She was lying, but the lie was good enough to pacify her sister for now.

“Will that be soon?” Tiffania asked, knowing nothing about Mars or how many years had been spent by how many scientists in order to give Mars a magnetic shield that still hadn’t been activated even though it had been finished secretly months ago.

“I couldn’t say,” Lisbet said brightly. “Tell me how your interviews with the reporters are going. What kind of questions are they asking you?”

Tiffania melted a little in her hammock. She had never been interviewed by reporters before. “Ah, they have a lot of questions about Antar’s pleasure palace.”

“Have you been there?”

“No. I only got here yesterday. I’m staying in a skyscraper they’re calling a castle.”

“I live in one like that,” Lisbet joined in. “Mine is called Castle Ares. What’s yours called?”

“One forty-two, I think. Why are you in one named after the God of War and I’m in one that only has a number for a name?” Tiffania complained.

“Because I’m married to the God of War,” Lisbet explained with a heavy dose of humility. Holding something like that over Tiffania’s head would not help anything.

“Yeah, I’ve heard him called that,” Tiffania said as she looked out the window at the pink sand. “Tell me about Vantz. What’s he like? You’ve been married to him for months.”

Lisbet smiled. “Naturally. What do you want to know?”

Tiffania proceeded to ask Lisbet all the same questions the reporters had asked her. Tiffania should have done better. She should have had better questions for Lisbet, but she didn’t. If Lisbet had to bet, she would have bet that Antar took a whole fifteen minutes with Tiffania to prepare her to talk to Lisbet. All she was supposed to do was ask Lisbet to go to dinner and she was going to have to leave empty-handed. Lisbet told her all the things she’d already told everyone. It was a very dull conversation for Lisbet.

Their conversation finished late in the afternoon and Lisbet told her sister she had to say goodbye. It was her normal time for leaving The Boiler Room. They said their goodbyes and Lisbet promised to meet her the next day. Tiffania looked hopeful and Lisbet got ready to go. She put on her fur piece, grabbed the strap of her handbag, and went down the elevator to where she would pick up her transport.

Except something unexpected happened.

The moment she stepped into the transport tube, she was attacked on the platform. An underground transport screamed past, ramming her transport vehicle and pushing it out of the way down the tunnel. When they passed her, she was pelted with rubber bullets and as each of them hit her in less-than-ideal spots, she knew that each one of them represented an electric shock she would receive later.

She screamed and hit the floor. The bodyguards fired at the vehicle as it disappeared down the tunnel, but it was too late. Lisbet was covered in bruises, red paint, and a dart was sticking out of her side that had a memory card attached to it.

She pulled the dart out.

“Hey, you’re not supposed to do that,” one of the guards warned.

Lisbet forced her breathing to be calm and got to her feet. “I’ll put darts out of my body if I want to,” she snarled. “I’m okay. Don’t touch me. For now, I need to go back inside and talk to Bridget.”

She met Bridget in the atrium, but Bridget wasn’t fast enough to get her into a private room before a floor full of the most important people on Mars saw that she had been attacked and that her white dress was covered in red. Whether it was blood or paint, they didn’t know. In actuality, it was both.

“Should I call your sister?” Bridget asked once they were alone.

“No. Keep her out and let me clean this thing. If you have other clothes for me to wear, that would be appreciated. I need to call my castle and arrange for another transport. Otherwise, I prefer to be left alone. Please do not let anyone in here.”

Bridget agreed and ducked out to find her new clothes.

Lisbet was about to call Beck, but she got a call from him first. “Busy day?” he inquired darkly.

“Did you see the number of times my sister touched me in a way that is likely to piss off Vantz, or the location of the underground transport, or the number of times I was hit by rubber bullets to add to how I’ll be punished later?” she wheezed, almost crying. “Is one of those the reason why you’re calling me?”

“Wait. What happened?” he asked, his tone appropriately altered.

She heard the clacking of his keyboard through the communicator in her bracelet.

“I just told you,” she pressed. “I was the victim of a drive-by shooting, but I was lucky they didn’t use real bullets. My ribs hurt like a son of a bitch. I was also hit by a dart. There’s a memory card attached to the dart. It’s in my purse. Seriously, Beck, is there something we can do about the shocks tonight? None of that was my fault and… I’m hurt really bad. I think one of my ribs is broken.”

“Did you see who attacked you?”

“Hilariously, no.”

“Are you getting medical treatment there? I don’t want just any doctor to look at you. I have a doctor I can call up from the fortieth floor.”

“The one I was supposed to meet for my initial assessment?” she asked snarkily.

“I’m sorry about that. He’s been busy. Here and there. Obviously, he hasn’t been here, but he is now. I’ll come and get you in a fresh transport. Hang on.”

Lisbet was not happy when he cut the connection. She wanted to keep talking to him. She sat and waited for Bridget to come back and refused to acknowledge the tears running down her face.

Chapter Fifteen

“Your sister is in the hall outside demanding to see you,” Bridget said when she came in with new clothes. “I’m so sorry, but all I have is a waiter's uniform.”

“That will do. Thank you,” Lisbet said as she took the pile of clothing from Bridget. “While I’m changing, go back out in the hall and tell Tiffania that I would love to see her, but I’m not at my best just now. I had an accident and I need to take care of myself. Encourage her to leave.”

“They’re not letting anyone leave the club just now,” Bridget squeaked, clearly dealing with problems of her own. “The police are here and they’re interviewing everyone. They want to interview you. They’re waiting until you’ve changed. They want your discarded clothes in a bag as evidence.”

“Fine. Tell Tiffania to go back to her hammock and do her interview with the police like a big girl.”

“Will do.” Bridget ducked out.

Lisbet got out of her clothes and laid them out for the police. She went to the sink and tried to wash herself, but they only had some weird sanitizer. Blood was oozing from the dart wound on her side. Breathing hurt.

There was a sanitary napkin dispenser in the room. It had tampons and pads. Lisbet chose the pad from the control panel and paid for it with her bracelet. Then she got an idea and bought another one. From there, she rolled one of the wingless pads into a loop with the sticky side in, then she used the other pad’s sticky side to hold it in place. It was makeshift, but she felt much better once that was done.

She put on the waiter uniform, and then she braided her hair in two tight French braids down the sides of her head. Her hair stopped at her hairline at the nape of her neck, but the hairstyle made her look even more like one of the waiters. When she left with Beck, she needed it to be as quiet as possible. It would be amazing if she was able to leave unnoticed.

When she was dressed, Bridget brought the police in to question her. They took the dart with the memory card. They couldn’t look at it there. They were worried about what viruses the card might carry. It needed to be examined carefully. They believed it would have the grievances and the demands of her attackers on it… If it didn’t have a virus that was meant to cripple Vantz’s system.

Once they had all they wanted, they advised Lisbet to see a doctor. They told her they’d be in touch once they knew what was on the memory card, then informed her that the exit had police officers stationed there, Beck was waiting for her, and it was safe for her to leave.

From what the police said, it sounded to Lisbet like leaving The Boiler Room was going to be easy. However, it was far from that. When Lisbet got to the exit, she saw that all the effort she had put into looking inconspicuous was wasted. Everyone knew it was her. There were a million cameras taking pictures of her. Beck was standing in front of the transport, working with the police to give her a path out.

Lisbet didn’t know what to do other than to throw herself into the crowd and try her best to make it to the transport. It felt like a hundred people touched her on her way. She dove head-first through the transport door and onto the seat. Beck flew in after her and the door snapped shut on its own, except it wasn’t quite fast enough and one of the reporters somehow

made it into the vehicle with them. The transport started moving down the tunnel with the reporter inside.

It was a man who instantly started firing off questions at Lisbet.

“Have you heard about the explosion?” he asked gruffly.

“What explosion?” Lisbet questioned in alarm.

Beck tasered him. Twice.

The man crumpled.

Beck pressed the red emergency stop button and, when the vehicle came to a stop, Beck opened the door and knocked the reporter’s body into the tunnel with an intense kick. His body fell.

Lisbet winced.

The door shut behind the reporter and they continued on their way to Castle Ares.

Beck folded his taser into something smaller with the safety on. He dropped it on the seat next to him like it didn’t matter. Nothing had happened. He opened his breast pocket and pulled out his cigarette, which he started smoking with an air of indifference that truly impressed Lisbet.

“What was that man talking about?” Lisbet demanded.

“One of our bombs went off today. It was only supposed to explode if someone tampered with it. It was one that had been placed in an empty pleasure palace. Either someone came to check on the palace, or loot the palace, or mine there. Whatever. It was in a zone that has never been approved for mining. No one should have been there… ever.”

“Who set it off?” Lisbet asked urgently.

“Miners. So far, we’re not sure who died, but a group of them have been reported missing. That’s what your little incident with the rubber bullets was really about. Someone knew where you were and decided to take immediate revenge on what they viewed as Vantz’s fault. They couldn’t get to him. They could get to you.”

“I don’t know for sure what they wanted,” Lisbet fumed. “The police took the memory card with their demands.”

“That doesn’t matter,” Beck answered with his eyes on the ceiling of the transport. “What they want isn’t exactly interesting because we aren’t going to give them what they want. That’s enough. You won’t be going back to The Boiler Room tomorrow. We have bigger fish to fry.”

“What does that mean?”

He took a deep breath and met her eyes before explaining. “We haven’t activated our magnetic field yet, so we’re going to lose all the gasses the bomb emitted. We’re going to have to replace that bomb. Mars’ gravity isn’t strong enough to keep that gas close to the surface, but that’s a tomorrow problem. How are you feeling?”

“Shaken,” she said, snatching the cigarette out of his hand and taking a drag on the cinnamon sugar cookie-flavored cigarette he was smoking.

She coughed.

He laughed. “You don’t seem hurt. You’re pretty tough, aren’t you?”

“I’m *very* hurt. I need to see a doctor. You have one?”

“Yeah. I told you. Fortieth floor. We’re going there now.”

By the time they arrived back at the castle, Lisbet was quite calm. “This thing,” she said, pretending to flick make-believe ashes on Beck’s shirt, “sure works. I was so stressed out. Talking to Tiffania was awful. Why did she come here? Why did she put herself in such danger?”

“You’re one to talk,” Beck said, helping Lisbet out of the transport and leading her gently to the elevator. “You did exactly the same thing. Selling yourself like an idiot.”

“You don’t think I’m an idiot, Beck. I dunno what, but something about me wins you over.”

“Yeah, I think you’ve had enough.” He took the cigarette out of her hand, took a long drag on it himself before he flicked it off, and returned it to his pocket. “I shouldn’t have let you have that many inhales on your first try. You’re acting like a rag doll.”

Like a drunken couple, they made their way up to the fortieth floor. There, they were met by one of the most startlingly striking people Lisbet had ever seen: blue eyes, chiseled features, and muscles for days. He was too perfect to be real.

“This is Invocation. He’s a doctor and a professional grouch,” Beck said, introducing her to the doctor.

Lisbet stared at him with wide eyes. “You’re my doctor?” she squealed. “I love that!”

He did not look remotely surprised by Lisbet’s enthusiasm. He brushed it away and started giving instructions. “Disable her bracelet,” Invocation said briefly before he showed her to an examination table. “Where are you hurt, Lisbet?”

“Everywhere, but especially here,” she giggled. She got on the table and pulled up her shirt. She was only supposed to show a little patch of skin where the dart had hit her like a lady, but she was feeling giddy and sloppy so she accidentally pulled the white shirt up over her bra, showing the rubber bullet marks on her skin.

“Shit,” Beck said, grabbing her shirt and undoing the buttons. “How many places were you hit?”

“No need to be so worried. I was only hit on my front, not on my back at all,” she explained with a drunken giggle.

Invocation looked at the spot where she’d doubled up the pads and saw that the bottom pad had soaked up a lot of blood. He gently pulled the whole thing off. “That was a thick dart,” he said, getting annoyed and then preparing a needle for her. “This is in case of an infection. Were you hit by any other darts?”

“Nope, just bullets,” Lisbet said, as Beck stood by counting the bruises. “I’m bulletproof.”

“That’s a lot of internal bleeding,” Beck complained.

“Oh, shut up,” Invocation said steadily as he disinfected a circle of skin for his needle. “You can’t complain that your princess gets hurt when you use her for a public relations shield. You’re setting off bombs that are exploding in other people’s faces. You can’t be surprised when a corresponding bomb goes off in your face. Besides, they didn’t kill her. They weren’t trying to kill her. They’re too afraid of what would happen if they did. Would anything hold our side back?”

Beck groaned in his defense. “There aren’t a lot of ways to approach this problem.”

“Well, get your ducks in a row. Well, she doesn’t need stitches. She does need a proper wash.” Invocation pulled a few bandages out of a drawer and placed them in Beck’s open palm. “Why don’t you take her upstairs for a bath? Skip the water rations and wash her up properly. She’s got red paint and blood all over. Put the bandages on her when she’s dry. I’ll come check on her in the morning.”

Beck nodded and carefully did up her buttons before he hefted her arm around his shoulders and led her back to the elevator.

Chapter Sixteen

Lisbet wouldn't let Beck wait outside during her bath. Once he had finished preparing the bath for her, she took the fresh bandages from him and told him to get lost. She was less woozy and once she was in a quiet place, she felt like she could get her head on straight.

He went upstairs.

She washed her hair thoroughly. She hadn't had a wash that deep since she got to Mars. She got out of the water, dried off, put on her bandages, got dressed in something soft, and went upstairs to talk to Beck. She had to thank him for disabling her bracelet. If she'd gotten all the shocks that were coming to her with all the unnecessary touching, it would have been worse than the drive-by-shooting.

She carefully made her way to the escalator and went up touching her bare shoulders and wishing she'd brought a sweater with her. She hadn't realized it was so much cooler outside her bedroom.

Beck wasn't in the workshop. She stood outside the door that led to his bedroom door for a solid minute before she tapped on it.

Waiting for him to answer was agony.

When he finally cracked the door open, he was shirtless and sweaty.

"What's going on?" he asked, pushing his wet hair off his forehead. He'd obviously been working out.

"I just wanted to thank you for everything you did to help me today, especially for canceling the shocks. The whole thing was pretty scary and knowing that you were coming to get me really helped. Thank you."

"Okay." The word escaped his mouth like every other expression of boredom he made.

Lisbet cocked her head. "Do those things you smoke make you a little dull like that? Like what I'm saying is boring because everything is boring when you're smoking?"

"Maybe," he said, narrowing his eyes at her. "Did you want something else?"

"Can I come in?" she asked.

He stepped out of her way.

The room ahead of her was nothing like the one she had downstairs. For one thing, it was way smaller. For another, it was almost empty. It was just his bed, another VR cage, and a line of his clothes on a rack. His bed was unmade as the comforter was crumpled at the end of the bed. Otherwise, the place was very tidy.

He put out his hand and took her hand in his. To her surprise, he gently kissed her knuckles. The sight of him doing such a thing took her off guard. What was weirdest about it was that a man Beck's age should have been clumsy kissing a woman's knuckles. When Beck did it, he was unusually suave like he kissed the back of a woman's hand every damn day.

"I tried to call you, but my bracelet didn't work," she lied.

"Oh, right. I disabled it," he dropped her hand. That was when she noticed that he wasn't wearing the line of screens on his arm. There was only one bracelet left, the one that controlled her. He pressed a few buttons on it and the tiny screen on her bracelet rebooted.

Realizing that she wasn't in his room because she had any romantic intentions dropped his spirits. Tired and deadpan, he turned back to her, "Well, is there anything else I can help you with?"

Lisbet fumbled to ask for anything. "I want you to come down to my room and read me one of your fairytales."

"Oh?" His face lit up.

***

Lisbet waited while Beck put on a white long-sleeved crewneck T-shirt and then buckled all of his screens back on his forearm. Then she led him down to her room.

When they passed through the doors, Lisbet was reminded of what Charcoal had said about the layout of Martian homes. There was no need to bring anyone home. She felt a strange sensation reverberating through her. She was taking her first step to getting closer to Beck and it scared her. What if they hated each other and she had no one else on Mars? What if they liked each other? Both ideas bothered Lisbet.

She led him into her bedroom all the same.

"How do you want to do this?" he asked, holding a tablet in one hand and holding his other hand to his mouth like he had a cigarette between his fingers. Except, he didn't. His hand was empty. He had forgotten to smoke.

"Let's get a warm drink first," she said, heading toward the food dispensers.

"Uh… wait… I can't eat," Beck admitted timidly.

"Why?"

"I have an eight-pack. I don't want to ruin it. Surely you noticed it when I opened the door earlier."

She didn't. She only noticed that he was shirtless and averted her gaze like a lady, but she knew that she'd hurt his feelings badly if she said that. "It was very impressive."

"You didn't seem impressed," he commented dryly.

"I'm a lady. I can't let my eyes bug out every time I see something sexy."

He nodded at that. Thankfully, that was enough of an explanation for him.

"Is that why you refused to have lunch with me? You don't eat because you don't want to spoil your body?" Lisbet asked, turning.

"Yeah. Whenever I'm online, all the women say that they need to be able to lick caramel off their lovers' abs or they're not interested."

Lisbet refrained from chuckling. "That's not true. Besides, I'm sure we can find you a zero-calorie tea if you want."

"I hate tea," he spat softly. "I have fake flavor in my mouth all the time anyway."

"We'll get you a water then," Lisbet insisted. "You can drink it between sentences so your throat doesn't get dry."

That did it. He agreed and came along after her. He lazily took a water bottle from her clear refrigerator in the dining room.

She ordered a hot chocolate for herself. The liquid splashed into a mug from a dispenser. She took it and Beck back to her bed. She set her drink on the nightstand and pulled up a chair for him to occupy.

“This way, you can read to me and if I fall asleep, you can get up without disturbing the bed,” she said as she peeled back the bedspread. She knocked off her slippers and got inside.

Lisbet did not have high expectations for Beck’s fairy tale. She was allowing him to read to her because it seemed like the only foothold he’d offered her. She knew why he’d asked for it. It was because it put him in a place of maturity over her. If he was like a daddy reading a story to a little girl, the fact that she was older than him no longer mattered. He was hoping he’d sweep her away with the majesty of his tale, except Lisbet didn’t think that was possible. Not only was she a physics major with numbers running through her head, but she was just too grown up to be a little girl. She was of the age where she should have had a little girl of her own.

She pushed away the thought. If she wanted to be a mother, she’d clearly conducted her life all wrong. She grasped the handle of her hot chocolate mug and pulled it toward her.

“I hope it’s a nice long story,” she whispered encouragingly.

“I thought I’d start with a short one. Most fairy tales are short,” he said, taking the chair she offered and clicking on his tablet. “Once upon a time, there was a prince who had everything his heart desired. He lived in a palace with marble floors and feather beds. He had everything he wanted, but something was missing. Noticing his discontent, his guardian sent for a magician to look at the boy to see what was wrong. The magician looked in the boy’s open hands, in his eyes, down his throat, and even opened his chest to peer into his heart.”

Beck was better at reading than Lisbet had expected. He had a wonderful tone and the way he spoke suggested that was the only way he communicated with anyone. That his voice was his key to the minds and hearts of others. If he had a gift like that, why was he so lonely? Why did he work for Vantz? Why was he even there?

Beck said the words, carefully chosen words, that cast a spell on the room and threatened to turn Lisbet into a little girl again. “When the magician was finished with his examination, he said that the only thing that would help the boy would be time and something to distract him until the key to his distress was known. With that, he gave the prince a crystal ball. It was not like the crystal balls used to read the future. It was a crystal ball like a bubble that had been frozen in time. The prince bade the magician farewell and took the crystal to his room. The light caught and spun in the ball and mystified him. It was his most prized possession… until it broke.”

The way Beck said ‘broke’ made it sound like the worst thing that could possibly happen had happened. Lisbet felt something inside her crack.

“It was shattered by a girl. She was the daughter of a jewel merchant visiting the palace. She wore a jade dress and aquamarine shoes with a topaz flower in her hair. The prince was more intoxicated by her than he had ever been by the bubble of glass and spangled light. He had to have her! Unsure how to attain his heart’s desire, he did the only thing he ever did when he wanted something. He asked his guardian to give her to him. In turn, his guardian did the only thing that was ever done when something was acquired. An offer to buy was made. The offer was met with rejection but accepted when it was amended. The jewel merchant’s daughter would marry the prince when she grew up, on condition that she lived in the castle immediately.”

Lisbet finished her hot chocolate. She thought she’d be drowsy by the time she finished it, but she still hadn’t placed her head on the pillow. Instead, she sat upright, listening intently.

“Once the girl was in the palace, and her parents were firmly outside the gate, the young prince took the jewel merchant’s daughter to his room. She told him she was unwell without her

parents and needed to join them, but he did not listen. She had been bought to be his playmate and he wanted to play with her."

Lisbet felt a shiver run up her spine.

"The girl warned him not to touch her. She said she wasn't well. He tried to choose games that were quiet with electricity moving through circuits, but she wasn't well no matter what quiet game he chose. In the end, he tucked her into his bed with him and read her stories about crystals and gems. Tears spilled down her cheeks as she said one last time that she needed to be with her parents. Except, he was the prince and he wanted to keep her in his private universe."

Lisbet held her breath.

"She thrashed, hitting the wall and the crystal ball came tumbling. Then, all at once, they broke together. Like a bubble that popped, like glass that shattered, she broke, right in the middle of his bed. A broken crystal leaves shards. A broken girl leaves a residue of blood. She was removed from his chamber with a rush and a series of sharp instructions. The red mark changed the prince. He didn't understand why a girl should suddenly gush blood and disappear like swept glass. How could someone break? And he was never the same ever after." Beck finished and stood up. "Do you feel like sleeping?"

"No," Lisbet said honestly. "I feel like talking about what your fairy tale means."

Beck cocked his head. "It isn't an Earth fairy tale. It's a Mars fairy tale. There are no forests as settings. There are no mermaids swimming in pools, no snow storms to wander through, no flowers, no forests, or any of those other things. There is mining. There are jewels. I wrote the fairy tale with what we have here."

"Do you have more?" Lisbet asked.

"I have three."

"What do you call the one you just read to me?"

"Number One," he said plainly.

He left without another word.

Chapter Seventeen

Lisbet ended up not being able to sleep after Beck left. It wasn't his fairy tale by itself that caused her to twist sleeplessly on her mattress. The day had simply been too full to process. When she closed her eyes, she saw things coming back to her in a blundering mess of flashes. Tiffania was smiling like she didn't know a knife was hanging over her head. The rogue transport ramming into Lisbet's empty one and pushing it down the tunnel with a sound like thunder cracking. Beck tasering the reporter. Beck pulled the buttons of her shirt open on the examination table. He looked at her with such an odd expression on his face… Almost as if seeing her hurt and uncovered did something unpleasant to his insides. The reflections in his eyes changed and became dark.

That was when she opened her eyes in the half-light of her room.

If she was honest, Beck hadn't seemed very much like a little boy when he'd tasered the reporter, nor did he seem very childish in the way he looked at the circular bruises that made her look like she was part leopard. Exactly the opposite actually. The way he looked at her was not even a little bit like he got his jollies from looking at a naked woman. Granted, she wasn't that naked (she was still wearing her bra), but she had responded very differently when she saw him with his shirt off later that night. She was a hundred times more bashful than he had been.

Mars, huh?

Suddenly, she realized that Beck was far more experienced than her in every way. Loneliness ate people on Mars, so he'd had much more sex than she'd ever had the chance of having. But more than that, Vantz wasn't using her for her physics degree. He was using her physics degree to prove that she wasn't a bubble brain when she spoke to the public. She had never been asked to help Beck with the terraforming project and even though he was much younger than her, he was her boss.

She toyed with the wedding ring on her finger. Vantz hadn't given it to her specifically. He hadn't even told her she had to wear one. It was a ring she'd found amongst the jewelry in the dressing room. She'd put it on herself the morning when she went to The Boiler Room for the first time. It didn't mean anything. What mattered to Vantz was that she kept her promise to him regarding the stories she told the media.

That was all.

And the prince with the crystal bubble girl was afraid he'd break another girl.

Who was that story actually about?

Lisbet wanted to think about it more, but at that very moment, a knock came at the door followed by two figures in the dark. Lisbet didn't have to wonder who they were. Beck turned the light on immediately and showed himself and Invocation.

"Good, you're awake," he said swiftly. "We need to go."

"Where?" Lisbet asked, pushing the blankets aside and rushing to put her slippers on.

"We'll talk about it later," Beck said, grabbing her elbow and pulling her toward her dining room. "You have a servants' entrance in here. We'd better take it and we have to hurry."

The servants' entrance was a cleverly hidden door in the wall behind a vending machine. Beck popped it open with a thud on the right spot.

“Have people been coming in through here?” Lisbet wondered, the thought giving her the creeps.

Beck and Invocation grabbed both her arms and pulled her through the door without a word. Invocation snapped the door shut while Beck hurried Lisbet up a staircase.

“We’re on the seventy-fifth floor!” she whispered shrilly. “Shouldn’t we go down?”

Beck swatted at her to help her hurry up the stairs. “Obviously not. Castle Ares has fallen. It turns out that over seventy miners died in that explosion earlier and a mob has taken all the bottom levels. There’s no way we can go downstairs. We have a solarship waiting on the roof. We need to get into space because there is no down that is safe right now. Haul!”

Needing no further encouragement, Lisbet put some heat in her muscles and raced up the stairs.

When they got to the roof, Lisbet was surprised by how much her legs hurt. Gravity was less on Mars than it had been on Earth. She should have done better.

When Beck said ‘on the roof’, what he meant was a warehouse on top of the skyscraper. Mars didn’t have a breathable atmosphere. The warehouse was very sleek. The ship waiting for them was not. It looked old and a little like a bomb shelter someone had unearthed, but Lisbet didn’t have time to question it.

Soon they were aboard, strapped down, and Beck was taking the flight controls.

“Why did I think you’d be flying it?” she asked Invocation.

“Because I look older and more sophisticated than Beck, so you’re looking to me for guidance,” he said, giving her a patient glance over his shoulder. “But that is nonsense because he is higher up on the food chain than I am.”

Lisbet gave the doctor a dirty look and craned her head to see if Beck had heard them. His seat was ahead of theirs on the flight deck.

“Relax. He didn’t hear me. Besides, it’s a normal reaction. People are always turning to me thinking I’m the answer,” he said with a wicked grin. “It’s good Beck isn’t too proud to drive a dumpster fire like this into orbit. Anything flashier would probably be noticed next to the debris.”

Lisbet had traveled from Earth to Mars, but she hadn’t known anything about the time she’d been in space. She’d been asleep. Escaping the planet’s gravity was less vomit-inducing than she expected. She held onto the armrests of her seat and looked out the window next to her. It was a rare treat watching the horizon turn as they gained altitude and evened out. Soon they were hovering in space. Beck navigated their ship through old satellites and the discarded rubble to hide their ship under the wing of a ruined vessel.

“This is what the space around Mars is like? A graveyard?” she asked, looking ahead through the window on the flight deck.

“This is only the tip of the iceberg. Yes, this is the remains of that battle, but all this was a little bit of a junkyard before you came. There’s junk everywhere on Mars,” Beck explained looking through the window with her. “You’re not ruining anything no matter where you dump it. The land is uninhabitable. It’s not like you’re going to drop something on your neighbor’s lawn. The same goes for the satellites. We need information transfer a hell of a lot more than we need clear skies. There are no oceans to damage. Nothing. It doesn’t matter where you dump things on Mars. Littering is part of the culture.”

The air hung on those thoughts while Lisbet saw the whole of the red planet for the first time. It was more black than she expected. The mountains were clearer. There were no heat waves or cloud cover to obscure the view.

Beck turned in his chair to face her. “Here’s what we’re going to do. We’re going to wait here.”

“For what?”

“Invocation has a job to do. A ship will meet us here and we’ll transfer him over. Once he’s left, you and I have a different job. Remember the bomb that went off accidentally?”

Lisbet nodded, feeling tense. She wished she’d had the presence of mind to grab the rhubarb pie cigarette Vantz had sent her instead of leaving it in her room back at the castle.

“As I said, the casualties in the explosion were significant. The government is trying to track the mining corporation that was on site. There was equipment left in the area, but suddenly no one can find anyone to talk to. They’re all fleeing underground, getting into their hidy holes. So, no one is taking responsibility for being in a place they should not have been. Vantz has been making public statements in your place.”

“I’m sorry. I should be the one doing that,” Lisbet said, feeling like she’d dropped the ball.

Beck waved away her concern. “He had to take over because he simply cannot send you out to make a statement immediately after the drive-by shooting. He can’t seem like a loving husband if you make a statement now. We’ve told dozens of lies to cover the movements of our operation, but now that we’re nearing the end of the project, we’re not telling lies anymore. He straight up told the media that it was a bomb planted in an evacuated pleasure palace and that anyone who’s thinking of looting an abandoned palace should think twice because those are the perfect locations for the bombs intended to terraform Mars. He’s warning people that Mars is no longer safe in the zones where you’ve announced that people have been evacuated. As a side note, he’s publicly turned on the artificial magnetic field. That way, if someone else sets off a bomb by accident, we won’t need to replace it.”

“Great,” Lisbet said in little more than a whisper. “Are you guys leaving valuables inside emptied pleasure palaces? Is that why people want to loot them?”

Beck shrugged his shoulders. “No. The palaces are being dismantled. The palaces are being smoked out with sleeping gas, the people are being removed, and everything of value is being confiscated.”

“What happens to those things?” Lisbet asked, always curious enough to follow the money trail.

“They’re given as prizes to the crews that empty the palaces. They’re the guys we played *Emerald War* with. They’re wrecking crews and followers of the Church of Voynich. Surely, you saw their black skin and green hair.”

Lisbet scratched her skull. “I didn’t put that together when I saw them in VR, but I should have. They hate slavery and… Is Benediction himself here working with Vantz?”

Invocation chuckled. “She doesn’t know much about the Church of Voynich from Io, but she knows about Benediction?”

“Why is that funny?” she asked, not getting the joke.

“That’s his church,” Invocation answered blankly.

“He has a church? I knew he was a member, but I didn’t know he was the leader. I thought he was a model–”

That was when Invocation lost it. He laughed outright. “He would cry tears of blood to hear himself reduced to the influence of a model. Obviously, he’s not a model. He’s the prime minister of Io, so not only is he the head of a church, but he is also the most important government official on the entire moon. His church hates slavery and they’re here helping us dismantle the pleasure palaces. His people are coming to retrieve me, but not Benediction personally. He’s on Io, arranging for all the treasures unearthed from Mars to be used to pay for the raids to free the slaves, but he’s giving the leftover profit to the freed Martian slaves, so they never have to come to Mars again.”

Lisbet swallowed. “That’s very good, but isn’t Io a stinkhole worse than Mars?”

Beck and Invocation nodded and shook their heads in unison.

“Yes, it stinks on Io. Even though you can breathe the air there and it’s warmer than it is on Mars, they haven’t been able to curb the sulfuric stink, but to people who have suffered under Mars sands, it’s probably heaven,” Invocation explained simply. “They say you get used to the smell if you live there without nose plugs for a year.”

“Mars can be pretty smelly too if you’re in areas without proper air purifiers just because people without proper access to water stink,” Beck added before snapping the conversation in a different direction. “Lisbet, after the Voynich guys pick up Invocation, you and I need to replace the bomb that went off,” he explained, pulling a cigarette out of his shirt pocket and flicking it on.

“How are we going to do that?” Lisbet asked, eyeing his cigarette jealously.

“*You* aren’t going to need to do anything. I’ll handle all of it. There’s a discarded rocket in the same area that has one remaining engine that can fire. I’ll set it to explode on activation.” He took a puff on his cigarette before generously handing it to Lisbet.

She took it without question and inhaled. She breathed in the apple pie like it just came out of grandma’s oven.

“You two are close, eh?” Invocation said, looking at the two of them. “All alone in Castle Ares must have turned you upside down.” He gave them an envious look before announcing, “I’m gonna go to sleep. I was trying to sleep when all this went down. I’m gonna take cabin number one.” With that, he disappeared into the guts of the ship.

Lisbet turned back to Beck. “What happened to the other people in the castle?”

“There weren’t any. Anyone who didn’t have a job to do went into cryostasis soon after the Mammoths arrived.”

“Weren’t they worried that those ships might be attacked again?” Lisbet asked seriously.

“No. We wiped out the vast majority of the miners’ fleet. As soon as that danger was removed, most people living in the castle went to orbit and were put to sleep. Anyone else who has a job to do is off doing that job. By today, only the three of us were there. Robots were doing all the jobs. That’s why we lost control of the castle so easily. Not to worry. We knew that might happen at some point. Charcoal and Tavis have already been sent to the Saturn region. I initiated the self-destruct sequence on my equipment. I got Invocation and we left. Not to worry. All my equipment would have fried itself before we got to the roof.”

“What about my room?”

“There was nothing among your things that we would have minded being destroyed or pawed through by the enemy. At least not to my knowledge. Why? Is there something you’re going to miss? Please tell me you didn’t keep a paper journal.”

Lisbet dropped her head. “No. I didn’t. I guess I had nothing there that mattered. But now that we’re here, what are we going to do for clothes, for food?”

“There’s food aboard the ship. It’s not great food. It’s emergency rations, but if you pop into the kitchen, you can pour boiling water on one of the food packs. It’s not awesome or appetizing, but we’re not likely to be in space for longer than forty-eight hours. Not that I can promise great food wherever we end up after that.”

“Clothes?” she prompted.

“Forty-eight hours,” he repeated. “You’re going to have to make do with what you’re wearing. At the rocket site, a crate will be waiting for us with necessities. Vantz is taking care of it for us.”

“What will happen after we finish there?”

“I don’t really know,” he admitted reluctantly.

“Is there a place I can sleep?”

“Cabin number two.”

“You get cabin number three?”

“There is no cabin number three,” he replied humorlessly.

“Oh, that’s why Invocation was so hot to say which bunk he wanted,” Lisbet concluded. “Where are you going to sleep?”

Beck shrugged. “I wasn’t going to. I was going to stay out here and see if anyone tried to contact us, or if anyone noticed us. There aren’t many threats out here, but someone spiteful could hit us from the surface if they were determined. I’ll rest in cabin one when Invocation wakes up and he can take over the watch.”

“What about me?” Lisbet asked, annoyed that she could only help in The Boiler Room and nowhere else.

“You should rest. Cabin number two isn’t as good as your bed back in the castle, but I suspect it’s a good deal better than the chair you’re sitting in.”

“Uh…” Lisbet hesitated. Suddenly, she felt unsure of herself as she looked into the shabby innards of the ship. “Could you come with me? I know you’re working every second of every day, but could you spare a minute to walk me to the room and see that it’s okay with me?”

Beck nodded. “Yeah.”

He went first, showing her the door for cabin one. The hallway of the ship was so cramped that Lisbet couldn’t see anything around Beck’s lanky skeleton. Had he always been that tall? Had his shoulders always been that wide? She couldn’t see the numbers on the doors until after he gave her room to step into the cabin.

Tentatively, Lisbet went inside. It was less than a prison cell, in that it didn’t have a toilet or a sink. It was just a twin bed next to the wall with a little space next to it to walk.

“I’m sorry,” Beck said breezily. “I realize this isn’t what you’re used to, but I bet there’s a better blanket in the cupboard.

Lisbet hadn’t recognized that the panels in the walls could be concealed cabinets. Beck snapped open the first one and found a few vacuum-packed packages of folded clothes. He shut it impatiently and tried the next one. There, he found a comforter. It was blue with white stars on it. Behind it, he found a pillow. Spreading the blanket wide, he and Lisbet made the bed. She clutched the pillow to her chest.

“That looks like everything,” he announced. “I hope it will be good enough that you’ll be able to sleep. Do you have everything you need?”

Lisbet crawled to the head of the bed and shimmied under the covers. “I… uh… I feel really weird about this.”

“Yeah. I know you weren’t expecting to hang out in orbit on the underling’s ship. The sight of it doesn’t inspire much confidence, but this ship was purchased like this on purpose so that it could do these kinds of maneuvers. It’s called the Buckshot 2.0 and it was never a well-known model. The miners of Mars are proud and their vehicles look like the exact opposite of rust buckets. They would always think that something that had a red tinge to the metal was below their notice. If anyone is coming after us, and it’s safe to say that the mob that stormed the castle is looking for us, they won’t look twice at this vehicle. We knew all this was coming and we made plans to counterstep their moves. It will be alright.” Beck held the cylindrical cigarette between his teeth.

Lisbet looked at him with her big violet eyes.

“Still afraid to stay alone?” he asked with his hands in his pockets.

She nodded.

“Okay,” he said, sitting at the foot of her bed. “I’ll stay for a minute.” He handed her his cigarette.

She took a puff of it. “Is this how you stay so calm? When you smoke these you don’t let anything break your cool composure?”

He spread his hands. “Nothing breaks my composure because I want everything that’s happening to happen. I’ve been waiting for it to happen. Even though there have been hiccups… Obviously, I never thought you’d get hammered with rubber bullets. How are you feeling?”

She let her eyes roll up in her head for a second. “I don’t know. I don’t care. I feel like I’m falling through space and I can’t stop.”

“That’s true for everyone all the time, whether they’re on a spaceship or on a planet. We’re all falling through darkness all the time and none of us can stop,” Beck said.

“Yeah, but I feel directionless. I want you and Vantz to succeed, but I want to see further into the future,” Lisbet said, trying to explain herself better. “I want something more in the future. You have your plans mapped out on a bulletin board in your mind, don’t you?”

He nodded.

“Lucky you,” she said wistfully.

“Give me that.” He took his cigarette back. “I’ll tell you story number two and then I’ve got to get back to the controls. Vantz could be trying to contact me.”

Lisbet silently agreed to hear the story.

“I’m sorry if it doesn’t help you sleep,” he said stiffly as he drew breath to begin the story. “Once, in a land shrouded in darkness, there lived a cruel king. There were no jewels in his crown. Instead, the twisted metal on top of his head was made of the sword tips of vanquished warriors. He lived on the surface of his world in a castle befitting his grand station, until his wife unexpectedly passed from life into the shadowland, leaving the life she led with him behind. In the moments before her funeral, he stood over the grave she was about to be placed in and looked down into the hole. The cruel king knew a great deal about holes and would not place his beloved in such a place. Suddenly, he had a plan, a terrible idea that made his skeleton shiver and his mind race. He would not say goodbye to her if he didn’t want to.”

Lisbet felt a quaver in her heart. It was a Mars fairy tale, not an Earth fairy tale.

“In a frenzy, the cruel king had the queen’s coffin emptied,” Beck resumed. “Her body was placed on her bed in a position of repose, but only temporarily. Once the coffin was buried and no one suspected it of being empty, the king had a plan. The funeral went on as expected, mourning and grieving as was never seen before. They cried because they saw his queen as the only barrier between them and their cruel king. Once alone, the power to keep his dear wife with him was in his grasp. There was magic to keep her like a jewel in a box forever. The cost was high, but the cruel king did not care. He took his dear dead wife, his daughter, and all their servants deep into the ground, deep into the mines. Once everyone was there, he did the unthinkable. He caused the tunnel to collapse, trapping everyone underground in a grave for all of them.”

“Did they die?” Lisbet asked, worried about the people in the story despite what she already knew about pleasure palaces.

Beck did not smile. “Of course not. The king’s plans were perfect. They went on living, away from everyone who would disapprove of a man spending his days in the pleasant company of his departed wife.”

Lisbet suddenly felt sick, wondering what that meant.

“The princess, kept underground, was the daughter of the cruel king to begin with, but underground, she found the key to extending her depravity beyond her previous imagination. Her servants were the tools of her witchcraft. One servant was a fire, another a cauldron, another a spoon to stir the mixture, boil the pot, let the mixture ooze.”

“Wait. You have to stop,” Lisbet suddenly said. “You’re not talking about something fictional, are you? You’re telling me the story of Mars. You are talking about real people.”

Beck shrugged in affirmation.

“Why are you doing this? I’m in a cold clammy sweat. Aren’t fairy tales supposed to put people at ease, so they can sleep? What are you doing?”

“I’m trying to teach you about Mars,” he said dully. “I could have Vantz send you another information packet if you’d prefer.”

“He already sent me one. Almost everything was redacted. What about the other story?” Lisbet demanded. “The other story about the prince and the girl who burst like a bubble? What was that about?”

He smiled weakly and stood up. “It’s probably better if you don’t know the details. When you tell me you’re ready, I’ll tell you the last story.”

“I don’t know if I’ll ever do that,” Lisbet said haughtily with her nose in the air.

Beck turned to face her at the door. “You just go ahead and tell yourself how much more of an adult you are than me. Tell yourself that over and over again. It won’t make it true. I can see now that I can never make you feel whatever you’re supposed to feel for me in order for you to give me a chance.” His eyebrows were pulled together like the wings of a black bird that had already taken flight. He was impatient. He was stressed. He was hurt and he could no longer hide it with a puff of smoke, but he continued talking. “I can’t decide if your refusal of me makes you a good person or a bad one. However, it doesn’t matter now. We are too far along in the plan for us to enjoy what the two of us could have had. I hope you enjoy what Mars has made of you.”

He closed the door between them with a snap and took his pain elsewhere.

Nothing Beck had said or done made sense to Lisbet except this one thing. From the look in his eyes, to the way he held his mouth, to the stance he took, the words he spoke, and the way he spoke them. It came home to her like never before.

She had broken his heart.

It was the heart of a boy from Mars, a heart of secrets and shadow, a heart she had never known before, and she had broken it.

Chapter Eighteen

“Undo the top two buttons of your shirt,” Invocation instructed Lisbet in a voice of perfect disinterest.

He was holding a stethoscope, so she did as she was told.

Invocation was entirely too attractive for words. It wasn’t that he had a cute face because his face wasn’t that cute. Beck was cuter. It was that he was all man in a way that put Lisbet on edge. Surely a person built like that wasn’t real. He was a doctor, so did he have other doctor buddies who could sew a person together so perfectly that they caused brain damage to the average person just by looking at him? She kept wanting to poke him with her finger to find out if there were finally artificial people walking around. It was all very suspicious. However, she’d never poked a medical professional in her life, so she kept her fingers to herself.

“Your heartbeat is too fast and the beating is a little erratic,” he noted as he put the stethoscope around his neck in the way doctors do. “People I examine always have fast heartbeats though.”

“They’re that excited by you?” she asked drolly, trying to act unaffected.

He favored her with a quirky smile. “Usually. Let’s look in your eyes and ears.”

Other things were bothering Lisbet besides Invocation’s impossible looks. The night before (if there could be such a thing in outer space), Lisbet had stayed up and thought about Beck and what he’d said. She really had no idea he was so unhappy about her rejection. Why he should allow himself to feel that hurt confused her. What right did he have to expect her to love him? If she thought about all that he had said and done since she arrived, he had made his wishes known, but he hadn’t exactly coated them in sugar. The bitterness he suddenly exhibited surprised her. Still, even though he had done things that were heroic, helpful, and caring, somehow he hadn’t crossed the threshold inside Lisbet that made her want to break down her romantic walls to be with him.

A part of her still wanted Vantz, wanted to be his champion, his queen, his wife… Even if he was out of reach.

While Lisbet had her overdue medical exam, Beck was asleep in the bed Invocation had vacated. The medical examination took place in cabin two.

Invocation left Lisbet’s field of vision when he looked in her ears. “Did something happen to upset you?”

“Yeah,” she said smoothly. “Beck told me a fairy tale last night and it really bothered me.”

“I heard it through the wall,” he said smoothly like it didn’t bother him at all. “He was telling a story I know from an interesting angle.”

“You know the story?” Lisbet asked curiously.

“Yeah,” Invocation nodded. “My brother, Theology, was one of the servants taken into the very first pleasure palace on Mars. If you’re looking for a happy ending, my brother got one. He threw the dead ‘queen’ out of the cryochamber and put the empty box on the underground railroad that was supplying the pleasure palace with necessities. He got aboard and escaped. Then he ratted out the whole operation and the ‘cruel king’ went to jail where he died. But,” Invocation said with a heavy sigh, “it might have been better for everyone, if not Theology personally, if they had all stayed underground. Ever since it was discovered how to pull that kind

of stunt, it has been a common problem on Mars. It's just that there are so many natural underground caverns on Mars that someone doesn't even need to be a miner to find the perfect place to hide out and do whatever they want."

"So you're working with Beck and Vantz to spoil all those places and change the face of Mars?" Lisbet asked cautiously.

Invocation gravely nodded. "Yes. I'm a doctor and for the last ten years, I have been offering free medical care to anyone who can give me the location of a pleasure palace. Of course, the whole thing has been funded by the terraforming operation, and I haven't always worked for Vantz. Every time I see a patient who knows something, I become more convinced that the plan to blow Mars up is a great one."

Lisbet wetted her lips with her tongue as she prepared to ask something else. "Beck told me another fairy tale." From there, she did her best to tell the story of the crystal bubble girl who broke.

Invocation listened intently.

She wasn't sure what she wanted from him. She wondered why she had bothered to tell him the story at all. Did she want to hear that it was a fairy tale or that it was a true story?

When she was finished, he leaned against the supply cupboards and said, "Hmm… You're wondering if Beck is the boy in the story who changed when the girl 'popped'?"

She hesitated. "I wonder if it's Vantz."

Invocation let his eyes travel around the room like he was wondering how to broach his difficult answer. "I don't know the crucial detail you're looking for," he stressed. "The thing about pleasure palace survivors is that they can't talk about what they experienced underground freely."

"Why not?" Lisbet asked. In all the literature Vantz had provided her, they hadn't said more than the basics of abuse. They said what everyone already knew. After that, there was the covering of black rectangles to stop anyone who didn't know exactly what happened in pleasure palaces from learning about their horror.

"For one thing," Invocation continued, "if they talk about it, they relive their trauma. And for what? Why should any survivor take you to the worst part of their life and let you pass judgment on them for what they did or didn't do? For another thing, it wouldn't do you a lick of good to hear what happened. The things that happen down there have been designed by people who have been nursing twisted fetishes for decades and perfected how to achieve their climax on someone else's pain. It can be a source of curiosity to people who are seduced by secrets. Are you one of those people?" He looked at her levelly.

She didn't answer but kept her violet eyes on his blue ones defiantly.

"The biggest reason not to tell anyone what you've been through is that sometimes the person you're talking to is interested in that sort of thing because they'd like to reenact it," he elaborated coolly.

Lisbet was very sorry she had brought it up, but she wasn't a complete coward in the face of Invocation's accusation. "Look, I'm from Earth. Maybe I don't need to understand exactly, but I'm scared and he's scaring me more with the stories he's telling. He wants to convince me that the path Vantz is taking to terraform the planet is the right one, but I'm uncertain."

Invocation's aura instantly lightened. "Oh, well, if that's your problem, let me put your mind at rest. What I can do is reassure you that the work we're doing with Vantz is vitally important.

These people who have holed up underground have to be stopped. I've been working on this problem for over forty years and nothing will get them out. It's time to pour boiling water down the ant hills."

"Forty years?" Lisbet asked cautiously. "But you're thirty."

"I am not thirty," he said steadily. "I'm much closer to seventy, but I don't look it. Looks can be deceiving… My looks, Beck's looks, Vantz's looks, and your looks."

Lisbet swallowed painfully. She didn't know the answer.

Invocation turned his attention back to the medical exam and asked her quietly, "Do you want a full pelvic exam, or do you merely want to use the wand to check for abnormalities? It's up to you. It's not like you've been up to no good since you came to Mars with that bracelet on your wrist."

"Just hand me the wand," Lisbet answered, extending her hand. She didn't care if Invocation knew all about her sexual history or the lack thereof. It was clearly more like a merit badge when working with a doctor who primarily saw sexual assault victims.

Invocation gave her miles of space as he leaned against the door on the other side of the room and waited for her to finish with the wand between her legs. "Got any plans for when all this is finished?" he asked conversationally to stop the mood from being so weird.

Lisbet had been sold for a lifetime contract. She knew Vantz had said that she would be freed when he was prosecuted for causing the deaths of so many people, but a part of her had believed that Vantz was wily as a fox and he would find a way to skip prosecution. Then she could meet him as she was his wife as well as his bought woman. Maybe then…

She smiled wearily for Invocation. "I don't have any plans. What's the point of making them anyway when we're at this phase of the plan?"

"Ride-or-die girl? I like that," Invocation said as he took the wand back from her and read the results. "You look great. So great actually that I'd say you look like you've never had sex."

Lisbet gave him a deathly glare.

"Really?" he asked, astonished. "You never had a handsy babysitter? Never gotten curious in a swimming pool? Never fooled around with a guy in a graveyard?"

"Who does that?" Lisbet interrupted furiously.

He gave her a sly smile. "You'd be surprised. If you don't mind me asking, how did you manage such a thing? I suppose your parents were pretty controlling, but why didn't you sneak around a little under their nose?"

"I guess I was waiting for the right man," she said with a surly knot in her eyebrow.

His expression and thoughts were unmasked. Her existence was clearly beyond his experience. He tilted his head toward the flight deck. "I gotta go check to see if my ride is nearby. If I don't get a chance to talk to you more, I want to tell you what an honor it has been to speak with you in person. Beck did well when he recruited you. Your interviews were fun to watch. In case you are wondering, you really lived up to your nickname after the battle." He shook her hand briefly and left her alone to do up her buttons.

After he was gone, Lisbet did a double take. She had a nickname?

Chapter Nineteen

Invocation was picked up while Lisbet was in cabin number two pretending to be asleep. She heard the Buckshot join with the solarship that was there to pick up Invocation, but aside from looking out her window, she couldn't make herself get up to see the process in person. She'd seen enough movies. She knew how the inner lock rooms worked. Not only that, but she hoped that if she stayed in bed, she would fall asleep and sleep for a proper eight hours. She hadn't done that since she got aboard the Buckshot.

Who was she kidding? She wasn't going to sleep.

The problem was that she didn't want to see Beck. What was she going to say to him? 'Sorry. I was naive enough to believe that as Vantz's wife, I needed to be faithful to him even when he said I shouldn't be.' Or, 'I didn't realize I was being purchased partly because you were in love with me and so I rejected you over and over again because I'm stupid?' Or even better, 'I didn't think you were very interested in me because you said what you wanted from me once and then got lost?'

It all sounded horrible.

The truth was that he didn't force himself on her in any way. He waited for her to come to him and she never came because she really thought she had to be loyal to Vantz no matter what he said. Beck didn't tease her, flirt with her, get in her face, or prioritize meetings with her. He stayed aloof.

He wanted her to choose him. He wanted her to come after him. He wanted her to get in his face. It was so obvious now, but Lisbet had done none of those things.

Now he was heartbroken.

If she was honest with herself, she was a little heartbroken too, but what could she do about it now? If she went onto the flight deck and said she wanted to talk to him, she felt like there was no halfway for him between a conversation where they got to know each other better and diving between the sheets on a bed nowhere close to big enough. He was from Mars. He had lived on Mars all his life. There was no courting period on Mars. They jumped down each other's pants with a crook of an eyebrow as all the encouragement they needed.

She rolled over and tried to go to sleep again, but there was a knock at the door.

"Lisbet," Beck whispered huskily. "Are you awake? If you are, we need to drop down to the surface now or we'll have to spend another twenty-five hours waiting for our ship to be above the drop zone again. I need you to be strapped down on the flight deck for the drop."

"I'm awake," she called.

"Great. Come on." His footsteps led back to the captain's chair.

Lisbet got up and joined him, doing up the buckles on her chair that held her down.

"Hold on," he said quietly from the captain's chair as he turned the ship's nose down ninety degrees so they were pointed toward the ground.

The warm-colored sand sprang up to meet them. A drop from space took only six minutes, but it was a little like taking a dip on a roller coaster for an entire six minutes before Beck eased the nose of the Buckshot back up and let them hover over the flat sand until they arrived at the abandoned rocket site.

“There’s the supply crate,” he said, pointing. He angled the ship and retrieved it with magnets mounted on the underbelly of the ship.

“Hey. If you’ve lived on Mars all your life, how do you know how to fly?” she suddenly wanted to know.

“All the rich kids know how to fly,” he said as if the answer was so obvious it was annoying to give it.

“And you were a rich kid?” she asked.

“As were you,” he said as he opened the hatch to the hangar where the rocket was stored and landed the Buckshot. “Where are your riches now?” he whispered once the ship had come to a full halt.

She snapped her tongue in agreement. “Yeah. Gone. Yours?”

He unbuckled himself and stood up. “They’re around. A little bit here, a little bit there. You know how it is. You can go back to sleep if you want to. I’m going to get in a spacesuit and go check on the situation in the rocket. Afterward, I’ll sort out the supply crate.”

“Can’t I help?” Lisbet asked, feeling useless.

He shook his head. “Not unless you’re a rocket scientist.”

“And you are?” she asked dolefully.

“I dabble,” he said with a smile that almost resurrected his past charm. “I might not even be that long. If the rocket is unsalvageable after all, this is going to be a mighty short trip. It’s okay. I know you’re not sleeping.”

“How do you know that?”

“Why would you be sleeping well? Obviously, everything that’s happened has unsettled you. If you’re looking for an update on the situation, Vantz released a partial list of the bombs we set to the public, stating that he has not listed all of them and anyone with an ounce of sense will stop drilling immediately and evacuate. The cities are flooding with people as we speak.”

Lisbet asked weakly. “What is his next move? Surely, not to release the rest of the list?”

“No. He’s warning everyone to stay away from the evacuated zones, saying that any interaction with the bombs will set them off. The reason that it’s only a partial list is that there are too many to list in those areas. However, the same thing is going to happen as what happened two days ago. Another bomb will go off, killing more people.”

“Why would people do that?”

“Why would they dig when they’ve been told not to? Because they are used to getting their way, used to hiding underground, used to ignoring the warnings the government gives them, and used to thwarting whoever is in Vantz’s position. Vantz has received so many death threats, it’s impossible to trace them all.”

“Doesn’t he need our support?” Lisbet asked tentatively, looking for more clues about Vantz.

Beck chuckled. “Not in the way you think. I’m sure it’s been explained to you that other people are around him. They have their jobs and we have ours. Now, I’d love to continue chewing the fat with you, but I’ve really got to get going. If you don’t want to sleep, why don’t you eat something?”

“Would you eat with me?” she asked, trying again to get him to sit down with her.

“I already ate,” he said simply, before pulling his shirt over his head and disappearing down the hall.

Lisbet was annoyed that he left her, both that he didn't include her in his work on the rocket and that he didn't eat with her. She already had one of the rehydrated dinners and there was definitely a trick to preparing them so they didn't get too soggy. She needed him to tell her the secret to their microwave. How many seconds did each thing need to cook? The package didn't know what it was talking about.

As it was, she carefully prepared a bowl of oatmeal that was flavored like banana and coconut. When it was ready, it wasn't the worst thing she'd ever eaten, but it would have tasted a lot better if Beck had stayed and eaten a bowl with her. Then they could have laughed about how bad it tasted and figured out a way to make it taste better.

Mars was getting to her.

Mars was definitely getting to her.

Vantz was right. She didn't know if she was ready for everything Vantz said she could do with Beck, but she had definitely reached the point that if he didn't hold her for a minute, a tiny part of her might die.

Had Beck been waiting for her to snap the whole time?

When he came back, hours later, Lisbet had fallen asleep, but she woke up immediately when he opened the airlocks.

She waited for him to get out of his spacesuit, redress, and come to the flight deck.

"How did it go?" she asked anxiously.

"Oh? I'm not sure. I need to do a little research. I think it might be possible to get the rocket to explode, but I don't have all the parts. I need to set up a VR cage aboard the ship to get the information I need. I was thinking of doing that in cabin one."

Lisbet unintentionally wrung her hands together. If Beck took down the bed in cabin one, then the only place for both of them to sleep was cabin two.

"I also checked the supply crate. Good news. Everything inside was intact and most importantly, your cryochamber transported well."

"My cryochamber?" Lisbet mouthed hollowly. If he had asked for her cryochamber to be included with the supplies then that had to mean that he intended to put her to sleep. Her mouth went dry. "Is that a good idea? Putting me to sleep?"

"It's a very good idea," Beck replied in a straightforward tone. "Shall I list the benefits?"

"Please do," Lisbet said, crossing her arms and feeling uncomfortable.

"First thing: if I put you to sleep, I don't have to worry about your food or your maintenance. In case you didn't notice, the food here is substandard."

"Yes," Lisbet agreed.

"Also, if you thought washing yourself in the castle was no picnic then you should try doing it here on the Buckshot. After a week, you're not going to want to smell yourself, let alone me," he said as though trying to make a joke. "And you won't have to sleep with me," he added as an aside.

"If we're only talking about sleeping," Lisbet said quietly. "If we're only talking about sleeping, then I don't think it would be that bad to sleep next to you."

Beck did a double take, turned around to face her, and deliberately dropped what he was carrying. "Is that so? What brought on that change of heart?"

"I think you've proven to be remarkably trustworthy," she said, trying to make herself clear. "I mean, you've had my bracelet for months. If you wanted to get me to do anything, you could

have electrocuted me into doing it. You have never shocked me to get me to do what you said. How many owners on Mars have shown their slaves that kind of consideration?"

His eyes narrowed. "Are you saying you don't think I'm a monster?"

She nodded.

The gaze he returned to her was sharp. "Huh." He leaned away from her. "Okay. Listen up. You go brush your teeth, wash your face, and change your clothes. I'll take you down to the cargo bay and put you to sleep when you're finished."

Lisbet tried to stand up for herself. "Why aren't you letting me stay up? I don't feel comfortable being put to sleep in the middle of nowhere on Mars. What if you have an accident and you aren't available to wake me up? What if I end up asleep for thousands of years? What if no one finds me and you putting me to sleep here is essentially death?"

"Calm down," he said, putting his hands on her shoulders and holding her steady. "Granted, something might go bad and I might not be the person to wake you up, but your cryochamber is set to send out a distress call if it is left unattended for longer than two weeks. Secondly, it's set to wake you up if you receive a message of a certain amount of urgency. Thirdly, it's not like no one knows you're out here. Vantz knows. Invocation knows. And even if they didn't, everyone on Mars would want to find you if it came out that you were missing."

"Why would everyone *want* to find me?" Lisbet asked cynically.

He dropped his hands. "You're their queen… Sort of. At the very least, everyone wants to interview you."

"That's true," she said, agreeing with him.

He stood his ground and looked into her eyes. "Look, I need you to go to sleep in the cryochamber without a fuss. I have a zillion things to do, and now I'll stop this debate with the very best, most important reason for you to get in that cryochamber."

"Okay. Let's hear it."

"If I detonate that bomb accidentally, you will be safe in the cryochamber. It is Sleeping Beauty Inc.'s best cryochamber. I made sure that you came with the best model that anyone could make. And it might sound crazy, but if we dropped that chamber into the sun, it would last for a surprising amount of time. You'd live through the tiny explosion here like it was a sneeze."

"If that happened, would you die?"

"Probably, but that's not my greatest concern in all of this. Besides, I'm good at math and I've run the numbers for you. You will be completely safe and I will be able to work much better if I don't have to think about you."

"Okay," she relented, letting her shoulders droop. "Okay. I'll go brush my teeth."

"That's a good girl," he praised, turning away from her.

Lisbet didn't like any of that stuff. Everything Beck told her made her uncomfortable, but resisting him any further was a mistake when he made so much sense. She went into cabin number two and pulled out a pack of vacuum-packed pajamas. Pulling hers off and putting the others on felt weird. She'd never worn clothes with fabric so rough before. Looking at the tag she saw they were made out of flannel. She'd heard that word before, but she'd never felt it on her skin. Worse, the pajamas didn't fit her well. Neither did the underwear they came with.

When she came waddling out to the flight deck in her new outfit, Beck laughed at the sight of her.

“Adorable,” he chuckled. “Well, at least they’re clean. Let’s go down. I’ll tell you the last fairy tale.”

She followed him. “What’s the point of the fairy tales you keep telling me? I already know about Mars.”

“Does there need to be a point?” he asked, leading her down a skeletal spiral staircase and into the cargo bay.

“It feels like you’re not telling me these stories to scare me. You’re…”

“I’m telling you the story of the heart of Mars. The story outside the history,” he said without looking at her. He was standing beside her cryochamber pressing buttons and opening the lid for her.

“Do I really have to hear the last one?” she asked, feeling uneasy as she took his hand and he helped her into the chamber that resembled a coffin more than anything else.

His expression was sad and he did not answer her question. She suddenly realized that if his plan went poorly, she might not see him again. Letting him tell his story was a small kindness she could give him when he risked so much and he asked her to risk so little. Whatever deranged anti-fairy tale he wanted to tell her, it was better for her to listen to it than not.

She settled her head into the pillow while he buckled her five-point harness. “Tell me the story.”

Beck leaned on his elbow and looked into her eyes. “The violet in your eyes isn’t the way you were born. It’s what you invented for yourself?”

“Yeah, or something like that.”

“Hmm… I wonder how else we’re alike.” With that he launched into the fairy tale, speaking in a steady tone, “Once upon a time, there was a scornful prince. He spat in the face of his father, his family, their kingdom, and their very way of life. He hurled insults, slapped faces, cut cords, howled to the moons nightly, and cursed them all.”

Lisbet could see his fairy tale was not going to end well.

“However, the curse didn’t land on the scornful prince’s wicked family. Instead, it landed squarely on him. He was branded a monster. The things he said became his horns, his tusks, and his forked tongue. The rage that brewed inside him grew like monstrous fur that covered his whole body. He didn’t look human any longer. He wasn’t human any longer. The only thing that would sate his desire for revenge was death.” Beck paused, took Lisbet’s hand in his, and continued, “At the same time, there was a merchant with three daughters. His business was going poorly and he decided that the only way to recover his losses was to send his three beautiful daughters to wed wealthy partners. Sadly, the father focused on the wealthy above any other considerations, and his prized oldest daughter was sent to marry the monster. It was either that or ruin. The faithful daughter complied.”

Lisbet felt her heart quicken as she was certain he was talking about her, but was the monster in the story Vantz or Beck? Were they both monsters?

“She was married without seeing her groom, without understanding the danger that seethed below the surface. Her purity and innocence went undisturbed as their marriage continued. He hid behind cloaks and waited behind daggers, and he never showed his true self to her.”

Lisbet waited with bated breath while Beck went on.

“The fairy tale of their marriage wasn’t real, not for him. He had to make blood spill until the land was as red as the mythos surrounding it. He had to hold her at a distance and not let her

goodness affect him. If he let her know him and she loved him… Would he be able to cut down all that his honor required of him? If he gave her full knowledge of him and she disdained him…" Beck paused and let the thought linger in repose.

Lisbet did not try to pick apart the fairy tale. Perhaps she would understand it later. She thoroughly denied that it was about her.

"Sleep well, oldest daughter of a diamond merchant," Beck said softly.

She frowned at him. She was doing so well not drawing conclusions and he had to make the story about her definitively.

"I'm sure the drugs will help you fall asleep, even if the story didn't." He bent and kissed her.

She turned her head away.

"Stop that," he said firmly. "This isn't much. I am an exceptional kisser and if you'd just give me half a chance…" he turned her chin toward him.

Lisbet gasped. It shouldn't have been the best kiss of her life. It shouldn't have made her heart weak and her bones shiver. She should not have loved that kiss that was surrounded by blood, ruin, rusted metal, and an entire world that was diseased and broken. A kiss like that should not have been given to her by Beck.

She loved it. She hoped he would never stop. She was so delighted, she couldn't even move. She wanted him to hold her. She should have put her arms out to catch him, but she missed her moment.

He pulled away and put his cigarette in her mouth. She breathed it, hard. It was pumpkin pie. "Relax. The monster is on the other side of the glass."

He took the cigarette out of her mouth, took a puff of it himself, and with one final enigmatic look, he pressed the button to close the lid of her cryochamber.

When it came down, finally, she had shaken off her paralysis and was able to move. She put her hand to the glass. It was her fist that she pounded against the lid.

For just a moment, she wasn't herself. She was a young girl inside again. A young girl who had not been touched much, certainly she had not been kissed like she was precious. She had never been seen the way Beck saw her and she didn't want the moment where he looked at her to end.

Gas was filling the chamber and the moment was slipping away from her. Ahead of her was a darkness that was like death. It made her think that the person she had been on Earth had died and the person she woke up to on Mars was kissed, unlike her old self. No one wanted to kiss Lisbet on Earth. She was untouchable, but the version of her that awoke on Mars was instantly touched…instantly kissed… instantly wanted… and Vantz… No. Beck… wanted her.

Her hand fell limp and Lisbet fell into a sleep that was like death inside a cryochamber.

Chapter Twenty

Lisbet woke up from cryostasis feeling woozy like a zombie back from the dead. There was a buzzing sound in her ear that made her wince. When it paused, she relaxed, only for it to come back on again. It must have gone on and off ten times before she realized that the sound was something she'd have to deal with or it would just keep happening. Being woken with a kiss was much nicer.

She rubbed her eyes and opened them.

The lid on her cryochamber was still down.

That woke her up.

If the lid was still down that had to signify that there was a problem. She slapped herself awake and looked at the blinking screen in front of her.

There was an urgent message from her father.

Lisbet snorted.

So her father was allowed to send her urgent messages? How about that? She pressed the button that acknowledged that she was awake. She was about to press the button that would ignore his message and put her back to sleep, but what if it really was something really important?

She grudgingly pressed the button that allowed the message to play.

It was a video message of him sitting like a panicked ape in a room that was unfamiliar to her. He sat with his knees apart and glossy embossed papers in his hands.

"Lisbet, I don't know how to talk to you about this, but we've noticed something odd in your documents from Sleeping Beauty Inc. When we signed your purchase papers with Sleeping Beauty Inc., you were actually being purchased by someone named Beckett Beltrose and not by Vantz Bloomburg directly. When I was reviewing the contract, I got worried that Vantz hadn't actually married you. I asked Sleeping Beauty Inc. for a copy of your marriage certificate, and they said that they couldn't provide me with one since your sale is complete and I was only carbon copied on your sale as a courtesy. I got the money for you, but beyond receiving payment for you, legally, it's no longer my concern. So, I want to ask you. Did you really marry Vantz?" Her father looked frustrated and crazy. He thought someone had cheated him, but he obviously couldn't bear to say it in those words.

What his reaction meant was that her father thought of her as something he could sell. He still didn't realize that Lisbet could have told him no. Why had she said yes? The reasons she'd done what she was told felt very distant and foolish now. She thought she had done it for her family as an act of love, partially to save her sisters from a similar fate, but he'd also sold Cassica and Tiffania had sold herself. After everything, it was clear that her father thought of her as an object and one he could still control, even after the sale, even after what she told him about never doing anything for him again. Love wasn't part of the equation.

It stood in stark contrast to how Beck had treated her. He had been so hands-off Lisbet hadn't known how to react. She had been controlled her entire life and when a man encouraged her to say what she wanted, it was a gift she didn't know how to accept.

In any case, Lisbet had no interest in replying to her father's message. What would be more interesting would be having a frank conversation with Tiffania about how their family's fortunes

fared since she had left over a year ago. Suddenly, Lisbet wanted to talk to her sister again. She hadn't made very good use of the time they had together in The Boiler Room, but she thought they'd see each other every day for weeks if not months, so she hadn't asked the right questions.

Her father's message continued, "I contacted Sleeping Beauty Inc. again just now and they said that since Vantz has acknowledged you publicly as his wife, he has kept his end of the contract. But I *need* you to tell me," her father stressed, "did he marry you?"

The message ended and Lisbet sat with her arms crossed for a full minute.

Did Vantz marry her?

Of course, he wasn't present at the wedding. That made it weird. To make matters worse, she knew that she had been too dull with pain and heartache to really read the marriage agreement she had signed. Was the paper she signed not a marriage agreement with Vantz? She knew exactly why she didn't read it. She had already signed all her rights away. Signing a marriage agreement gave her a level of respectability and more rights most Sleeping Beauty Inc. models would never achieve. So she signed whatever had the words 'Marriage Contract' at the top of the document.

Thinking back on what she knew since she arrived on Mars, she thought it made perfect sense for Beck to have been her true purchaser. He was wearing the bracelet attached to her bracelet. Neither Beck nor Vantz had tried to deceive her that way. But Vantz told her that he was okay with her fooling around with Beck.

Then, it came clear to her. If she was married to Vantz, it didn't mean anything… legally. It didn't mean anything at all. It didn't matter if the marriage certificate had been real or just a dumb document meant to fool everyone. Vantz would never have been able to touch her without Beck's permission! That wasn't a real marriage. Vantz had never even acted like he was a real husband. That had been something she had nurtured in her own head.

She was Beck's property!

Was there a bigger gentleman in the universe than Beckett Beltrose?

She slapped the controls on the side of the cryochamber to open the lid. She slipped out of the cryochamber and padded back up the spiral staircase and onto the flight deck.

Lisbet could have had a completely legitimate relationship with Beck the whole time. She just hadn't thought of it that way because she'd been looking down on him and looking up to Vantz like an idiot.

Vantz was…

She froze. She could hear him talking. His English accent was coming through the walls. He was in cabin number one.

Very quietly, Lisbet approached the cabin door, but she didn't open it. She stood as still as a statue. Invocation had said that he heard Beck telling her the fairy tale from cabin number one. The walls were thin. She listened.

"Beck sorted it out. I told you he was my champion. He's at the site now. No, the rocket wasn't in good condition when he arrived, but he cannibalized his solarship and gave up all the correct equipment." There was a pause. "It does put him in an awkward position. No, we haven't figured out how to explain that explosion going off. They're so touchy about what we blow up, even when we tell them on repeat that we're going to burn the whole thing. I suppose it's just too much to ask for people to believe that this one explosion was a coincidence. As if they aren't

going to blame us for everything anyway. If we're lucky… Yeah, I suppose that's true. The bomb in the rocket could go off as part of a chain reaction when the other bombs go off, or we could say it did anyway. Beck needs a fresh transport." Another pause. "I wasn't expecting a solarship for him. I don't think he was expecting one either considering resource distribution. I think he was hoping for something like a helocarrier or a land rover. What can we get him?"

The break in conversation was long. Lisbet decided to crack the door open when he spoke next. It didn't seem like he was talking to Beck. It sounded more like Vantz was talking on the communicator with a person Lisbet couldn't hear. The only thing that made sense was that he was in the room, but maybe Beck was listening to one side of an audio communication.

Vantz went on, "That's marvelous! Just drop it on the sand next to the compound on the next revolution. Thanks."

Lisbet made a crack in the door. Beck was in his VR cage. His eyes were covered by the VR faceplate and he was standing with his back to the door.

"Are there a lot of questions about Lisbet?" Beck asked in Vantz's voice.

At first, she wasn't sure if she'd seen that correctly, but she watched carefully and saw Beck's mouth move.

He laughed Vantz's laugh and went on to say, "She's resting. She's quite fatigued after her harrowing experience. I'm sure she'll be back to answer questions in The Boiler Room soon. I'll tell her you said that. Yes, I know no one likes my avatar. Bye."

He was hanging up!

She couldn't be found there!

Lisbet pushed away from the door without closing it. She pushed herself backward and accidentally smacked her head against the adjoining wall.

Beck pulled the door open and stared in surprise at her huddled form on the floor.

Chapter Twenty One

“Well, hi, Lisbet,” Beck said, looking down at her for a moment before shifting his attention to the Sleeping Beauty Inc. control bracelet around his wrist. “Ah, I see that my bracelet did inform me that you had come out of cryostasis, but I was in the middle of a meeting and I didn’t realize it. Sorry. Do you need me to put you back to sleep?”

“Are you Vantz?” she asked. Her body was trembling, but the look in her eyes was steely. It was too late to act like she hadn’t heard anything.

“No,” he said, biting his bottom lip with his canine.

“I just heard you talking like him.”

Beck groaned. “To make this simple, Vantz is mine. He belongs to me.”

“Why?” she whispered. “Aren’t you working for him?”

He blinked at her like he couldn’t believe what she was asking. “Lisbet, this is none of your business, but I *feel* like I owe you an explanation since I made you sign wedding documents that made you believe you were married to him.” He paused after making his grand concession. “Let me repeat that. I *feel* like I owe you an explanation. By law, I do not. I could shock you into compliance and shove you back in your cryochamber without telling you anything at all. If I was anything like my father, I would do that. But since I do not want to be anything like my father, I have to tell you the bare bones of what is happening.”

Lisbet waited.

He didn’t continue. He ruffled his hair and looked flustered in a way she had never seen him before. When he spoke, it was almost like he was talking to himself. “It’s not going to matter if I tell you everything. We’re far enough along in the plan that soon everyone will know the truth anyway. It’s coming. Everything is coming down.” He took a couple of soothing breaths that did nothing for him, so he reached for his cigarette, clicked it on, and puffed on it like an addict while Lisbet waited. “Vantz is not a person. He began as a persona I used to hide who I was so that I could bypass convention.”

“What does that mean?” Lisbet asked blankly.

“He was my screen name that I eventually registered as a real person. Using the information that became Vantz, I was allowed to get a doctorate in terraforming at the age of thirteen.”

“Huh?”

“No one would teach me when I was eight, so I made Vantz, a diligent young man who studied at home. I did my university studies remotely. As Vantz, I have been awarded many degrees and many awards. No one would take me seriously when I was young so I needed to trick everyone into believing that I was older, but worse than that I couldn’t let anyone see me.”

“Why?”

“I’m famous,” he growled, puffing heavily.

“For being smart? Obviously.”

“No,” he said with dead eyes. “For being the son of a very wealthy miner.”

Lisbet’s mouth went dry. “Which one?”

“Carlos Beltrose.”

Lisbet hissed her breath in disbelief. She had not heard the name Beltrose before, but she had heard of Carlos. People spoke of him like he was the only Carlos in the world. You didn’t

need a last name if you were the only Carlos. “You couldn’t get a superior education with him as your daddy?”

Beck scoffed and responded. “You think a man like that would want to let anyone study anything that might lead to them taking power away from him? Even if it was his own son?”

Lisbet pursed her lips. She didn’t know much about Carlos. At least, she had never heard his name before she came to Mars and started meeting people in The Boiler Room. She had never met him herself, but Carlos had the kind of name people liked to drop. People liked to drop the names of rich people. The people on the surface hated the rich miners, but they were still strangely fascinated by them.

“How much money does he have?” Lisbet asked, trying to get her mind around the situation.

“He would never flaunt his wealth. He would do everything he could to hide it.”

“What about your wealth then?” she challenged.

“I don’t see why that matters,” Beck said, letting a certain amount of disgust show on his face. “I already told you that I’ve poured all my money into terraforming Mars.”

Lisbet growled at him. “I’m not trying to gold-dig you. I’m trying to understand what you’re doing. If I get this right, you are trying to blow up your father’s underground mansion along with everything else? You’re the one who’s orchestrating all this and you’re using Vantz as a cover?” she asked, piecing it all together.

“Vantz *was* my alias. *Now* he’s an AI I construct,” Beck said, correcting her misunderstanding. “Surely, you’ve heard that rumor.”

Lisbet nodded dumbly.

Beck went on to explain, “I can’t always be available. Vantz is better than a person because he always does exactly what will lead us to our goals without losing his nerve and without being threatened because he’s not physically present. Not being physically present is ideal because no one can kidnap him, assassinate him, or even threaten him. Even now, I don’t need to be anywhere specific to orchestrate the final phases of our plan. Frankly, it’s better if I’m not around.” He took a heavy drag on his cigarette. “I’m not as steady as an AI.”

“If you have something like that rigged up, why do you even need me?” Lisbet questioned slowly.

Beck rolled his eyes in a way that was almost playful. “Vantz definitely has his limits,” he chuckled under his breath. “The rumor that Vantz is an AI has been plaguing me for years. I have quite a lot of capable people who work for me, people like Invocation, but they don’t make good spokespeople. I needed you. You did great.”

“How did I do great?” she appealed, her mouth gaping. “I didn’t do anything!”

He laughed outright, showing a beautiful flash of white teeth. “Didn’t you? Reporters were asking you dumb questions like what Vantz smoked, what he wore to bed, what position he slept in, and how he kissed you. They were so friggin excited to see a beautiful woman that they forgot to ask you questions about the magnetic towers, about the dead ships floating in the sky, about the pleasure palaces that were being stripped daily. The relentless questions about how we were going to produce an atmosphere all but disappeared. You kept them off us for weeks, just by showing up, looking pretty, and hinting that you knew what Vantz was like under the sheets because you were honeymooning with him. It was downright magical.”

“But *you* own me!” she barked, interrupting his revelry. “If you were going to own the woman you got to play Vantz’s wife, why didn’t you choose someone who could match you better?”

“What are you talking about?” he asked with narrowed eyes.

She glared at him but didn’t answer.

“Oh, I get what this is about. This is because you look down on me for being only twenty years old to your twenty-six, twenty-seven? Grow up, Lisbet. The first thing is that Vantz would not be married to a girl of nineteen. Nor would he put a woman like that in charge of his PR at a social club like The Boiler Room.”

Lisbet exhaled. “I suppose that’s true.”

“Screw me for wanting to have my cake and eat it too,” Beck said grouchily. His Adam’s apple in his slim throat bounced as his vocal cords told the story. “And if you ask me, you’re still a little young for the job. I could have gotten a woman in her thirties. The thing that makes up for it is your face. The idea that I should have bought Cassica or Tiffania is laughable. They look like babies. They are babies. You’re a goddess. Look at the line of your nose, your black hair falling on your white cheek. There’s something classical about you, like a woman in a painting hung in a museum. Even the line of your chin is so unforgiving that it looks like you never took a drop of bullshit in your whole life. You are not an easy woman, and you don’t look like it. Yet, there’s something warm and reassuring about you. Like if you say everything will be alright, then it will be. And I…” he said, about to make a huge admission. “I hoped you would recognize my qualities and that something in you would resound with something in me. I had no idea you would have such a prejudice against me because of my age.”

Lisbet sighed and rubbed her temple. “I’m relieved you’re satisfied with your purchase. I’m sorry I was too naive to realize it was part of my job to fall in love with you.”

He crouched beside her. “I never wanted to force you into anything with me. I hoped that if we worked together, this phase might not be the worst time of your life even if it ended poorly. I think you did your job at The Boiler Room very well if that means anything to you. That was more important to me than my romantic ideals.”

She looked up at him, confused. “What’s going to happen now? I heard you in your meeting. You used parts from this ship to rig the rocket to explode? That’s pretty impressive.”

He snorted. “Don’t trip over yourself to admire me. I’m always impressive. I’m having a transport dropped, though I don’t know what kind of vehicle it will be. We’ll go back to Noachis and I’ll get you back to The Boiler Room. We still need you to help encourage people to evacuate.”

“I can do that,” Lisbet said softly.

“Fantastic. We have a ton of scripts you can choose from if you want to read them. I can forward them to your…” He began pressing buttons on his screens.

Lisbet put her hand on Beck’s forearm which was still covered from elbow to wrist in screens. “Can’t we talk a little more before we get back to work?”

His eyes widened. “You want to talk?”

She nodded. “When I came out of cryostasis the first time, were you the one who kissed me?”

“Of course.”

“And when I had my meetings with Vantz, it was you I was talking to, wasn’t it? You were the one I danced with?” she asked softly.

He nodded. “Yeah.”

“Why didn’t you tell me the truth?” she fumed, slapping him on the side of the head. “You told me some things, like that you were likely to be prosecuted for whatever happens when the bombs go off. That you want to protect me from being lumped together with you at that moment, but did I have to be kept that far in the dark?”

He parted his lips. “Lisbet, I didn’t know if I could trust you. If you didn’t like the situation enough, you could have said something cataclysmic to the press in The Boiler Room and there wouldn’t have been anything that I could have done about it after the fact. Leading you that way seemed safest for the project. And I have worked myself to the bone for Mars. Every thought in my head for the last decade has been about how to pull this off. As much as I want you, as much as I look at you and wish you would let me love you, Mars comes first. I have to free the slaves underground. I have to give Mars air so that people can run, and so that a civilization can grow on the surface. If you and I never get together, that’s fine. I would never force you to give me your love, but I have to break Mars open like an egg and let the blood run out of it.” He stood up and looked down at her. “That’s why I’m a monster.”

“Beck… I…” she said powerlessly.

The look of him was all wrong. At that moment, his shoulders were so bony he looked like a boy instead of a man. He was beautiful, so beautiful it was painful for Lisbet to look at him. He was hurt, which made Lisbet want to throw away all her reservations, but seeing him in person, and listening to him talk was giving her reason to pause.

She hesitated. “I don’t think you’re a monster,” she finally said.

He scoffed. “If you don’t already, you will. Give it a minute. We placed bombs everywhere. We’ve warned the people about them. If they don’t stop visiting the empty pleasure palaces, more people will die. If they don’t take our warnings seriously and leave the planet before a chain reaction is set off, then everyone left on the planet may die at once.”

“Wait,” Lisbet said, grasping at his arm. “Are you saying that you don’t *know* when the bombs will go off?”

“How can we know that?” he asked with a blank expression. “We know the miners are greedy and they’ll set them off accidentally before the planet is evacuated. Another bomb went off this morning, but this time the mining company who did it is staying quiet, so we don’t know how many people died in that explosion. Don’t worry. We won’t have to replace that bomb. We’ve activated the magnetic field, so we won’t lose any of the gasses, but being on the surface now isn’t safe. That’s why we’re getting out of here. On the plus side, the bomb I rigged inside the rocket will need me to detonate it, so at least we can be confident it will not go off while we’re right next to it.”

Lisbet let out a shaky breath. “Yeah, that’s pretty lucky.”

“Hey,” he said, changing the subject. “Is there anything I can do for you? To thank you for being such a trooper? I don’t know how to reward you.”

Lisbet thought of something immediately. She wanted to say something cool like, ‘You already paid for me and that’s more than enough.’ That was what she wanted to say, but she was starving. “You could feed me,” she said in barely a whisper.

He leaned in. “Did you just say you need me to feed you?”

She looked up and nodded.

“We have food. Care to join me?” He disappeared around the corner with swift strides that took him out of sight.

Lisbet chased into the kitchen after him.

"Beck!" she called, bumping into him in front of the packs of dehydrated food. It was like running into a gym wall. She rubbed the sore spot on her head.

"What?"

"I want one that has a lot of cheese," she said, sounding dumb. "Please let me eat until I'm full. I was on a really strict diet when I was living in the castle. If we might die soon, can I have cheese?"

"Your diet was too strict for you?" he asked, peering over his shoulder at her.

She nodded.

"You never complained," he observed.

"How could I complain? You gave so much money to my father to have me look picture-perfect when I did interviews at The Boiler Room. I was scared to gain a pound. Besides, we were on a tight budget and food is so expensive on Mars."

"That it is," he said, choosing two enchilada packs from the pantry. "Let's have these." He added water to them and put them in the microwave.

Then he sat at the poor excuse for a table and nudged a chair for Lisbet to sit in. "It's not that food is scarce on Mars," he said, seeming relieved to have something impersonal to talk about. "It's that the people who raise food on Mars do not want to share it or sell it. They've hidden fish tanks, farms, ranches, and more underground. They can't report to the government how much land they've taken, because they've populated those places with slaves that have not been purchased like you. It's filled with people who've been stolen from their lives. Whole ships full of people get reported missing. Where's the crew of twenty? Where are the passengers? They're all below ground on Mars. This place needs to be blown out like a candle. Looking skinny is a sign of a life without slavery."

"But you bought me," she pointed out, not looking at him but instead looking at the numbers on the microwave counting backward.

"What I did with you is hardly slavery," Beck said with a chuckle. "I needed to get someone I could trust to do that job."

"Charcoal?" Lisbet supplied.

"She is far less loyal than she would lead you to believe. That's why she's with Tavis on her way to the Saturn system. Plus, she could never have generated the fan base you did. Do you know what you look like to the people of Mars?"

Lisbet shook her head, bewildered by what he was saying.

"They think you're practically their princess. You're an heiress who gave away her life of plenty to care for the people of the red planet. Vantz never got the kind of support you get. I haven't even told you how many more people invested in my company after you started doing interviews. You've done a great job."

"You know, even though you're praising me on repeat, you sound kind of apathetic, like you don't really care," she commented.

He waved his hand through a stream of smoke he exhaled from his mouth. "It's this stuff. It stops me from getting worked up."

"And you're massively addicted to it?" she asked, feeling like she would become reliant on it herself if she had Beck's to-do list.

He gave her a funny look. “Yes, I’m completely addicted to not letting anything bother me. For your information, I was prescribed this stuff at the tender age of six. I started smoking it instead of swallowing it at age twelve. I prefer the smoke and the reason why will floor you.”

“Oh?”

He grinned like a crooked imp. “It’s because, under normal circumstances, I take less of it if I take it on an ‘as needed’ basis instead of just swallowing the standard dose in pill form.”

“You have had an anxiety disorder since you were a kid?” she asked, trying to be understanding.

“I’m not abnormal for having an anxiety disorder,” he said as the microwave finished. “I would be abnormal if I *didn’t* have one under the circumstances. However, as you have seen, my current project is basically something that no one should attempt… Ever. Terraforming an inhabited planet is a dumb idea. I wouldn’t attempt it, except for the necessary destruction of the pleasure palaces.” He put her meal in front of her on the folding table and set his food down too. He cracked open a hatch in the floor and removed a bottle of water. He poured her a glass.

His concession was quite interesting. So was the way he moved and spoke. The competent way he moved about the ship’s kitchen was fascinating. He didn’t seem like the type who knew how to do anything. He looked too young to do anything other than get on a simulator and make things happen in the invisible world of virtual reality. However, he had been surviving just fine on the ship alone while she had been in cryostasis. He had to know his way around like a champ. Lisbet hadn’t been giving him enough credit.

“Let me get this straight,” she said, lifting her glass and pausing her speech to make him clink glasses with her. “You have been getting in a spacesuit and going out on the surface of Mars to rig a bomb and you’re twenty years old?”

He gave her a dirty look as he unwrapped a fork. “Please don’t talk to me if you’re going to talk to me about my age. It disgusts me. I lived fifty lives while your father held an umbrella over your head.”

Lisbet shrugged. He wasn’t wrong about that. She unwrapped her fork and bit into the food. It tasted like melted jalapeno on soggy corn chips, which shouldn’t have been amazing, but the hot spicy cheese was amazing regardless of how it was prepared. She ate and felt the moisture in her nose from the spice in the food, a sure sign that she was having a good time.

“I don’t get why you want to have a romance with me,” she sighed. “I mean, I know you want a romance and it makes sense for you to want something like that. It’s a normal human want, but I don’t get why you want to have a romance with me. Wouldn’t it make more sense to hire me to do the public relations work and hire someone else to be your love interest? I’m sure you could find a younger, yet more experienced, woman to give you the romance you want.”

He glared at her. “You’re talking about a synthetic seduction experience and I know more about how to orchestrate one than any woman you could hire. My parents arranged for my first romance when I was under the age of ten.”

“You’ve been dating for ten years?” Lisbet asked with her mouth open.

He leaned back in his chair and gave her a level look. “The only reason you haven’t fallen in love with me is that I haven’t tried to make you. Not with your bracelet,” he said, flicking her hand, “but with one of a hundred planned techniques. I know them. I didn’t use them. I let you see me for what I was, to the best of my ability, and you refused me. It hurts like hell,” he said in a deadpan voice that usually pointed to deep disinterest.

However, this one time, Lisbet thought that was how he acted when he didn't want any of his feelings to show.

"You're acting like none of this has hurt me," she said flatly.

"Has it?"

She nodded and stirred her food with her fork. "I've been very lonely. I really missed meeting Vantz in VR. And I was really sorry that you wouldn't eat with me. I felt very rejected."

Beck looked at her, his expression like he was reading a book and he didn't understand what was written on the page.

Lisbet was confused too. She didn't know if what she said meant something special.

An alarm on one of his armbands went off. Beck turned it off and read what was written on the screen. "I have to get back to work. There are a million people who need to talk to 'Vantz' before we do that long drive back to Noachis. If you don't want to sleep, you'll have to amuse yourself, but no matter what you do, you've got to be silent—no one can hear your voice— and you cannot disturb me. Feel free to prepare more food if you're still hungry."

Lisbet nodded, and he went back into cabin one, leaving half his food on his plate.

Chapter Twenty Two

Beck wasn't thinking about Lisbet anymore. That was what she thought as he looked out the window of the Buckshot and watched the land rover fall atop a sand dune with as much ceremony as someone dropping a garbage bag. The drone that brought it flew away with more speed than it came in with. The rover must have been too heavy for it.

Beck looked at the vehicle in the sand with a grim expression on his face. He had been hoping for something better.

Lisbet was watching over his shoulder and saw the land rover. It was kind of like a tank in that it had none of the agility of a helocarrier and none of the speed of a solarship.

"Does that worry you?" she asked, letting her breath curl around his ear with the words.

Beck refrained from rubbing his ear against his shoulder and said in hyperbole, "Well, at least if a bomb goes off under us while we're in that, we will *only* be blown to kingdom come. We won't die or anything." He rolled his eyes and fetched Lisbet a spacesuit from a cupboard set inside the floor. "Do you know how to put this on?" he asked as he pulled out the orange and gray suit.

"Uh… no, I've never worn one," she admitted.

He sighed and let his angular body fall slack for a moment before turning his head to face hers. "You have to put it on naked."

"Because it has a toilet inside it?" she asked hesitantly.

"Yes. It has two modes. The first mode is the one where you aren't really expecting to have to use a bathroom on your trip because it's going to be a short one. The second mode is the one where you live in the suit now and you'd better get comfortable. You can wear a diaper in the first mode if you don't like the process of putting on the suit in the second mode, but it's pretty uncomfortable because…"

"If you pee or poop, you'll be sitting in it until you can get somewhere to take the diaper off," she said, trying her best to match his maturity level.

He nodded.

"What's the second mode like?"

He grimaced. "It's pretty uncool if you're not used to it." He zipped open the suit and dove down to the crotch area to pull it forward. He pulled out a loop. "So, you take this loop and you use this adhesive strip to attach it to your crotch. If you have any hair down there, you might be lucky and not get the strip on any of it. If you're unlucky and get some hair caught in the strip, you will be unhappy until the suit comes off."

"Are you telling me I need to be waxed clean before I can put that on?"

"I'd put you in cryostasis and skip this conversation, except I can't load your cryochamber onto the land rover with the equipment I have since I cannibalized the Buckshot and I can't leave you here inside the cryochamber. I just rigged a bomb next to it, and though I do think that if the rocket exploded everything would break except the cryochamber, I think it's better not to risk it." His no-nonsense manner sunk into her.

Lisbet wordlessly agreed.

"Look, it doesn't need to be a pretty wax job," Beck continued. "I know women have a hard time seeing down there and you've been without beauty treatments for months, but the less hair

there is, the better the suit will work. Once the seal is in place, you can relieve yourself whenever you want and it will drop into a little baggie that you can drop in the sand without getting any waste on your suit."

Lisbet stared at him incredulously. "Are you telling me that this suit will put my poop in a doggie bag and we'll just dump it wherever?"

"Yeah," he said with an understanding eye roll. "I know on Earth, you guys pick up your dog poop and carry it around in a little bag until you can get to a proper garbage can, but we don't have landfills or even the microbiology systems that will decompose the poop. There's no one living on the surface out here and the cleanliness of your suit is more important than where your poop drops. It's even less important when you consider that I'm going to blow up the surface of the planet."

Lisbet scratched her forehead and smoothed out her eyebrows. "Okay, is there a kit to help with the hair removal?"

Beck nodded and took her to the bathroom.

"Wait," Lisbet said, following him in. "Since you've been going out in a spacesuit to work on the rocket, does that mean you're all waxed too?"

"Ah… Do I have to answer that?" he said, handing her a box by the handle. He didn't answer her question and gave a few instructions before ducking out. "Remember, you don't have to be smooth as a newborn baby, but the less there is, the better the adhesive will stick and you'll be less likely to get an infection."

Lisbet chuckled. "And you're not offering to help me?"

He swung around and gave her a look. "You don't actually want that." He closed the door on her and she heard his footsteps leading away from the bathroom.

She opened the kit and got to work.

***

When Lisbet came out of the bathroom, Beck was already in his suit. He handed her the one he had set aside for her. He turned it inside out, gave her specific instructions on how to seal the adhesive strip, and sent her back to the bathroom.

Putting on the suit was like giving her first urine sample, meaning it was the last thing romantic comedies or romance novels had prepared her for. She felt like all the glitter of a main character had come off her and if Beck had been nursing feelings for her they had to be wiped out by the sick reality of how she had to wee in her spacesuit.

"The lack of a bra in this suit is dumb," she complained loudly as she came out of the bathroom.

"You can wear a bra," Beck said, jumping up. "Didn't I say you could wear a bra?"

"No. You didn't. You said I had to be naked in it."

"Only naked from the waist down?" he clarified. "Isn't that what I said?"

Lisbet stuck her tongue out at him and grasped at the closure at the neck.

"Uh… don't undo it," Beck said, rushing her. "Refitting the seal will compromise the suit's integrity. Sorry about not explaining better, but you're stuck without a bra. It will probably fit better once we go outside and the air in your suit is compressed."

She didn't believe him, but there was no point in fighting him. They needed to get back to Noachis.

He helped her with her helmet and then put his on. It was weird watching him put his helmet on. She didn't like feeling like a child, but she really didn't know how to do any of the stuff they had to do to go outside on Mars. She felt like a child putting on a snowsuit, while he had been raised on Mars. This was as natural for him as blowing bubbles.

She immediately regretted making the comparison and started picking up the packs of provisions he intended for them to take with them. They were heavy and she realized a moment later that they were mostly taking tech hardware with them. There was one bag of drinks and snacks.

The moment Lisbet felt her boot shift on the sand beneath her, something changed.

On Earth, stepping in sand meant going to the beach. It meant pretending she was plastic and had a perfect life. She went to the beach and wore a bathing suit that made her feel both expensive and beautiful.

When she stepped onto the sand on Mars, a part of her sank further than the sand. A part of her was left behind when she lifted her boot and left a footprint. She stepped away from the person she had been trying so hard to hang onto since she came to Mars. She had tried to keep being her parents' daughter. It was so subtle, she hadn't even realized she had been doing it. She had tried to keep the old customs, the old way of doing things.

She realized as Beck cracked open the cargo doors to the land rover that that was the true reason she had forced herself to stay out of Beck's arms. She was acting like she was still on Earth. She was acting like her parents would be ashamed of her if she ran off with a man seven years younger than her, who was now a servant, who could meet her needs better than the rich man. Worse than being too young, Beck wasn't rich. But now, the life she had had on Earth was gone and she couldn't get it back. Now, she was on the surface of Mars with only one layer of plexiglass between her face and a world that could kill her.

She wasn't a princess anymore. Or if she was, she was a different kind of princess.

Beck held the passenger door open for Lisbet and she saw him differently than she had before. She had ignored who he really was because who he was didn't fit into the neat little packages that existed on Earth. He was something else completely.

"Can you hear me?" he asked.

She nodded and got in the land rover.

The seat inside was old and worn, which made it softer. Lisbet sank into it as Beck got in the driver's seat.

"There's one more thing I forgot to tell you," Beck said. "I forgot because I haven't met that many people who have never worn spacesuits. If you want to eat something, you have to eat it as a mush."

He pulled out one of the snacks and pressed a button by her chin. It made a straw poke from inside her helmet toward her mouth. Beck shoved the mouthpiece of the mush pack and squished it. Apple sauce came up the tube and Lisbet swallowed it.

Lisbet looked at him with curious eyes as he fastened the harnesses around her body. She hadn't been helped into a vehicle, given a mushy apple snack, and buckled in by an adult since she was a baby. She felt like a baby as he checked to make sure she was okay before he buckled himself.

She groaned inwardly. She was even wearing something close to a diaper.

Beck set the navigation route on the screen in front of them and they began driving. Lisbet finished her snack and had to follow Beck's instructions to get the straw inside her helmet to retract.

"I was on a date once where the guy took me to an arcade where they had an interactive Mars experience," she said slowly.

"How was that?" Beck's voice came over the speaker in her helmet.

"It's sort of dumb that being in the simulator was supposed to be a bonding experience."

"You don't think you can bond during a simulation?" Beck asked, his voice neutral.

"I felt like I bonded with Vantz when I played *Emerald War* with him," she answered softly.

"That was me," Beck said with only a touch of humor in his voice.

"Of course that was you," Lisbet replied roughly. "As Vantz, you told me that it was okay for me to sleep with you if I wanted to."

"I've been thinking about that," he said, his helmet facing the rolling pink dunes of the Mars landscape. "If you were from Mars, that would have been all the encouragement you needed. My pressing you any further or even being around you any more than I already was would have been overkill, but you aren't from Mars… and I misjudged how to handle you."

"Are you saying you should have accepted my lunch invitation?"

"Sure, but I wish more than that. I wish I'd insisted on helping you take the photos we needed for choosing the outfits you wore to The Boiler Room. I wish I never bought that mirror. I could have been in the room when you slid in and out of your clothes and we could have bonded over how you looked and how I saw you in each and every outfit. I think my feelings would have gotten through to you then. I could have helped you with hard-to-reach buttons and zippers. And I wish I'd taken you to The Boiler Room every day instead of letting you ride alone." He was quiet for a moment. "And I wish I told you how lonely I was."

Lisbet put her hand on his on the gear shift at the exact moment something happened.

A helocarrier skimmed above them and fired a line of bullets next to the land rover. Sand flew upward and covered the windshield. For a moment, they couldn't see anything.

He changed modes on the rover and instead of riding on the surface of the sand, they were plowing through it.

Through the back window, Lisbet saw the helocarrier swing around and shoot at them again. This time one of the bullets hit.

Beck checked his instruments. "Damn it. They hit the fuel tank. It's leaking." He hit more buttons and they dove further into the sand.

Lisbet didn't ask why someone was trying to kill them. Almost everyone on Mars who owned a helocarrier would be trying to kill them if that would stop the terraforming project.

The sand Beck drove them into covered their windows and a moment later, it covered the roof of the land rover.

Once they were completely covered by sand, Beck stopped the transport and checked his instruments.

"It's just circling us," he said, showing Lisbet the position of the helocarrier over their heads on the screen on the dashboard.

"Does it know where we are?" she asked.

“This image of them flying around is being transmitted to us via satellite, but we’re not on the satellite because we’re underground. They will be able to find us if given a little more time, but they probably know exactly where we are. They’re just not shooting at us because it’s a waste of ammunition when we’re under the sand.”

“What are we going to do?” Lisbet asked, trying to keep the fear out of her voice.

Beck huffed in annoyance, but it was not the sound of someone who was afraid. It was the sound of someone who was inconvenienced. “We’re going to do the only thing we can do. We’re going to drive under the sand until we get to that cave.” He showed Lisbet the route on the map. “Inside the cave, there’s a place we can hide.”

Lisbet thought that all sounded extremely convenient, even though he was acting put out. She was about to say how lucky they were when she remembered all the maps in Beck’s room. He knew every square inch of Mars. He had privileged information about where they could hide.

He got the land rover moving. It was very slow under the weight of the sand, but it was a vehicle meant for maneuvering through sand and carrying loads from the mines. Beck explained as much as they drove. Not every canal was perfectly clear.

Lisbet kept her eyes on the screen that displayed the helocarrier overhead. It didn’t leave. It just circled the area, looping in wider and wider loops.

Eventually, the land rover shifted. For a moment, Lisbet was afraid the ground under it would give way. There were so many caverns on Mars that they could fall through the surface into a mine shaft if they weren’t lucky.

Beck assured her that they didn’t need to be lucky. He knew the area well. His voice was steady.

Then he pushed the steering wheel down hard and they fell. Not far, but it scared Lisbet and she screamed.

“Stop it,” Beck said over the speaker in her helmet. “We’re fine. We were supposed to fall there. Now we’re in the cave I was aiming for. We just need to follow this for a few caverns and we’ll be at…” he hesitated to continue.

Lisbet turned to look at him. She couldn’t see his expression when his helmet covered so much of the side of his face, but it seemed that he had simply forgotten to keep talking. His driving was consuming his attention.

They drove deeper into the cave. Lisbet looked out the window, but there wasn’t much to look at. The rover’s headlights lit up what was in the vehicle’s path, but out of the side windows, there was only darkness.

Finally, Beck stopped the rover. “That’s it,” he said, pointing.

“That’s what?” Lisbet asked, straining to see what he saw in the darkness.

“Wait here.” He unbuckled himself and got out of the land rover.

Outside, he approached a wall. It looked like all the other walls. Beck was looking for something on the ground. He moved a few rocks, then he pulled something upward and revealed that the cave wall was fake and what they were looking at was merely a fabric sheet meant to look like the side of the cavern. Once he had tied it up, he revealed a door that looked exactly like a garage door.

Lisbet exhaled in relief. It was exactly what they needed.

He came back to the land rover and drove it in.

“What is this place?” Lisbet asked him.

“You’ll see,” he said sourly as he put the land rover into gear and drove inside.

Chapter Twenty Three

Beck parked the land rover before he turned and unbuckled Lisbet.

“I’m sure you don’t need to do that for me. I can manage,” she said with a touch of frost in her voice.

“Fine,” he said, getting out of the land rover.

He went back to the door, dropped the curtain back into place, and then pressed the button to roll the metal garage door back into place. Then he went to a control panel and pressed a series of buttons.

“Is this garage all there is, or is there more to this hideout?” Lisbet asked, coming up beside him.

“There’s more,” he said with a quick glance. “I just need to make sure that the rooms are ready for people to inhabit them. I have already switched it from the secondary power supply to the primary power supply. The air needs to be at the proper temperature and have the right composition. I need to turn on the hot water tanks and… all that is going to take a few minutes.”

“Wait,” Lisbet asked, taking a step forward and zeroing in on the most important thing Beck said. “This place has water?”

He nodded, pulling up his wrist and setting a timer. “We should be able to go inside in twenty minutes.”

“Wait a second. You’re not getting off that easy. Why does this place have water when the ship we just left didn’t?”

Beck rolled his eyes so far back in his head, Lisbet was afraid they wouldn’t come down again. “I need a smoke,” he said dully.

Lisbet tapped her toe and waited.

Finally, he relented. “You’ll be inside soon, so I guess there’s no point in hiding it. This place is a pleasure palace.”

“An abandoned one?” she asked fiercely.

“Sort of, though it is not one of the palaces that the Voynich boys dismantled and left bombs as gifts. It’s mine… And it has never had a collapsed entry,” he said hoarsely.

“It’s yours?” Lisbet repeated.

“Yeah.” He took a step away from her. He didn’t need to look at her or even stand near her for his voice to be in her ear like he was whispering it. “I told you that I am the son of Carlos Beltrose. That means that I was raised in a pleasure palace and when my father saw how much I enjoyed my privacy, he built this palace for me. It was a gift for my twelfth birthday. I lived here apart from my family for most of my teens.”

“What did you do here?” she couldn’t help but ask.

“I mostly studied terratology. You knew that. Vantz’s accomplishments are my accomplishments.”

Lisbet relaxed at his words. He had graduated swiftly and with high grades. Doubtless, the palace gave him a lot of space from his family’s depravity to get a great deal of work done. “Your father must have been very proud.”

“Why do you think that?” Beck said as he turned around to face her. “I guess your father must have been very proud of your scholastic achievements. My father doesn’t know about them. He

had very good reasons to believe I was doing things he would approve of heartily for the majority of the time that I lived here."

"Are you saying that your family has no idea you have been working for Vantz?" she asked, a little dumbfounded. It made sense that he would be able to hide Vantz as his persona, but how had he hidden that he was working on the terratology project?

"They know, but they think I'm an errand boy."

"So they're mad at you?"

Beck huffed. "It's more like they're disappointed in me because they think that nothing in the world could make Vantz succeed. Their arrogance overpowers everything. They have always thought I was working on a doomed project."

He looked at this watch again. "The garage is filled with air. We can unload the rover even if we can't enter the palace yet. Keep your helmet on until I tell you. It's still pretty cold in here."

Lisbet followed his instructions, trying to be as patient as possible. Finally, he took her into a room he called the mud room. There he organized their cargo, wasting as much time as he could. Finally, his watch started blinking.

"Can we go in now?" Lisbet asked nervously.

He nodded. He took off his helmet and helped her take hers off.

Once their helmets were off, he reached for his cigarette and flicked it on.

Lisbet reached for the door before turning one last time to Beck. "Can I go in?"

He nodded. "Please."

When Lisbet stepped into the space, it was a surprise, because it was nothing like the wealth that had been exhibited back in Castle Ares. That had been luxurious for Mars. That was what she was told. But what was in front of her was far more luxurious than even what her father's home on Earth had been like.

Everything around her sparkled. There was a waterfall in the middle of the great room. It was surrounded by plush sofas. The water filled the room with moisture in a way Lisbet had not felt since she arrived on Mars. Every room she had been in had been like a frozen desert before this room. It was still chilly, but the water in the air hit her cheeks like snow spray. It was very welcome.

"This place is ridiculous," Beck said as he came around behind her. "That water falling pointlessly is part of the hydration system of the palace. It is clean and can be drunk or bathed in. It's constantly being cleaned and recirculated."

Lisbet listened to him as she circled the room, noticing the whiter-than-white walls, the intricate molding clinging to the ceiling, the murals were painted with green and blue water lilies on a planet that was dusty red. Every surface gleamed. Every couch looked soft and comfortable. Every lamp, every carpet, every table, every painting, every place she looked was beyond beautiful.

"The decorators must hate the red planet down here," Lisbet commented as she pulled at the collar of her suit.

"They don't," Beck contradicted. "It's green and blue down here because *I* hate red. My father knew that and asked the decorators to make it to suit me."

"Why do you hate red?" she asked, following him past a side room that was filled with VR cages. When he didn't answer her, she asked another question. "What did you use all those cages for? Don't you only need one?"

He shot a backward glance at the cages. “That’s where I did my studying. Two of them don’t work, but it was a hassle to dump them, so I left them there.”

She followed Beck as he stomped through the palace. He took her to the back and brought her into a bathroom. The tub was humongous.

“The hot water will take a few hours to heat up,” he explained as he took her past walls of mirrors and gleaming ceramic appliances.

Beck led her further into a dressing room. Lisbet had thought that the dressing room he gave her in the castle back in Noachis had been luxurious because of its size and all the clothes that filled all the racks. However, it was insignificant compared to the closet in his pleasure palace. It was a hallway that ran in a huge circle. The doors that hid the clothes were huge. The mirrors between the closets showed endless elegance as they faced each other.

Beck knocked the doors to the closets open as he walked like they were the most meaningless things in the world.

Finally, he stopped at one closet. “This is where I kept my clothes.” He opened the door and showed her a half-full closet with black clothes. There was one suit coat. The clothes there were mostly track pants and hoodies.

Suddenly, Lisbet realized something strange. “All the other closets are filled with women’s clothes?”

He nodded.

“Why?”

“This is a pleasure palace. My father would send me slave girls to entertain me. This is where they played dress up,” he explained tersely before leading her into the bedroom.

Lisbet was suddenly in a place she knew must have existed somewhere, but she never expected to be there herself. The first thing that caught her attention was the bed. It was a huge circle at the back of the room. Except it was larger than a king-sized bed and when she touched it, it started to turn.

Beck went to the head of the bed and flipped a switch to keep it steady. “Sorry, the cleaning robots are instructed to leave it unanchored after they’re finished cleaning it.”

Lisbet stepped further into the room. There were twin poles that gleamed gold and reached to the ceiling.

“You had pole dancers in here?” she asked incredulously.

He nodded and puffed on his cigarette while keeping his head down.

There was a stage at the back of the room. Three steps led up to an area where a curtain could be pulled or drawn back. Lisbet took the stairs and saw a few odd props that had been left abandoned. There was a swing that looked like a crescent moon. It was hanging from the ceiling. There were wooden horses. She went further back and saw multiple backdrops against the wall and a control panel for the lights. She flicked one of the switches and turned a spotlight onto the stage.

“Please don’t play with that panel,” Beck called to her. “You’ll drop artificial snow or confetti on the stage and we don’t need that right now.”

Lisbet came out from behind the curtain. “What did you do with the girls?” she asked seriously with her eyebrows drawn together.

He blinked. “You need to understand that this is a space that was designed by my father. A lot of individual pleasure palaces look different because they’re built in caverns that dictate the

space, but this one was designed to imitate his palace. It's smaller, but the main thought is the same. This was his kind of place. Now, why don't you come down and get out of your spacesuit?"

"Why should I?" she asked, coming forward with her arms crossed over her chest.

"Look, we are hiding here until that helocarrier has backed off and I've repaired the hole in the fuel tank. In the meantime, there's no reason for you to pee in your suit. We can eat and use the bathroom while we wait, but you have nothing on under that suit. You need some clothes."

She hesitated.

He explained further. "There's no need for you to be creeped out by what is in my closet. A lot of it has never been worn and what has been worn has been cleaned."

Lisbet stepped toward him, a thousand dirty questions on her lips and she didn't know how to ask them.

She would have settled for a smaller question when there was a sound from out in the great room.

It was a "Yoohoo!"

Beck was so startled that he dropped his cigarette.

Chapter Twenty Four

“What was that?” Lisbet asked, thinking that she had never heard someone call ‘Yoohoo!’ unless they were A) female, B) intruding, and C) very unwelcome and trying to hide it by being extra friendly.

Beck bent and retrieved his cigarette from off the floor. He grabbed Lisbet by the hand and pulled her into the dressing room. He pulled her to a specific cabinet and opened the door to show a display of sex toys that would make a love boutique blush.

Lisbet stood there and gawked like the virgin she was while Beck searched for what he was looking for. Having found it, he tied a mask over her eyes.

“Unless I am very much mistaken, that was my mother,” he said shortly. He grabbed a hat from another cabinet and slammed it on Lisbet’s head. It had a wide brim and it was edged in feathers.

Why was he trying to hide who she was?

But there wasn’t time to ask him. He was giving her more instructions as though their lives depended on it. “We have to pretend we arrived to use this palace to its full extent. You are not Lisbet, the wife of Vantz Bloomburg. You are my plaything and you will act as such. Do not say a word unless I say that you can. Got it?”

Beck took his hands off her, straightened, ruffled his hair, cracked his neck, and went out into the great room.

Lisbet followed him but kept her distance by peeking around the corner.

It was so quiet that Lisbet expected to see his mother standing in the great room by herself. It was a big surprise to see the space full. Yes, his mother was there, but an older gentleman in a black space suit was standing next to her and the two of them were surrounded by a group of bodyguards in body armor. They were obviously armed with tasers at their sides and communicators at their ears. They surrounded Beck and Lisbet, though their body language suggested they were there to protect her and Beck rather than harm them. Either way, they still seemed to be covering all paths of escape.

“Hello, Father, Mother,” Beck said in a lazy drawl as he approached them.

Lisbet knew their names because they had the kind of names people liked to drop in The Boiler Room. They were Carlos and Hessia. They were famous

“Son!” Hessia gushed as she approached Beck. “It’s been so long since you popped in! We wondered if Vantz had starved you to death in his castle.” She touched his face with two hands under his chin in a way that surprised Lisbet.

Was this woman really his mother?

“I’m fine,” Beck said, removing her two hands with his two hands. “I’ve told you before, all the food on the surface is the same and it doesn’t kill anyone.”

Then he turned to his father and shook his hand in a way that was far more familial. Beck didn’t exactly look like Carlos, but something about him was similar. At least, they looked related.

“It’s strange that you should dive underground when Vantz is talking about blowing up the surface,” his father observed crossly.

“I think there’s at least a few minutes before that happens,” Beck defended.

“If only!” Carlos rasped. “They’re breathing down our necks, forcing us to give up everything we have worked for. Vantz acts as though it is only natural we give up all our possessions and our servants in exchange for not being prosecuted. As if there is anything he could prosecute us for!”

“Calm down, honey,” Hessia said, putting a hand on her husband’s chest. “Beck doesn’t think like Vantz. He just wants to be at the center of things.”

Beck breathed and said nothing.

His father said nothing.

The moment hung.

Finally, Carlos broke it by saying, “I have been good to my servants. Have you told Vantz that?”

“Do you think a man like Vantz would listen to me?” Beck said, sounding like the young man his parents expected him to be.

“Does Vantz like you? Does he trust you?” Hessia asked, looking at her son with pleading in her eyes.

Beck’s mouth hung open for a moment. “Uh… He’s kind of hard to read.”

“Do you know what I think?” Carlos said, getting a little fire in his voice. “I bet that all the riches that are being plundered from the ransacked pleasure palaces are going straight into a vault that Vantz controls.”

“Is that so?” Beck said, sounding interested in his father’s theory, which was undoubtedly incorrect. “Where do you think he keeps his vault? Somewhere on Mars or somewhere else entirely?”

Hessia interrupted Carlos before he could go off on a rant regarding the final destination of the unearthed wealth of Mars. “Beckett, who’s your friend?” she inquired, pointing at Lisbet, who looked slightly crazed in a mask, wide-brimmed hat, and a space suit.

Beck put his hand over his mouth. The purpose of the motion seemed to be to keep his tongue in his head. “Oh, we just needed a place to *talk*,” he said. The way he said the word ‘talk’ suggested that he had no intention of talking for the rest of his life. He was looking for a place to fool around.

“Really?” Carlos asked, sparing a curious glance at Lisbet before turning back to Beck. “From the motions we picked up on the surface, it seemed like you might have ducked in here because you were having a bit of trouble.”

“Yeah, I guess we were. Trouble with our land rover. It got shot by a helocarrier and was leaking fuel,” Beck admitted loathfully.

“We can help you with that!” Hessia called out joyously. “There’s a new garage not far from here. Our boys can tow it!”

“A new garage?” Beck asked slowly. “Does that mean you’re still expanding? When I was here last, my palace enjoyed a lot more privacy. Not a thing was ‘not far from here’.”

Hessia’s face fell. She clearly hadn’t meant to give away that tidbit.

Carlos slapped Beck on the back. “She exaggerates. It’s not close. She just doesn’t want you to think that we’re going to any special trouble for you. She knows how you hate that.” He gave a nod to two of the bodyguards and they disappeared into the garage.

Lisbet heard the airlock click into place behind them. Now, even if Beck could have repaired the land rover, the opportunity had passed him by. They were stranded.

The look on Beck's face did not alter at all with their changing circumstances. He gave no outward look and said nothing to indicate his feelings one way or another. Lisbet didn't know if she'd ever met anyone in her whole life who had more control over himself than Beck.

He thanked his father. "I could have patched it myself, but it's much nicer to have professionals do a job that is practically a factory reset. Thank you, Father. I'd invite you to stay for a meal, but we just arrived and I doubt there's anything special on hand. I haven't even checked what is in the food stores."

"You didn't do that as soon as you got here?" Hessia reproved, adopting her motherly tone. "Isn't that the first thing you were taught to do when you arrive at a vacant pleasure palace? Otherwise, you might find out that it has been raided of supplies like a tomb in the Valley of the Kings."

"I should have, but…" he gave Lisbet a look that was both predatory and sensual. "I couldn't wait. We never got to the kitchen."

"Ah, but we knew your larder hadn't been stocked in years. We packed up a picnic basket and came right over," Hessia continued. She looked nothing like a woman who would call 'yoohoo' back on Earth with a scarf in her curls and a mid-length floral print dress. Hessia was wearing a spacesuit that was more expensive than the one Lisbet had been given, in that it actually made her look expensive. It was white and her hair was slicked back in a style that couldn't be damaged by the dome she had to wear on her head. She had brought a picnic basket?

Lisbet almost laughed at the oddness of their predicament.

Beck nodded to his mother. "Well, that was very thoughtful of you."

"We should all eat together!" she said noisily as a few of the bodyguards went to fetch the basket from where they'd discarded it at the door.

Beck was about to point the servants toward the dining room when he suddenly dropped his hand. "They know their way," he said, giving his father a conspiratorial glance. "We'd love to eat with you, but we need a few minutes to freshen up. It's been a long couple of days for us. Please feel free to freshen up yourselves—your guards too. My spacesuit feels like a sandworm swallowed me. Excuse us."

He took Lisbet by the upper arm and hauled her almost like she was his duffle bag into the dressing room before flicking a switch and closing the doors behind him.

Lisbet had been manhandled so few times in her life that the way he carted her after him surprised her. No man had ever wanted her with him so bad that he didn't at least pretend to give her a choice. She was enjoying a pleasant buzz from the interaction when he stopped moving, turned toward her, and started undoing her space suit.

"I can do it myself!" she hissed in complaint.

"We don't have time," he hissed back. "It would take you five minutes to get out of that suit on your own and we have to hurry. My parents are not pleasant people regardless of what you just saw. If we leave them alone too long, we'll lose our chance for a moment of privacy. None of the locks on this place work against my father. They'll come in here to see what we're doing if they get bored."

"Surely, they wouldn't," Lisbet said, fighting his fingers and holding the front of the suit over her chest closed as he dropped to undo the clasps on her boots.

“They would. If they walked in on us screwing around, they’d be delighted. They’d take seats and watch. We have to hurry and you need to get changed first because if they walk in on you naked, you’re going to have a very different reaction than if they walked in on me.”

“I’d scream,” she conceded as he finished up with her boots and got to his feet. “What would you do?”

“Absolutely nothing. I have no shame over anyone seeing me naked. It doesn’t bother me,” he said, diving into the closet, finding clothing, and throwing pieces at her.

She caught a black slip and she threw it over her head as she peeled the spacesuit off under the shield of the silky fabric. A blush dawned on her face like the rising sun, but when she turned to look at Beck, he was already out of his spacesuit. It was in a discarded heap on the floor.

Her cheeks were suddenly aflame.

She had been so cautious because she didn’t want him to see her naked, but then to turn and see that he wasn’t even interested in such a thing blew her mind.

Raising her eyes to observe the whole dressing room, she saw he was behind a closet door at the other end of the corridor. He was throwing things again, but his body was hidden.

Foolishly, she grabbed a closet door, positioned it to work as a modesty screen, and put on the things Beck had given her in order. Once finished, she moved to see herself in a mirror. They were easy to find since they were everywhere.

She was in a black slinky dress with an exceptionally low neckline.

“It’s so lucky you don’t have any moles or marks on your chest,” he said, popping up behind her.

She cringed at his sudden appearance. Then breathed the tension away. At least he was dressed. It was black trousers with a dark green turtleneck sweater.

His brown eyes looked very green in the light above the mirror.

“Why is that?” she asked hesitantly, wondering why it was lucky for her to have no marks.

“You’ve been on media outlets for months,” he replied smoothly. “You have marks on your arm that are an instant tell and mark you as you.”

Lisbet pulled on the tight sleeves of the dress and revealed her arms. What was he talking about? She didn’t have any marks on her arms… Until she did. She didn’t notice them, but she had two freckles side by side on her left forearm, but just as Beck said, her chest was as blank as a canvas. It could belong to anyone. He had noticed that about her?

“How did you know that?” she suddenly asked.

“I’ve only seen you in about a thousand different dresses since you got here,” he said as he moved to another part of the closet.

Lisbet looked in the mirror again. It was too much skin. She’d never worn a dress in her whole life that showed that much breast. “Ah… I get the point about the focus of this dress being on my chest, but does it have to be so busty? Can’t we choose another one?”

“There isn’t time. Not only that but if you don’t look the part of my plaything, my father will send me a woman to entertain me tonight. We don’t want that,” he replied tersely, tearing off a strip of black lace off a spindle with his teeth. His desperation made up for what he wasn’t able to cut with his teeth and the lace broke.

“What’s that for?”

He covered her eyes and tied the black lace in a knot behind her head. “Just now, you weren’t close enough to my parents for them to recognize you. You had the mask, you had the hat, you were on the other side of the room, but at dinner, you’ll be closer, and there will be more light. If they see your hellish violet eyes, we’re done for.”

“Hellish?” she exclaimed.

He huffed as he reached for her discarded mask. “I’ve told you before that I didn’t think much of that body augmentation of yours. Anyone who looks into your eyes will recognize you, which is the last thing we need right now.”

She nodded.

“This way, the webbing on the lace will cover your eyes, which the mask doesn’t cover, and no one will recognize you. That’s the point of the dress, the mask, the wig…”

“What wig?”

“This one,” he said, plopping a black bob wig on her head.

“That’s basically my hair color and style anyway,” she said when she saw herself in the mirror.

“Yes,” he agreed, “but it looks like a wig. That’s the point.”

Beck stopped to admire himself in a mirror. He checked the folds of his cuffs, sprayed his hair with cologne, and took a little electric razor to his stubble before he declared them both ready.

“Are you sure you’re not thirty-five?” she asked drolly.

“I’ll be thirty-five if you want me to be.”

She looked at him.

He looked at her, giving her the admiring gaze she craved, before he scoffed and turned away. “Whatever doe-eyed look you’re trying to give me, I can’t see it through the mask and lace. Let’s go.”

***

The dining room was one of the places Lisbet had yet to see on her tour of Beck’s pleasure palace. It was truly ridiculous how grand it was. The ceiling was domed with a royal finish that resembled a blue Earth sky above them. The chandelier that hung over the white marble table was thousands of crystals. The way the bodyguards instantly became waiters and the way Beck had been a sad tech boy who lived alone in a VR cage who had suddenly become the heir to the kingdom was something else.

Lisbet wasn’t sure if the whole situation was loathsome or spectacular.

She held her breath on her opinion as the food was served. Beck had told her that there was better food underground, but that it wasn’t being shared and that felt more real than it should have as she was served roast lamb with mint sauce. It was a little cold, but it was the most delicious thing she had put on her tongue since she arrived on the red planet.

Beck had told her not to talk and one of the perks of not talking at a dinner party was that she got to enjoy the food. She got to cut the meat up into tiny little pieces and eat everything the way she had been taught. It wasn’t quite like eating a navel orange with a fork and knife, but not all of the table manners she had been taught came in handy.

Carlos watched her cut the fat off her meat and deposit the little pieces in her mouth with fascination.

“Is something entertaining, Father?” Beck asked, holding his wine glass by the stem instead of the bowl.

“I’ve just never seen a pleasure princess eat like that,” the man replied.

Lisbet had never had anyone comment on her table manners before, but she knew they were of the highest standard. Her mask didn’t cover her mouth, so it didn’t get in the way, and even though she was looking down at her plate through black lace, it wasn’t hindering her. Then, she realized that Carlos thought that her eating was too civilized. She had erred on the side of being too classy.

Beck shrugged his shoulders. “You can train a person to do anything that excites you.”

“I’ve got to try that,” Carlos said under his breath. “Beckett, what’s your girl’s name?”

“Charity,” Beck answered smoothly, like what he said wasn’t a lie.

Lisbet wondered when he had decided on that name for her.

“How have you been?” Hessia asked, directing her attention toward Beck and acting like a concerned parent.

“What she means is, how has it been working for Vantz?” Carlos asked, sounding more genuine in his disapproval.

Hessia interrupted before Beck could answer. “We were so pleased to learn that you were not hurt when Castle Ares was stormed by that angry mob. You got out all right?”

“I’m here before you,” Beck said pleasantly. “Unharmed.”

“You have always known that I didn’t want you working for anyone who was terraforming Mars, but I wanted to ask you if you were able to talk sense into any of those executives you work for,” Carlos said, wiping his chin with a blue cloth napkin.

“Ah… You mean your ideas about finding a way to give Mars an atmosphere without the necessity of evacuation. I wish I could have, but I’m merely a tech boy. You must know that,” Beck said softly. “It’s not as though they listen to the children who work for them.”

“I suppose not,” Carlos replied, clearly annoyed that anyone wouldn’t want to listen to an extension of himself.

“You must check in more often,” Hessia stressed, like the end of their world wasn’t soon, like things could go on the same as before. “We were so afraid when we saw the footage on the media outlets. You were living in that castle when it fell, weren’t you?”

“Yes,” he said, giving his parents all they wanted without fussing. “I’ll be sure to check in more often. Should I send a message once a month or once a week?”

His mother looked relieved and chose the weekly option, though she wanted daily reports if there was another emergency.

Carlos cocked his head before pulling out an electric cigar much like the one Beck smoked constantly. He puffed on it, releasing the scent of old wood. Lisbet was very entranced by it, her nose filling with the precious familiar vapor of home. It was probably the most precious scent on the whole planet.

“Are we keeping you from your interests?” Carlos asked, sparing a sideways look at Lisbet.

Beck did not nod, shake his head, or smoke. He kept his eyes on his father and said, “It would be inexcusable of me to indulge myself when my parents are present after such a long absence.”

“I see you still like your privacy,” Carlos puffed. “Very well, we’ll be on our way. There’s a party tonight at the main palace. I’d like you and Charity to come. I know everyone would like to see you. I’ll send a vehicle to fetch you.”

Beck nodded. “Thank you, Father.”

Carlos got up with Hessia following his lead. There was fussing and air kissing and almost hugs before they were finally through the airlock with all their bodyguards.

Once they were gone and the airlock was sealed, Beck turned to Lisbet and said firmly. “Do not trust them. They are the ones who sent the helocarrier to shoot at us. They orchestrated our capture and prepared this palace for us. This is not how I left this place. It looks as though it was touched up by a maid yesterday. They aren’t being this nice to me because they like me. They’re hoping to use me as a tool to force Vantz to back down, even though he’s already evacuated two-thirds of the planet.”

Lisbet’s mind fired rapidly as she reviewed everything she knew. Vantz was an AI who had been programmed by Beck. “Us being here won’t stop the timeline?”

“No. Vantz will blow me up along with everything else, but that’s why it’s so important that no one finds out who you are. If they think they have Vantz’s wife, my father won’t evacuate the pleasure palaces he controls, thinking he holds the ultimate trump card over Vantz.”

“Vantz will ignore me as a hostage as well as you?” Lisbet asked with bated breath.

Beck nodded. “He’s programmed to ignore everyone. That’s the only way for Mars to be reborn. That’s one of the reasons Mars was held back in the past. The miners kidnapped important people and held them hostage underground until the head terraformer quit. It happened over and over. I wasn’t going to let it happen this time”

“Beck,” she said, thinking of everything he’d told her. “How did you do all of what you’ve done to get this far with Mars?”

“You mean how have I managed all the projects, put them into place, and kept them on track?”

She nodded.

“All the plans were made before I took the job,” he explained with a roughness in his voice that Lisbet had not heard before. “The plan to have the pleasure palaces gassed, the unconscious people removed, and the places stripped? Not my plan, but I found a way to do it. The building of the magnetic field generators? Not something I put together. But I finished what someone else started. The plan to put the evacuees in cryostasis in orbit? That was the brainchild of someone at Sleeping Beauty Inc. who was pissed off at the fate of their models who were sent to Mars. Every part of this plan was made by someone else. I’m just the stubborn bastard who won’t be manipulated. So… if we can’t find a way out, we’ll either get gassed and taken out by force by the Voynich boys when my father’s palace is up on the work docket, or we’ll die. Whatever happens, the plan will not be halted because we’re down here.”

Lisbet swallowed as the sweat pooled at her neck.

Chapter Twenty Five

Beck ushered Lisbet into the bathroom and started filling the oversized tub.

“What are we doing?” she asked as she used one of the many mirrors to help her remove her mask and the black lace covering her eyes.

“We’re getting ready to go to my father’s party,” he explained. “There’s all this water here. We might as well use it.”

“So, we’re really going?” she asked as she removed her wig and fluffed her hair that had been crushed under it.

“I want to talk to one of my cousins. His name is Shattern. He has always been sympathetic toward me. He might be willing to help us escape.” Beck took a deep breath in. “He’ll be helpful anyway, even if he can’t help us return to Noachis. He can help me convince my father to evacuate. Honestly, the reason we’re trying to go back to the city is to get connected to your PR contacts so we can convince the miners to empty their pleasure palaces. We might do a better job of it here with my father than over the media outlets.”

Lisbet watched the swirling water fill the sparkling tub. “Are you having a bath or is all that water for me?” Lisbet asked from over his shoulder.

“It’s for you, Princess. We’re lucky my parents took as long a visit as they did. Now the water is warm.” He ran his hand under it to check the temperature.

“Can I ask you a question?” she asked stiffly, standing over him like a watchtower.

“Fire away.”

“Am I married to you?”

He did have the good sense to look mildly embarrassed when he nodded. Lisbet would have been annoyed that he showed such little feeling, except that she was learning that was Beck’s specialty, to hide how he was feeling.

“And you’re not going to pressure me to be your pleasure princess?” she asked, rubbing her shin against his thigh.

Beck stood up beside the tub. At his full height, he was much taller than her. He looked down on her. “Feeling frisky?”

She shrugged, annoyed that she was having to make the moves on him.

Seeing her hesitation, he stepped away from her. “We’ll see if you’re still feeling frisky later tonight. Why don’t you choose what you want to wear to the party and I’ll approve it? Like old times.”

“Those old times were last week,” Lisbet reminded him.

“It was actually a bit longer than that. You were in cryostasis so time isn’t the same for you. But don’t let it concern you. It was only for a few weeks.” He waved a loose hand at her and went to leave the bathroom. “I assume you know how to turn off a tap.”

She rolled her eyes. “I’m good at turning things off,” she said, giving herself a little insult.

“And turning things on,” he said, giving her a little compliment as he closed the door between them.

***

They would probably die soon.

That was what Lisbet thought as she lay in the tub with a mountain of rock above the ceiling over her head on the red planet.

They would probably die, but she had missed warm water so desperately that at that moment, she didn't care at all.

When the water turned tepid, she got out, covered herself with a fluffy housecoat, and wandered into the closet built like a ring. It was like clothes and parties and fun times were displayed on a merry-go-round that went around and around forever. It was dizzying.

Beck told her he wanted her to choose something to wear. She walked around, unable to focus on any one closet because these were not clothes that were meant for a lady. She found closets with nothing but underwear. There were others with nothing but cheap costumes that no woman of culture would ever wear even in the privacy of her own bedroom. The dresses were the same. She realized with a heavy heartbeat that the dress Beck had chosen for her to wear to lunch was an anomaly. She would have to hunt hard to find something that covered her as much as it had because it was completely out of the question for her to wear it again.

After what felt like an exhaustive search, she had decided to layer two dresses. One had a spectacular ruffled skirt, that covered everything below the waist and covered almost nothing on top. The second dress had a top and almost nothing for a bottom, but if she wore both of them at the same time, she was covered.

Beck came out of the bedroom and saw her. He was wearing a suit with no shirt under the coat and it was suddenly more obvious than it had been before why he was so careful about his eight-pack.

"How did you get cleaned up?" Lisbet questioned immediately. "I was in the bathroom."

"Do you think the master of the pleasure palace is required to share a bathroom with his consorts?" he asked her quizzically.

"Oh. Was I in the small bathroom or the big bathroom?" she wondered.

"The big bathroom. There's no point in refusing to spoil you," he said, pulling the strap of the ruffled dress off her shoulder.

"Hey!"

"You can't wear that. My fake mother will wear something that shows more skin than that."

"Your fake mother?" she asked, making a failed attempt to get her strap back up.

"Of course," he said as he flicked his cigarette on and blew a puff of smoke. "She would never lower herself to give birth to a baby herself. She had a slave girl endure the pregnancy for her."

"Oh. Does that mean that she had a surrogate? It was your father's sperm and your mother's egg and someone else's body?"

Beck shook his head. "For a while, that was the story they told Hessia, but my father was screwing a maid and so he told Hessia they'd put the eggs they harvested from her into the maid. It wasn't true. I had my DNA tested later. He's my father, but Hessia's only concerned about looking like a good mother. It's a shame that what looks like a good mother in a pleasure palace is so far from one."

Lisbet thought of the bubble story and bit her lips shut. Now that she knew Beck and Vantz were the same person, it seemed like it was about him.

Beck walked between the closet doors casually until he found something that pleased him and tossed it to her. This time when he threw clothes at her, she caught them.

It was an angel costume.

"On the bright side, you do not have to wear the lace under the mask to this party. If we make you wear it, you won't be able to see anything, and it will be so dark that I don't have any worries about someone seeing your violet eyes."

Lisbet went behind a closet door and put the costume on. It had sleeves, which Beck said they needed in order to cover her arms, but it did not cover much else. Her stomach was on display, the neckline was low, the hem was high, and she did not know how she could go out in public wearing it. Most importantly, unlike the dress from that afternoon, it showed the bruises that had not yet healed from the shooting at The Boiler Room.

She came around the corner and grunted.

Beck saw her and laughed. "Relax. We're not finished yet."

He gave her a wig that covered her chest in long white curls. Then he gave her thigh-high boots that covered her legs. Finally, he put a large pair of wings on her back. They were gauzy with wires that came up as high as her eyes. She could cover herself with the wings if she was desperate.

"You need to look like you belong at this party, but you also need to look a little boring. This kind of look is beyond basic. You will not get any attention wearing this. It will be so dark no one will see the bruises on your stomach and thighs. And…" he said with a sorrowful expression on his face, "after this party, you will not be the same."

"Why?"

"Because, unfortunately, you will see things you never wanted to see, things you didn't even know people did, things that will make you want to blow up Mars as much as I do. I'd spare you from it. I'd planned to spare you from it, but we're here now and I can't leave you here in my palace without me. As a matter of fact…" he pulled out some handcuffs and knocked one loop over his wrist and one loop over her wrist. "I do not want us separated. Put your mask on. It's time to go."

***

Maybe Lisbet thought that Carlos and Hessia were like the gentility she had known back on Earth. Maybe Lisbet's parents had sheltered her so completely that she didn't know what rich people on Earth did with their money, but in the underground canals of Mars where power was unchecked, Lisbet saw things she never imagined.

It was a whirlwind of activity where the rave lights caused seizures and the beat of the music broke eardrums.

Beck held Lisbet's hand rather than let the handcuffs cut into both of them. She covered herself shyly with her wings while a set of triplets gushed over Beck and how much they missed him. They screamed that he was the best lover they'd ever known.

Over his shoulder, she saw a girl get electrocuted and fall to the ground.

Someone spilled a goblet of blood down the back of Lisbet's dress.

"It's cow blood," the guy who spilled it reassured Lisbet. Five seconds later he whispered into Beck's ear that it was Katrina's, but she was a cow, so everything he said was true.

Beck laughed. It was the most perfect laugh Lisbet had ever heard. It was a planned laugh, a practiced laugh, a laugh used for a moment like this to defuse any situation.

After the Bloodspiller had gone, Beck drew her closer to him and whispered in her ear, “How uncomfortable is the blood?”

“It’s fine,” she said in a half-lie. It had been more of a splatter than a stream and the only part of her panties that was wet was a patch on her hip.

“Good. The purpose of that was to force us to detach while you went to clean up,” he whispered. “If you can stand it, please do. I’m still looking for Shattern.”

Lisbet looked around too. The cavern the party took place in had been heavily inspired by ancient Roman architecture. There were columns everywhere. There were baths in sectioned-off square spaces. Lisbet had never seen so many people undressed in her life before. She thought it would be fine until one of those undressed bathers was electrocuted in the water and a surge of hot laughter bubbled.

“No one has ever died that way!” someone shrieked.

Something smelled burnt.

Beck slid his cigarette between her lips and put his lips near her ear. “Inhale.”

She did so and felt a measure of her normal self return to her. She could be as stoney as him.

She saw Hessia take off her top for a tableful of women. Apparently, she was showing them the incisions from her latest breast augmentation and she didn’t mind at all who saw.

In another direction, she saw a man carrying a trayful of drinks. He had a whip coiled around his neck and he was tripping over someone who was recovering from an electrocution on the floor. He was being dragged like a dog. The drinks were spilling. Lisbet got the backsplash of that. The front of her dress was soiled in white wine.

She pulled her angel wings closer.

“We have to find Shattern,” Beck said as he rushed her through the rooms.

Each room was worse than the last, so much so that Lisbet stopped looking. She just held onto Beck and kept her eyes on the floor to stop herself from tripping.

Then Lisbet heard something she had not expected to hear. It was a frightened squeal. It was Tiffania. Lisbet looked up to see her. Tiffania had a choke chain around her throat. Not a plaything like the things in Beck’s closets. It was an actual choke chain. She had dark bruises on her face and the skin around her Sleeping Beauty Inc. bracelet was charred.

Lisbet’s eyes followed the leash and saw the man that was holding it. That must be Antar, her buyer. Lisbet had not realized how gentle Beck looked, not just his face, but his aura and his manner. He looked very gentle compared to Antar. Antar looked like an open wound, like everything about him was pinched and pained. His shoes were too tight, his socks were too tight, his belt was too tight, his collar was too tight, and even the glasses on his face looked like seeing through them was a horrific struggle because the lenses were the size of quarters.

Another group of women had clustered around Beck and all of them were saying how they missed coming to his pleasure palace and how he was the wildest lover they’d ever known.

It was odd how so many of them made the effort to come over and say such things. Lisbet did not think of Beck as the virginal type so some of what they said had to be true, but what seemed more true was that they had been trained to say such things. Beck said something at lunch

about how they could be trained. Did he train them to do that? Was that a wise decision? Didn't it make the other men jealous?

Then she realized how much he had taught her to say, just to a different crowd with a different message.

Tiffania looked up and saw Lisbet.

Could she recognize her when she was wearing a mask and a wig?

Her sister stood up.

Apparently, it was without permission because Antar pulled her back down with a cruel twist of his wrist and slammed his fist into the cheek that was already bruised.

Lisbet flinched hard in sympathy.

Beck touched her chin and turned it away from her sister. "You can't help her. It would blow your cover."

"I can't leave her like this!" Lisbet hissed. It was on the tip of her tongue to ask Beck to buy her sister from Antar right there on the spot when she remembered that no matter how rich he was to the outside world, he was as poor as porridge when the books were laid out. He didn't have the money to buy Tiffania.

"There's nothing we can do," Beck mouthed in her ear. "This isn't your fault. This is the chance she took when she sold herself, and the reason we have to change Mars forever."

Lisbet looked down at her bracelet. She had been shocked once, but her skin had not changed colors. How many times did someone have to be shocked before their skin looked like Tiffania's?

If Beck wanted to… What could he have done to her? What could he have forced her to do to him? It didn't matter that she was so much older than him, he could have put her on her knees and ruined her dignity as firmly as Tiffania's was ruined.

He hadn't done any of those things to Lisbet and finally, as he turned her head away from her sister and led her to the next room, he was no longer younger than her. The math could tell a different story if it wanted to, but in Lisbet's mind, the details no longer mattered. She clung to Beck's elbow and went along with him.

For the first time, they were together as a couple. It was a different feeling for Lisbet. She had rarely been part of a couple, but she wanted the feeling to continue. She held onto him tighter.

"I can't see Shattern anywhere," Beck said as he finished their first loop. "I think we've put in enough of an appearance for my father that we can go back to my palace now." Beck rang for a transport and helped her move toward the doors. The hand on her back was bloody when he removed it.

It was only spilled blood.

Chapter Twenty Six

Lisbet submerged herself in the tub in Beck's pleasure palace for the second time that day. She had more blood sprayed on her skin than she thought and she had so much disgust that she needed to wash off.

"Beck," she called into the bedroom. She had left the door open because everything that happened at the party rubbed her wrong. Carlos and Hessia could come back to Beck's palace anytime they liked. No doubt they would be back and if she was in the tub when they got there, she needed to notice so she could grab a housecoat. Lisbet no longer felt safe. "Beck!" she called again.

"I'm here," he said, the back of his elbow was visible at the door. It was low. He was sitting on the floor in the hallway, though Lisbet couldn't see the rest of him.

"Can you grab me a nightgown? Is there one I could wear that would actually cover me?"

"Don't get your hopes up," he said, tossing a hoodie and some sweatpants onto the counter. "Would you prefer a thong or a pair of my briefs?"

"Your briefs," she called back to him.

He tossed the underwear to sit atop the pile of clothes he was creating. "Do you need anything else, Princess?"

"Do you think your palace is bugged? Do you think there are cameras and microphones all over the place here?" Lisbet asked, holding a mountain of bubbles next to her chest."

"No. That would go against the general code of pleasure palaces. They don't want anyone to find evidence of their crimes, so no cameras, no microphones, and if you do something particularly naughty, the only thing to do is to do it again."

"Then we can talk about when your father's pleasure palace will be raided? How soon is that going to happen? Is that going to be next month, next week, or tomorrow?"

"What we're claiming with the evacuations," Beck began, a curl of smoke escaping from around the door, "is that the miners are coming out themselves."

In the past, when Lisbet reported evacuated areas to the public, she did not reveal whether or not the miners came out of their hideyholes of their own accord. "Has the public story changed then?"

"Yes. We're putting more pressure on the miners to come out by themselves. We're saying that miners are choosing to evacuate."

"Is that true?" Lisbet wondered.

"No. We're telling the miners they'll get lighter sentences for their enslavement crimes and that it would be better for them if they weren't raided. The remaining miners have been getting better at sensing when a raid is coming. A few of the palaces have set enough explosions of their own to have killed dozens of the Voynich boys. The problem is that those boys have already made a sick amount of money for what they've done here. I don't know if they have much more appetite for dismantling pleasure palaces. They've said a few things that indicate they'd be happier to dig up dead bodies from this point onward. We probably won't be able to empty the whole planet. We've emptied two-thirds of the planet for sure. That was true when we left the rocket site this morning. If we want more precise information, I need to get access to my work, though I'm a little spooked to try when my parents have been messing around in here.

Though I am confident they aren't recording us, my VR connection might not be as sound as it used to be."

"If you can't get access, is that going to halt your work?" Lisbet asked, peering over the side of the tub.

"No. Vantz has contingency plans for everything. There are plenty of other people working. I don't have to be there. If I did, I never would have gone to the rocket site to rig that bomb personally. I sent everyone else to work on evacuations. But my father's palace is set to be the last one raided. His is the largest and therefore the hardest." Beck paused and thought seriously for a moment, running calculations in his head. "We should prepare for the eventuality that the Voynich crews will not come here and that Vantz will elect to set off the final chain reaction to give Mars an atmosphere without evacuating this complex of palaces. We need to convince them to evacuate."

Lisbet thought about the people they met at the party at Carlos' pleasure palace. She didn't know if any of the people who held the controls to the electric wrist buzzers would ever want to leave. The place seemed thick with a frenzy for power that couldn't be silenced by the promises Vantz was making them. He was only offering that they would continue breathing. It wasn't enough for people that high on their own hedonism.

Lisbet would have been happy to let all of them suffer the consequences of what they'd done, except for one thing… Tiffania. Lisbet hated to leave her to die. Wasn't there something she and Beck could do?

"You know," she said in a voice that echoed through the bathroom. "Those people were not what I expected… and neither were you."

Beck snorted. "What does that mean?"

"It means that you were so good at talking to them. You kept your head on straight and didn't let anything that happened bother you. You even laughed with that guy who spilled blood on me. It's too bad you couldn't do your own PR work. I'm sure you could convert everyone."

Beck exhaled. "What you saw was nothing. I stopped fighting those people to their faces ages ago. I couldn't remake the system from my position inside it. I had to step out of it and find a way to burn them out. Yelling at my father never fixed a thing."

"You used to fight with them?" Lisbet asked in an interested whisper.

"Yes. My father has been told my thoughts, but…" he trailed off.

"Hmm," she hummed as she looked around for a bathrobe. "I never fought with my parents when I still lived at home. In particular, I never fought with my father. Now, I want to scream at him until I run out of breath, breathe in, and scream some more. I got a message from him when I was in cryostasis back at the rocket site. That was what woke me up. He sent me a message to make sure I was really married to Vantz. He noticed some flaws in the paperwork. I was sold to you and not Vantz."

"Ah," Beck said. "The marriage certificate we gave you didn't have Vantz's name on it at all. It only had my name. You were in such a state of confusion and unhappiness that you didn't even read it before you signed it. Sometimes I play that moment back in my head. How would things have been different if you had read it and realized that I was your purchaser?"

Lisbet felt a heaviness fall on her upon hearing that. She shouldn't have signed something that she hadn't read, but it did explain why Beck and Charcoal were acting so strangely until the

certificate was signed and whisked away. Even Charcoal knew what Beck was doing and the position she had been placed in because of what she signed.

“Are you mad I did that? That I tricked you into this whole thing? You thought you were getting Vantz Bloomburg?” he asked, his voice coming around the door like a cat peeking around a corner.

Lisbet sighed. “It doesn’t matter. How could it matter? Even if we weren’t likely to perish in a collapsed canal, it’s the same thing, because you and Vantz are the same person. Besides, if you want to show me the courtesy of marrying me instead of treating me like a sold woman who gets burned until her wrist is black, then…” Lisbet couldn’t remember what she was supposed to be saying. “It doesn’t matter. I signed the personal sale papers of my own accord. Yes, I was upset when I signed them. I was upset when I signed the marriage contract as well, but…” She stood up out of the water and unable to find a bathrobe, she grabbed a towel and put it around herself.

It didn’t cover as much of her as it should have, but Lisbet stepped into Beck’s field of vision anyway.

Sitting on the floor in front of her, he blinked. “Do you need a robe?” he asked, peering over her shoulder.

She shook her head in the negative.

He turned back to her, his cigarette making a column of smoke next to his face while he considered her with curious eyes. “Did you get a taste of something you liked at my father’s party tonight?”

She shook her head and looked down. “No… I… uh… I think you were right about us… about me… and I…” She could say more if she knew what words to say. Why was she tripping over herself?

“Are you sure you want that?” he persisted, blowing a line of smoke between them.

“I want to understand what all those girls at the party were raving about,” Lisbet said saucily, stalling what she really had to say.

He lolled his head between his shoulders in a show of resignation. He stood up and got a robe for her from the closet in the hallway behind him. “That’s very sweet,” he said as he pulled the bathrobe around her shoulders. “But I don’t think you’re ready for all that entails.”

“Why? Am I not grown up enough for you?” Lisbet asked as he tied the sash at her waist over her towel.

He scoffed. “Are you in love with me?”

She hesitated. He wanted her to beg, not because he wanted to assert dominance over her, but because he wanted to be sure he wasn’t forcing her into anything.

Finally, she found her voice and said, “Look, I’m scared. Really scared.”

“You’re scared of dying? That’s reasonable,” he agreed, looking down and turning away from her.

She hauled his attention back to her with the force of her voice. “Okay, I am scared of dying, but if we die in this palace, it’s likely to be fast and everything that lives has to die at some point. Some people are just luckier to live longer lives. I could slip on the soap and die with my head cracked on the tile. When your time is up, it’s up. Death is hanging over all of us all the time. No, what I’m scared about at this moment is that I’ve been wrong about you. That I’ve been wrong about everything.”

He paused and looked at her like something inside him was finally on while she spoke to him. That for once, their conversation was important to the man who found everything dull.

Lisbet stumbled over the words, but even with the stumbling, she delivered them anyway. “That it wasn’t some sort of upside-down luck that brought me to Mars to work with you. It was intentional. It was your intention that brought me here. That I came to you so immediately because even though the situation of selling myself for life is ridiculous… I came because something in me called to you, so when you called for me, I came. I think that if you told me what the situation was when I arrived and that you wanted me to be your wife… I would have resisted very little. I would have opened up and let you fill me because I… don’t want to live the life I had. I wanted to fall in love with Vantz. I *did* fall in love with Vantz and what was he? A VR simulation with your voice.”

“What are you saying?” he asked, stepping closer to her and getting in her face.

“I’m saying I *want* to be in love with you,” she said sternly.

He stood with his face close to hers. “Prove it.”

She reached up and kissed him. For a moment, she was back in her father’s house. Beck was the pool boy and the last person in the world she was supposed to be with. But she ignored the impulse in her head to always say no and deepened their kiss. In the next moment in her head, Beck was a servant in the skyscraper tower. Again, someone she wasn’t supposed to touch. She fought hard against the feeling of perpetual restraint and slid her hand under his shirt until she felt skin. At the last moment, he was her husband’s subordinate and she slapped that idea down as hard as she could. Those were lies she told so she could sabotage herself with a clean conscience. Beck had found a way to tell her he was hers from the very beginning. She just hadn’t been listening.

She kissed him again and the feeling went straight to her head.

“So, I’m man enough for you now?” he asked, taking one hand and whipping his shirt over his head.

It was a challenge because of how she’d reacted when he was shirtless before. She hadn’t looked at him.

She looked at him now. Gritting up her courage, she even ran a hand across his stomach. She gulped. “I’m such a baby. This is the first time I’ve ever touched a man’s bare stomach,” she admitted. “I’m shy… and I’m certainly going to bore you compared to those other girls who…”

“Took naps when they visited?” he supplied.

Her eyes widened. “Really?”

“I won’t admit to being virginal, as that would be a horrific lie, but I will say that was what was happening most of the time when my father sent girls to entertain me.”

“Why the eight-pack if you weren’t fooling around with them?” she asked with her interest piqued.

He put his hand around Lisbet’s wrist and said patiently, “The eight-pack is for you. It’s something I made during the time you were floating through space between Earth and Mars. I was trying to make myself over… make myself into a man you’d want.”

Lisbet gasped. “Is that true?”

He nodded and scoffed, “I wanted to impress you. As for my life here in this palace, you need to understand that the girls here have been abused within an inch of their lives. It’s better for

everyone if they don't die, but they're still wounded deep down inside." He put a hand on Lisbet's chest over her heart.

His hand felt strange on her, like he was opening her awareness up to what would happen next. Her body was heating up.

Beck said his next words carefully. "The girls liked coming here because they knew that I wouldn't hurt them. I wouldn't demand anything of them, but some of them grew to hate coming here."

"Why?" Lisbet asked curiously.

"Because I refused to love the way they wanted," he explained.

"They wanted you to love them?"

"Of course, but they were warped. They had been taught to crave a kind of love that isn't love at all," he said with a downward glance, at his hand on Lisbet's chest. "I would never hurt you for fun or push myself on you to show you my power. That's not love. I want to give you real love. Touch you like you're gold. Precious and rare. Soft and painless. Do you want me to tell you how I adore you? Sweep you away? Do you want me to love you? "

Lisbet's throat was too dry to answer. She nodded.

"It will change you," he warned. "This whole place, my palace, Mars, and me. I'll change you. Are you sure that is what you want?"

"Yes," she gasped, conscious that she had to say the promissory word or he wouldn't do a thing.

He took her into his arms and led her through the archway that brought them to his bedroom. The feel of the carpet under her bare feet felt like walking on moss. The fabric of her robe falling away from her felt like wings uncurling about to take flight. His breath on her skin felt like the hot wind of a summer night when the stars were close enough to touch. It felt like nature to let go of the old and become enveloped in something new. It was a feeling like being inside an egg that was cracking and breaking. Under thousands of tons of rock, Beck changed Lisbet. She begged him to change her and even though she did not expect it, she loved every moment of it.

Chapter Twenty Seven

Lisbet woke to the sound of china clinking. It was a soft sound, one that was not meant to wake a soul, but it broke her haze of oblivion and she blinked, opening her eyes like clamshells. There was no sunlight, only a soft blue light like the lighting used in a pool—indirect lighting pointed at the floor. She felt artificially underwater. A sound like water lapping was bubbling from the side of the bed.

"Beck?" she whispered.

Opening her eyes fully, she saw his bare back as he lay on his side. The sheets covered his lower half and blue lines like water veins twisted on his elbow and across his shoulder blade.

He was still asleep.

What had he done to her the night before?

She was just about to think it over when her thoughts were interrupted by an extremely unwanted sound.

"Her breasts are perfect. I should have a cast made of them and get my surgeon to do me up just like her," a yoo-hooing voice practically sang.

Lisbet yanked the bedsheets over her chest.

Hessia and Carlos were sitting at a table at the foot of the bed. They were not having breakfast. They were having morning tea and they hadn't quite set their teabags to soak.

"Oh, look," Carlos yawned. "You woke her up."

"Good morning, Lisbet," Hessia said triumphantly.

Lisbet touched her face. Of course, she hadn't worn her mask to bed for her first night with Beck.

Now they knew who she was.

She slapped Beck's bare back. He jumped up. Then he saw Lisbet's face and his parents watching them. In a tired voice, he ordered the palace's AI to change the lighting scheme so that they could all see each other properly. Then he reached for his cigarette and leaning back in his bed with all the pomp of a rich boy, he started smoking. Obviously, he made no attempt to dress himself and left the sheet over his bottom half with no adjustment.

"We brought you breakfast," Hessia said sweetly as she showed them another picnic basket that looked more like a cooler meant to carry organ transplants.

Beck didn't answer. He casually kept smoking, while Lisbet was profoundly aware that he had asked her not to speak to his parents. If that was his order, then she mustn't. After what he had done to her the night before, she would never disobey him for fear that he wouldn't do what he did to her again.

However, sitting next to him on the bed, a flood of memories from the night before sparked inside of her. Her face went flush. Lisbet clutched the blanket to her chest. He had been right. The whole world had changed. She picked up his free arm and put herself under his wing next to his skin. From there, she peered at his parents.

"Does Vantz know she's here?" Carlos asked conspiratorially.

Beck exhaled and put his cigarette in Lisbet's mouth. He made up a lie and delivered it like it was the truth. "I'm here because I've been exiled from the God of War's court because I couldn't keep my pants up and I didn't want to. If you get in Vantz's face and tell him that his wife is here

and tell him that he should find a way to skip the destruction of this pleasure palace rather than let it explode with her inside, the information won't change his mind. He'll tell you to put her in an evacuation pod and then put yourself on an evacuation pod because he has every intention of blowing up the whole surface of the planet. His job is to terraform Mars. Surely all that has been explained to you."

"Well, what are you doing here if you're so certain the bombs are going to go off?" his father asked sharply. "Why aren't you in orbit?"

"I left with Lisbet on a solarship that practically had the words 'garbage heap' written on the side in a hurry because Vantz found out about us on the same night the angry mob descended on his castle. I took Lisbet, ran, couldn't stay in orbit, and intentionally crashed near a rocket I thought I could repair. When I realized I couldn't fix it, I had one of my old friends send me a vehicle to help me get back to Noachis. All he could give me was that land rover, which you crippled to bring me here." Beck adjusted the truth to match his needs so effortlessly that what he said came off as the cross-my-heart truth. "Did you do that because you thought Vantz would care if I were alive or dead? I promise you, after what I have done to betray him in stealing his wife, I'm not a bargaining chip."

"Was that man even born on Mars?" Hessia exclaimed with an exaggerated head swagger. "Doesn't he know everyone has sex with everyone? It's the Martian way. How could he get angry at you over such a small thing?"

Beck rolled his eyes. "A man who was hired to terraform Mars has no love for Martian customs. He wanted his wife to stay faithful to him. He wanted me, his subordinate, to realize that. He warned me and others many times that he would not tolerate anyone fooling around with Lisbet behind his back."

"Why was he so nervous?" Carlos asked languidly. "She's a bought woman? She's wearing a bracelet now. How could you have an affair with her if she was being properly shocked?"

"He disabled her bracelet. He doesn't believe in shocking his wife. He expected her to be faithful without the electric fence," Beck explained.

Hessia huffed a laugh. "Come on, darling," she said to her husband. "It's not surprising that Beck can make any woman do anything. Even if he is fifteen years younger than her—"

Lisbet made an involuntary sound. She was not fifteen years older than Beck. Seven. She was seven years older than Beck. Six if you took off the year she was in cryostasis where she didn't age.

Hessia waited a moment for Lisbet to clarify, but Lisbet said nothing.

Hessia continued, "Every single slave girl I spoke to last night begged me to send her to pleasure Beckett."

The way the words came off her tongue made Lisbet choke. The cigarette fell out of her mouth.

Beck retrieved it with a smooth swoop and put it back into Lisbet's mouth. Turning to Hessia, he said, "You know why they want to come to me, don't you?"

"Of course," she replied, a naughty little smile on her face.

Beck narrowed his eyes. He was determined to set the story straight. "They want to come here because they know that I will never administer an electric shock to them and because they're hoping that after all the stories they've heard about me working for Vantz, I have the

power to put them into orbit. That way they won't be here when this place becomes a caved-in crypt."

"What?" Carlos asked in utter disbelief. His jaw hung open.

"You heard me. The girls know they'll die if they stay here. They don't believe that you can protect them from the bombs. They know how greedily you mine. You're likely to set off a bomb Vantz left unattended if you don't stop mining."

Carlos and Hessia exchanged worried glances.

"Yes, but you were so popular," Hessia said in a falsely positive voice. "Before Vantz. Before any of this happened, you were so popular."

"I agree. Again, it's because I didn't shock them. If they're with me, they can count on one night when their teeth won't rattle. Do you know what they used to say to me when we were alone?"

Carlos glared at him.

Beck wouldn't stop. "They said they wished they were dead, but they didn't want to die and you know why, don't you?" Beck accused angrily. "You know why it's not better for them to be dead. They want this place to cave in and everyone inside to die at once. They want you to die with them and leave a spectacular mass grave that no one will ever find under ten thousand tons of rock. How many suicides do you have? Have you ever even had one when all of your slaves wish they were dead?"

"That's enough," Hessia said between tight lips. "You're upsetting your father."

Beck ignored her and went on. "Lisbet didn't see a tenth of what you guys do to your slaves at the party last night. And no one can ever talk about it. No one ever talks about it because if anyone puts it all together, it will happen again and again and again. Someone with power will want to simulate that hateful twisted little part inside them that likes it when their dark side is tantalized. Depravity has no limits. There isn't any end, is there?" Beck shut up, took the cigarette out of Lisbet's mouth, and puffed on it himself. Between set teeth, he continued, "I may have put my dick somewhere I shouldn't have and it may have ruined the other life I could have had with the terraforming team in orbit, but I'm perfectly happy to let Vantz kill us all if that's what you've decided, Father."

"If I go into space," Carlos said, not sounding defeated. "It would be better for me if I was dead."

"You're worried about them catching you? Putting you in jail? Funny. I'm not worried about that at all. I'm worried about you killing everyone you've brought down here. I told Vantz you were an old miner and you loved it underground. After running the math after we had our first explosion, I have to tell you, you're not going to survive in your caverns here when the bombs go off. You were too greedy… And you've been even more greedy since my last visit. Your skeletal cavern walls will not hold up against the bomb that Vantz planted closest to you. Your life is over either way. It's just a matter of whether or not you want to kill everyone with you."

Carlos was getting angry. "You sound like you haven't grown up at all. There you are shouting at me just like you did when you were eleven. After all we gave you, you haven't changed at all," his father said sourly, like that was the worst thing he could think of to say to his son who he utterly adored.

"I'm finished," Beck said with a wild grin. "I'm not going to say another word to you about it. I've said my piece and I know you heard me. What does it matter anyway if all of us roast in

hell? I've brought heaven with me." He kissed the back of Lisbet's hand, dropped his cigarette, and rolled into her chest.

Carlos stood up.

Lisbet had been knocked on her side, so her view of Beck's father was askew. Beck was wrapping her legs around him and ignoring the fact that his parents were there.

The old miner snapped his fingers and Beck turned to his father to give him the attention the old man commanded. "I'm not sure I believe you. I'll talk to Vantz and then I'll be back. I'm sure there's some arrangement I can make with him."

Beck smiled. "Go ahead and try."

"Come on, Hessia. We're leaving." He snapped his fingers at her and she toddled after him like a trained animal.

Once Beck was certain they were gone, he flicked the bedsheets off him and took a deep breath. "That was nowhere near as terrible as I feared."

"Your father really loves you," Lisbet said in awe. "I thought he was going to put a collar around my neck and offer to give me back to Vantz."

Beck blinked at her. "My father would never take away one of my toys."

"That's what I am?"

"We're all toys here," he said crossly before he stood up completely naked and disappeared into the hallway. "I'm starving!"

Chapter Twenty Eight

“How are you feeling about last night this morning?” Beck asked as he tossed things around in the kitchen. He was wearing a pair of track pants he’d thrown on as he passed through the closet. He’d left his shirt off and was strutting as he worked to get them a breakfast Hessia hadn’t brought them.

Lisbet smiled and walked her fingers up his bare arm. “Good.” She was wearing the bathrobe from the night before.

“Good,” he said with a dopey smile on his face. “I’d bet my life that my parents locked the doors on us when they left. We won’t be able to get out so easily, so you’re stuck with me till death do us part.”

Lisbet groaned, still a little too loose from the cigarette she’d been smoking. “Are we gonna die? Are we going to escape? The tension is killing me.”

“We would be stupid if we didn’t try to escape. I can’t hear my father’s conversation with Vantz, but I don’t really need to. I can run the simulation in my head and the results are not pretty. My father will think that Vantz is bluffing to the bitter end.”

“Why?”

“Because I don’t think my father would ever fold while he was playing poker. I think he’d always just hang on until the end and wait to see everyone’s cards. Even if he lost, he’d win the next time, but that kind of strategy won’t work this time. One strategy is a terrible way to play.”

“So, we’re not going to count on Carlos to give in and put us into orbit?”

“We’d die if we did.” Beck paused and looked around the ceiling thoughtfully. “There are a few escape routes that I built into this place when I was a willful teenager. The problem isn’t getting out of the palace. The problem is the suits we wear when we leave. The suits that you and I wore when we came in are designed to be worn in conjunction with a land rover, or a helocarrier, or a solarship. No one would ever advise someone to go out walking on the surface of Mars with those suits on for an extended period of time.”

“What can we do?”

“I have one,” Beck said as he popped open a bottle of preserved apple juice. “I have one heavy-duty suit that I stored under the floor in the garage. It should be easy to open the flap and get it out since the garage is empty. It’s so heavy that it mostly does the walking for you because if you were walking without any help, you’d never get anywhere because you’d only go the measly five kilometers an hour everyone walks. We need to use it to get us to my father’s garage so we can steal a better vehicle.”

“What could we steal from him? A solarship?” Lisbet wondered wearily under her breath.

Beck smiled and took a drink before offering her some. “We wiped out all but two of my father’s solarships in the first space battle. I don’t know if either of them is skyworthy, but one of them could carry dozens of slaves off-world. I’d hate to deprive him of the opportunity if he had a change of heart. I’d rather get a helocarrier. To be specific, I want the one that fired at us.”

“We’re not going to try to convince your father to evacuate anymore?” Lisbet asked, drawing her eyebrows together.

“We already did,” Beck said with a scornful laugh. “We already said everything we needed to say to him.”

“Are you sure there isn’t something more we can do before we run away?” Lisbet asked, hating to leave Tiffania and the slaves she’d seen at the party without deliverance if the Voynich crews weren’t going to empty the palace.

“Let me think.” Beck walked around and noisily shot off another idea. “I could try to get in touch with Shattern again. That guy is so resourceful, he might be able to act as an intermediary. But he wasn’t at the party last night. He may have evacuated already.” Beck stood next to Lisbet and let his hand slide under the robe she had wrapped around her.

“I wish there was ice cream,” Lisbet whined.

“There probably is,” Beck said, as he turned around to get into the cold pantry. A moment later, he was back. “It isn’t ice cream. It’s sherbet. Will that do?”

“Sure,” she said before he produced a spoon and let her eat straight from the container. It was blackberry flavored and so sweet, it made her stick her tongue out.

“It can’t be that bad,” he said, pulling her to him and tasting what she had in her mouth with a sloppy convenient kiss. He pulled away. “Okay, I would never tell you that you tasted bad, but this stuff should have been rotated. That’s my fault.”

Lisbet laughed. “Is there anything we can eat?”

He chuckled. “There are oatmeal bars. There are always oatmeal bars.” He gave her one.

Biting into it was a jolt back to reality. They tasted normal and had a shelf-life of fifty years. “That’s good,” she praised as she took another bite. “You know, I feel a little uncomfortable waiting here alone while you go to steal a transport. If I’m left unprotected, I…”

“Might have a similar fate to the other little slaves kept down here?” Beck supplied for her.

“Yes. What about cryochambers? Do you have one down here?” Lisbet asked, thinking the plan over. “If you leave me here alone while you’re out, I’d be a lot more comfortable if I was unconscious and locked up tight. What if your father came back while you were gone, convinced that I was the perfect tool for bending Vantz to his will, and took me?”

Beck nodded in agreement. “I have one. That’s not a bad idea, but trust me, if my father really wanted to move you, he’d move you inside the cryochamber even if he couldn’t open it, bones and all. But it’s still not a bad idea. If the cave collapses, you’re safer in a cryochamber than out of one. Not that a cryochamber can withstand unlimited pressure put on it, but it provides reasonable protection against falling debris and it can be programmed to send out a signal alerting the authorities of a functional cryochamber for months after a collapse. It’s actually a shame I didn’t have two.”

“You can’t put two people in the same cryochamber?” Lisbet wondered. She never knew that much about them.

“You can, but… you shouldn’t,” he replied vaguely. “They make double-wide cryochambers. I should have ordered one when I was rolling in money. The one that’s here is… not something I ever thought I’d use. You *can* put two people in one, but the resources that are used for keeping a person asleep have to be divided between two people. That makes the box last less than half as long because the cryochamber isn’t running at optimal efficiency.”

“So we couldn’t both get inside and let the world burn?” Lisbet asked, trying to sound like that wasn’t the worst thing she’d ever heard of.

He smiled darkly. “As tempting as that sounds, it goes against my system of belief. I have to keep trying to save us. I can’t give up until the moment when the bombs go off. You know though,” he said, pausing and thinking. “The cryochamber we left at the rocket site was a newer,

fancier one than the one I have here. The one I have here is almost a trinket case compared to the one Sleeping Beauty Inc. sold me with you inside."

"What's the one you have for?" Lisbet asked, completely unaware that she had stepped on a minefield.

"It was purchased to preserve a dead body," he said, his expression returning to the dead-boy expression he usually wore. "But I didn't put the body inside. I buried her in the sands of Mars instead of keeping her like a red jewel in a box. The bubble had already broken."

Lisbet hesitated. "Are you ever going to tell me what really happened?"

He took a new cigarette out of his pocket and flicked it on. "My first slave girl died after I'd had her for a month."

Lisbet's gasp was involuntary. She should have known that was what happened. She just didn't like to think that the story was about Beck.

"She was pregnant when my father bought her," he carefully continued. "She was little more than a child. None of us suspected she was pregnant. She told me she was uncomfortable. She told me she didn't feel well. I took her to the closest thing we had to a doctor in my father's pleasure palace, but he didn't know what was wrong with her. He was a dolt because he wasn't a real doctor. He wasn't even a certified nurse. My father might have many faults but a child her age had never been pregnant in our palace before. Tragically, her baby died and she hemorrhaged during the birth and died too… on my bed. What happened was not my fault, but the people down here show such a grand carelessness toward life that they didn't care about her life. Her dying in my arms changed me forever."

"I'm sorry you had to go through that," Lisbet said softly, again feeling shockingly inexperienced next to him.

"My mother changed the mattress and the sheets…. My real mother—the maid. But I couldn't sleep in that room again. That was what led my father to build this pleasure palace for me. I needed a place away from everyone where I could feel safe from their carelessness. He also gave me a cryochamber to house her dead body."

"But you didn't keep her body? You buried it?"

He nodded, exhaling his smoke and then coughing on it. "What is this? Red licorice? Agh! It's been in the pocket of these pants for four years and a decade," he complained before he put his head under the kitchen tap to rinse out his mouth.

"I guess you don't know who was responsible for her condition?" she asked him.

"I have already been through the washing machine on this subject," he said bitterly as he wiped his mouth on a tea towel. "Who did what when? This is the worst place in the universe to find someone and make them pay for what they did. The only thing to do is to drag all the miners out at once and let the slaves who are still alive tell their stories. Maybe one of them will know what happened to *that* girl."

The way he said 'that' instead of giving her a name told Lisbet that he was done telling her about the crystal bubble girl. That was the end of the story.

"Thank you for telling me. I'm so sorry things went sour. You were supposed to marry her when you grew up?"

He blinked and turned to face her. "Lisbet, please don't think that I bought you as a replacement for her."

"I wasn't. That was a long time ago."

“I can’t tell you what last night meant to me,” he said, growing more reflective. “I didn’t think you would ever ask me to do all that.”

“Whenever anyone does anything particularly naughty in a pleasure palace, the only thing is to do it again,” she said, trying to keep her voice steady. She was still nervous around him.

“Come here,” he said, pulling her toward him.

Her heart jumped up in her chest.

Then there was another sound out from the living room. It was not a ‘yoohoo’, but it was a woman yelling.

Lisbet and Beck left the kitchen to find a bruised Tiffania huddled on the floor in an angry heap.

Chapter Twenty Nine

Lisbet stared at her younger sister, Tiffania, in alarm. “Are you okay?” she asked, crouching to her sister’s level.

“No,” Tiffania said, biting the word. She put her palms on the floor to steady herself. “Do I look okay to you?”

Lisbet saw her bruises, her split lip, rug burns on her shoulders, and her darkened wrist.

“If your escorts have gone, I’ll get a first aid kit,” Beck said, disappearing into a bathroom.

The people who had brought her had clearly dumped her there and taken off without any lead-up or farewell. They’d just unlocked the door, thrown her in, and locked it up again.

Tiffania stared after Beck in awe. “What is going on? Have I been in hell while you’ve been screwing Beckett Beltrose?”

Lisbet had no desire to explain the whole thing to her sister. “I’m gonna go with a yes,” Lisbet said simply.

“I could scream for a week,” Tiffania said haughtily as she flicked her blondish curls out of her face. She got to her feet and corrected what she could about her appearance. “I’m a mess. I didn’t even get to sleep after the party that ran all night. This morning I was shoved in a spacesuit, brought here, and abandoned. Do you know why I’m here?”

“I can guess it’s because Beck’s mining family is trying to talk to Vantz about me and Beck and they thought he’d be more likely to listen to them if you were here too because you’re my sister?”

“I’m glad you know something of what is going on,” Tiffania said stiffly like Lisbet couldn’t possibly understand much.

Beck strode back into the room with an ice pack and the first aid kit in his hands. He’d had the good sense to throw a shirt over his head. “You’re here as a hostage?”

“I plan to blame you both equally if Vantz abandons us,” she stormed angrily, the word ‘us’ seemed to include more people than just the three of them. “Why did you have to cheat on Vantz? He told you both it would piss him off and you did it anyway?”

“So you’ve heard all that?” Lisbet said with her gaze on the ceiling. “News travels fast here.” She clicked her tongue and then asked curiously, “What have you heard?”

“How Beck is the prodigal son. He left home taking all the money he could get with him and then returned home penniless, having spent it all on nothing–gambling, liquor, sex, drugs–only to come home with his tail between his legs begging for his daddy to help him. Everyone is disgusted that his father is willing to welcome him home. Didn’t you know, Lisbet? The party last night, the one where you were sneaking around like a phantom wearing a mask, was a party for him! And he left early!”

Lisbet was annoyed by the accusation that Beck had come crawling home when his father sent a helocarrier to shoot at them to force him to come home, but she was stunned into silence by the notion that the sickening party the night before had been in his honor.

Beck looked at Lisbet. He didn’t say a word, but his expression read, ‘Yes, in his own way, my deranged father loves me.’

“Tiffania,” Lisbet said, her understanding of Beck’s situation deepening. He needed to free the pleasure palaces… Even his father needed to be free. “Do you have any idea how we could make these people take Vantz seriously? They have to evacuate.”

Tiffania snorted. “Who knows? How could anyone know? These people are monsters, Lissy. They’re monsters who live underground and pull people down with them. Do you know what was the first thing Antar did when I arrived?”

Lisbet shook her head in the negative.

“He broke off my Sleeping Beauty Inc. bracelet. The voltage that went through it wasn’t enough for him and he didn’t want the bracelet reporting to the corporation how many times he would shock me because he likes to shock beyond what is legally allowed and at a higher voltage. Antar needed to make a point. He didn’t shock me at first. He didn’t need to. He needed to break my bracelet to show me immediately that Sleeping Beauty Inc. was not available to protect me. They have no power here. He replaced my bracelet with one that looked enough like an official Sleeping Beauty Inc. bracelet not to be noticed and sent me to The Boiler Room to try to catch you. My real purpose is to catch you, so if I have to make a guess…” Tiffania said, glancing at Beck. “I’m here to make it harder for you and Beck to leave since you’re locked in here to stop Vantz from collapsing the mines. They’re such hypocrites down here. They say Beck’s the prodigal son when they’re hoping he’s their savior.”

“How did you put all that together?” Beck asked, opening the first aid kit on the coffee table.

“These people are very confused,” Tiffania said breezily as she turned the kit to face herself. She pulled out the antiseptic and then hesitated tugging on her spacesuit. “Can I use your bathroom? I can treat myself and I don’t need either one of you gawking at me while I’m doing it.”

“Antar did all that to you?” Lisbet grimaced at Tiffania’s bruises.

“Oh chill,” the younger sister recommended. “You should see the girl he normally beats. She’s the one you should pity. That girl needs a vacay. Besides, I’m less afraid of Antar because no matter what happens, he won’t own me for long.”

“But he broke your bracelet. How is Sleeping Beauty Inc. going to retrieve you when your contract is over and your bracelet is gone?” Lisbet wondered.

“Did you miss seeing Mars when you were in The Boiler Room? Antar isn’t going to let me leave when my contract is over. The Sleeping Beauty Inc. representative who sold me warned me that he might not. She didn’t pound me over the head with a tumbler and scream, ‘They hide the bodies! They hide living bodies in caves and once they get you, they’ll never let you go!’ She said things like ‘can’t ensure your safety’, ‘sheltered here’, and ‘might not understand how dangerous it is on Mars’. I wasn’t listening to her. I was so angry at our father for allowing you to be sold, allowing Cassica to be sold, and then having the nerve to be furious at me when I wasn’t selling because no one wanted me.” Tiffania narrowed her eyes when she said the last line. “Because of his debts and his deep misunderstanding of the downward flux in the diamond market, Father didn’t understand that diamonds were over. They are scraping diamonds off poop in the asteroid belt and he’s shocked people aren’t paying the kind of top dollar they used to pay. He didn’t understand that his business was over. He took the money he got for you and tried to use it to save his business, not bury it. That was why he needed to sell Cassica. He threw me out because our house was up for sale. And like a fool’s daughter, I marched myself

over to Sleeping Beauty Inc. and sold myself like a perfect little fool. I didn't listen to a word the Sleeping Beauty rep said and I signed the papers!"

"Why did you do that?" Lisbet asked desperately.

"Why? Why? Why? Who knows? Who cares? Maybe I felt left out. Maybe I felt that was the only way justice could be served. Maybe, my pride couldn't stand that no one wanted to buy me as their wife. Who knows? I thought I had something to prove. I didn't. That whole life that you and I had on Earth wasn't real. It was like a dream where if you fall, you don't get hurt. Well, my life is real now and it's likely to be of short duration, but Antar had to be rushed to the medical lounge this morning because I punctured his lung with a steak knife."

Beck's eyes went wide and Lisbet gasped.

The moment hung while the two of them wondered how Tiffania had come from stabbing Antar to being there with them.

"Who brought you here and talked things over with you?" Beck asked.

"Hessia. She doesn't care that I stabbed Antar. She thought the whole thing was hilarious, but she reminded me harshly that if I stabbed you, the golden child of the mines, it wouldn't be hilarious. It would be heinous and I'd suffer in a way Antar was too pure-minded to think of."

Beck nodded and took an unpleasant drag on his licorice-flavored cigarette. He'd clearly forgotten that was what he was holding and he exhaled with a putrid look on his face. "I need a real smoke, not this kiddie garbage," he said as he disappeared into the back of the palace.

Tiffania closed the first aid kit. "I need a bathroom. Can you point me…" Tiffania looked around. "Never mind. I know the way. These places are all built the same."

Beck returned with a haze of pumpkin pie steam surrounding him. "That's much better. Where's your sister?"

"In the bathroom," Lisbet said weakly.

"She called you Lissy. Do you like that nickname?" he said like they had not been discussing the horror that surrounded them on the red planet. His expression read that there was still plenty to be happy about.

"Yeah," Lisbet breathed, taking his cigarette and breathing in. "I like it. You can call me that if you want to."

"We should get the cryochamber and fit it for two people instead of one," he prompted. "Instead of using it for you and me, we should prepare it for you and Tiffania. You know, just in case my father comes back. She's got her own space suit, so we should be able to get her on board a rover or a helocarrier."

"You always think of everything. Will you be able to get out of here if your father has locked us up?"

"Easily. I made escape routes," Beck said pleasantly as he guided Lisbet behind the couch they were sitting on. He clicked on the panel in the wall and the cryochamber slid out on rails. "Thank goodness. For a second, I was afraid it wouldn't be here, that my father was clever enough to remove it. Maybe he forgot it was here. He'll remember if he comes back and can't find anyone after he went through the trouble of locking us up. Let's see if she powers up." He clicked the power button and the blue display came on. "Even if there is enough power to keep you both asleep and safe, there isn't enough room in this chamber for both of you. Why they put a whole dentist chair in here is beyond me."

"I think they're trying to stop it from looking like a casket," Lisbet noted.

“Maybe. I’ll get my tools and remove the chair. With it gone, you can probably both lie down. Why don’t you poke around and see if you can find some padding to put in the bottom? They don’t even make corpses lie on slabs and the cheapest cryochamber Sleeping Beauty Inc. carries still has a little foam in the bottom.”

Lisbet put her hand on the couch and touched the blue velvet. “Am I going to be able to find something better than this upholstery?”

“Probably not, but if you use that, it’s going to look exactly like a casket on the inside.”

Lisbet looked at him with large eyes. “Let’s not kid ourselves. All sorts of things could happen so that we die in this cryochamber.”

“Don’t think that way,” he said with a reassuring hand on hers. “Before I break into my father’s garage, I’ll leave the cave and send a message to Invocation. I’ll find out what the current evacuation numbers are, and who knows, maybe I won’t even need to steal a transport from my father. Maybe Invocation will be able to send someone to get us. Tiffania too,” he added pleasantly.

Lisbet allowed herself to smile. “It’s really no wonder you have been able to talk everyone into letting you do this mad thing… blow up the planet and all that. I think you could talk anyone into anything.”

Lisbet did not say all that she thought. Instead, she got on her tiptoes and kissed Beck. It was a kiss on the cheek that he turned into a kiss on the lips with a clever turn of his head.

When Tiffania came back into the living room, she looked at them like they were aliens, kissing in front of a cryochamber. “You two are making out like idiots while the world around you burns?” She said a few other things under her breath like ‘morons’, ‘even stupider than me’, and ‘friggin can’t stay here.’

“We’re finished!” Lisbet huffed in exasperation as she pulled away from Beck. “Do you like crowbars, sister?”

“Probably,” Tiffania said slowly. “I like hitting things and breaking things apart.”

Lisbet turned to Beck with a hopeful look on her face. “Do you have one?”

“To take apart the sofa? I don’t have a crowbar in my toolbox,” he replied soundly, taking another inhale of his cigarette. “You’re going to have to take knives or spatulas or whatever you can get out of the kitchen to pull this sofa apart. I have a power drill. And that might be all I need to get the chair out.”

Lisbet shrugged. “That sounds like fun too.”

“You two are weird,” Tiffania remarked sharply. “How long has this affair been going on? You two act like you were born to nail each other.”

“How long have we been together?” Lisbet asked, feeling tipsy.

Beck kissed the back of her hand before pulling away. “Not long enough.”

“You’re both idiots,” Tiffania chortled, while she pulled at the white bandage on her cheek. “No one is supposed to experience bliss in a pleasure palace. Not even the masters who claim they’re pleasured by all that happens are actually made happy. It’s all a lie.”

“I’d lie forever if I could lie with her,” he said wistfully before he headed over to the heaps of abandoned VR cages to retrieve his tools.

Lisbet patted her cheeks as if to wake herself up. “Don’t be confused about him. He might say stuff like that, but he’ll let us all die if he has to in order to terraform Mars.”

Tiffania nodded. “They told me he left his family to help Vantz remake the planet so… obviously.”

“Let’s rip apart the sofa. We need the upholstery to line our coffin!”

“We only get one? We have to share?” Tiffania whined. “I want my own coffin.”

“Don’t make me pinch your cheek,” Lisbet threatened, pointing to the bandage on Tiffania’s face. “We only have one coffin!”

Tiffania stuck her tongue out in disgusted resignation.

Chapter Thirty

Lisbet opted for a fork and a knife with a sharp tip to take apart the sofa. It wasn't that difficult. A fork was remarkably like a crowbar when necessity demanded it. All she had to do was loosen the staples that held the upholstery in place. In some places, like the arms of the sofa, there were even visible tacks that were easy to pry loose. Tiffania was more than happy to help with this phase, but once Beck got stuck removing the chair from the cryochamber, she scooted off to the bathroom to tend to her injuries again. That was what she claimed. Lisbet could see her in Beck's massive closet picking out clothes and fixing her makeup.

Beck gave Lisbet a curious look to see if she was irritated.

"It's not annoying," Lisbet said grudgingly. "It's predictable that she bails as soon as things get tough."

"It's fine by me if she wants to play in the closet," Beck said, taking an electric hex wrench in his hand. "I don't want her around. I have wanted to be alone with you from the start. Curse me, I was even glad when you didn't get along with Charcoal so we could be alone together. I'm even faking that I can't do this by myself."

"So, all the girls you know are as lazy as my sister?" Lisbet questioned, still hoping he'd give her more information about the girls who used to visit him in his pleasure palace.

"Tiffania isn't like most of the slave girls my father owns. She's more like the girls who have been raised underground and have slaves of their own. And yes, they're very lazy. Yes, those types of girls do nothing but play in the closet and expect others to serve them."

"Is that why I was gifted that huge closet full of clothes when I first arrived at the castle?" Lisbet asked in alarm. "You thought I'd like to play dress-up?"

Beck chuckled before turning on his wrench and making her wait while he removed a bolt. When he was finished, he had had adequate time to prepare a response. "Clothes are a mandatory part of doing business at The Boiler Room. They're an essential part of every rich girl's life. Yes, not all the clothes in the castle fit you, but they were clothes that covered your body, showing your supremacy when you went out in public. I didn't know if they'd amuse you, and to be honest, from the expressions on your face in the pictures you sent me, you did not look amused. Which is a shame because I rather hoped I'd luck out and you would be amused, seduced, pleased, and have a bunch of excess sexual energy with nowhere to put it. But, you didn't seem to experience any of that stuff. You seemed so self-controlled that it was difficult for me not to deliberately try to break you." He stopped and looked at her, giving her a look meant to provoke her. "I'm still not sure what turns you on."

"Do you want a list?" she joked.

He shook his head in the negative and looked inside the cryochamber instead of at her. "Nah. I want to discover those things myself, but perhaps you could tell me one thing that went well last night."

Lisbet felt her stomach flip. "It all went well last night," she admitted bashfully. "It went so well, I want to slap you."

"Huh? Why?"

"I'm sure you know, or at least, you've been told… that a lady's first experience can be *trying*," Lisbet said, and truthfully, she never sounded more like a stiff and proper lady than she

did at that moment. “For you to know how to handle that so perfectly worries me. How much experience have you had breaking in virgins?”

Beck glanced at her. “Not that much. I just had a lot of time to sort out how I wanted to make love to you, but I didn’t expect a flawless victory.”

“I thought it was pretty flawless,” Lisbet said with a little color on her cheeks.

“I’ll do it differently next time,” he said gently before he stood up and lifted the back half of the chair out of the cryochamber.

“It would be nice if there was a next time,” Lisbet said with a stressed puff of her cheeks. “I keep jumping at every sound, but it’s just Tiffania messing around in the closet.”

Beck got inside the empty half of the cryochamber and unwound the remaining bolts. “Well, that idea does give a boy a little kick to get going. How are you going to fit that upholstery in here?”

“I don’t think it is long enough to cover our feet. The sofa isn’t as long as the cryochamber,” Lisbet noticed.

“Go get some blankets from the bedroom. I’d prefer it if we didn’t take the time to bastardize another couch. When you go through there, tell Tiffania that she needs to put on some decent clothing for the sleep. Peek-a-boo dresses are the last thing you need at the end of the world. You can both wear my sweatpants and hoodies if there’s nothing else. I doubt there is. There’s nothing but feather boas and bikinis in there.”

Lisbet went and got the blankets for their feet. Beck had already removed the rest of the chair and he was pounding the tacks left over from the sofa arms to hold the upholstery in place. Looking down, Lisbet was shocked at how much it looked like a coffin. She dropped the blankets she’d brought from the bedroom beside the cryochamber.

“We’re done, right? Once you’re finished, you’ll want to put Tiffania and I to sleep immediately?”

He agreed.

“What if we don’t get any more time together?” she suddenly blurted. “What if things don’t work out and you die or I die and there’s no more of *us*?” she suddenly asked with tears forming in the corners of her eyes.

Beck stood up and put his arms around her to comfort her. “The faster I get out of here, the better our chances will be. We need to move, but there is one thing you can count on in all of this: I want to save you. I love you and I am going to try everything I can to save *us*.”

“Except get Vantz to call off the bombs?”

“I don’t have the authority to do that. I made the system operate that way in case I got weak, and I was right to do that because I’m suddenly feeling quite weak. We need to hurry. Run. Go get changed.” He flicked on his cigarette and offered her the first drag.

She sucked on it. “The only reason I’m doing this is because you do it. I want to do what you do.”

He breathed and straightened something around the waistband of his pants. “Then do what I do and go get you and your sister changed. I’m going to get changed too. There’s a lining I need to put on before I put on the heavy exosuit. Hurry.”

Lisbet regretfully joined her sister in the closet. “Hey! We need to wear sweatsuits. Why are you wearing sequins?”

“Can’t I wear both?” Tiffania asked with a flick of her tongue. “We’re going to die anyway. What does it matter what I wear?”

“For frick’s sake.” Taking a page out of Beck’s book, she went up behind her sister, grabbed the zipper on her dress, and undid it. “I can’t believe I have to dress you like a baby.”

“Hey!” Tiffania complained.

“Stop being whatever it is you are right now and be the girl who stabbed Antar with a serrated knife.”

Tiffania paled. “That was scary. I… uh… have been trying not to think about it.”

“Playing pretend that you’re a princess again and you’re trying on clothes in a boutique back on Earth? I understand the temptation,” Lisbet said, throwing her sister some of Beck’s old clothes. “Get these on. You will only have to be brave for about five minutes and then you’ll be unconscious.”

“That’s scary in its own way,” Tiffania breathed.

“It is, but Beck is fearless. He’s like no one I’ve ever met before and we have to follow him now.” Lisbet tore off her robe without regard for what her sister might see as she put on the clothes Beck said she needed to wear.

“Something is weird about that,” Tiffania said as she pulled the black sweatshirt over her head. “When Hessia told me that you’d had an affair with Beck, it didn’t seem like it was a real story. You cheated on your husband? How could that have happened? You’re not the type to do anything like that at all, especially with a younger man. Do you remember that pool boy I used to fool around with?”

“Vividly,” Lisbet replied, pulling a pair of Beck’s black socks up to her knees.

“Did you know that I was his second choice?” Tiffania admitted, grabbing a pair of socks from the stack Lisbet had robbed.

“How did you find that out?” Lisbet asked incredulously.

“He had written something on the side of his nightstand. He’d actually carved it out of the wood with a pocket knife. It was his name and your name. You know, it was done in the same way some boys carve names into trees. He wanted to be with you. I saw it when I was lying on his bed. I was fooling around with him and his light was on. I looked up and saw it. I pushed him off me and made him tell me what that meant. He said that he had liked you and tried to get you to like him, but it hadn’t worked. You had refused him so hard he felt like a little boy with a slingshot. I wasn’t there at the time, so it was carved there before he met me. Once I heard that nothing had happened with you, that was enough for me and I just kept fooling around with him, but the idea that you pledged your life to a man and then slept with one of his tech boys… That story still doesn’t make sense. Even though I’m seeing it with my own eyes, it still doesn’t make sense.”

Lisbet did not want her sister to get wind of the truth. “Does it make sense now that you’ve met Beck?”

Tiffania didn’t answer.

Lisbet pressed harder. “Do you think he’s the kind of man I would throw everything away for?”

“Yeah… I guess. I mean, you have,” Tiffania said as she finished changing. “He’s very sexy, but so was that pool boy.”

“What was his name?” Lisbet said, trying to pull Tiffania’s focus away from her and Beck.

Tiffania chuckled awkwardly. “I don’t remember.”

“Come on, forgetful one. Let’s get to sleep. You said you didn’t sleep last night.” Lisbet pulled her sister back into the living room.

Tiffania looked down at the cryochamber that was now prepared to take two people instead of one. “That looks really creepy. It’s like we’re at our own wake,” she complained.

“Yes, it does,” Beck agreed as he came out in his very tightly fitting metallic bodysuit.

Lisbet and Tiffania looked him up and down before turning to look at each other. Then they averted their eyes.

Beck didn’t notice their glances and gawks. “With the two of you inside, it will run for eight and a half months. That will be more than enough for whatever happens.”

“That seems like a short time span,” Lisbet said, looking at it. “Shouldn’t it run for years?”

“It’s what I said. It will run for less than half the time with two people in it. It was bought twelve years ago, but it only had power cells to last three years. Then it would need to have its battery and supply tanks changed. I didn’t use it, but someone did because the power was lower than it should have been. I ran the math. With both of you inside, it should last a guaranteed eight months and two weeks. Maybe more if we’re lucky. Get in.”

Tiffania got in and put her back against one side of the cryochamber.

Lisbet looked at Beck with an ache in her heart because she couldn’t stand to be separated from him.

He held her gaze. “Do you want me to tell you a fairytale to ease you into dreamland?”

“No,” she got on her tiptoes and kissed him. “I’ve been meaning to tell you, you tell terrible fairy tales.”

He scooped her up. She yelped, but he lowered her in beside Tiffania. When his hands let her go and came away from her, Lisbet wasn’t sure she could go through with their plan. What if he needed her to stay awake?

Beck stood up straight and looked down at them. “I’ll kiss you when you wake up,” he promised before he closed the lid on them. He breathed smoke, like a dragon, like a man about to snap, like everything she wished she knew how to wish for.

Lisbet could see him through the glass lid until he pushed the cryochamber back into its hiding place in the wall and closed the panel that covered them.

“Tell me what he’s going to do in that flashy suit,” Tiffania said as the gas filled the chamber.

“He’s going to go to the surface and call for help. Then he’s going to steal a transport for us to get back to Noachis.”

“That sounds useful. I don’t know if my bracelet will let me go as far as Noachis,” Tiffania said, taking the steadying breaths that they had been instructed to take at Sleeping Beauty Inc. headquarters on Earth when entering cryostasis.

“Then we’ll break it off,” Lisbet said savagely in the dark.

Tiffania took her hand. “Now we’re sisters.”

Lisbet agreed. Whatever relationship they’d had before, whatever bonds they’d had living in the same house with the same parents, they’d never been close. But now, surprisingly, they were.

“Am I Rose Red while you are Rose White?” Lisbet asked.

“Nah, we’re both Beauty in Beauty and the Beast. Except I wasn’t beautiful enough to turn my beast into a real man. That’s why I had to kill mine.”

“Is he really dead?”

“I hope so,” she breathed, the gas in the chamber getting thicker. “You must have had a beast too if you’re sleeping with a stable boy who’s actually the prince of the underground troll kingdom. What a wild story you’ve had!”

“Vantz wasn’t a beast,” Lisbet said softly. “That was just a rumor they spread about him.”

But it was too late. Tiffania was already asleep and in the next breath, so was Lisbet.

Chapter Thirty One

When Lisbet woke from cryostasis, she was not woken with a kiss from Beck. The lid was up on her cryochamber and Carlos and Hessia were looking down at her. Lisbet shifted her gaze from his black eyes to her green eyes.

“Where’s Beck?” Carlos asked hotly, like his temper was at its limit.

“I don’t know,” Lisbet said, glancing down at Tiffania. She was still asleep. It seemed they had only intended to wake her up, but Tiffania was waking up anyway because they were two people in one cryochamber. “What day is it? How much time has passed?”

Hessia was unimpressed as she looked at the control panel. “It seems that you have been asleep for two days. Tell me, Lisbet. Does neither Vantz nor Beck care about you? Why did Beck leave you like this?”

“Uh… I…” Lisbet fumbled. “You’re wondering why he put us to sleep and left?”

“Yes, you stupid girl,” Hessia fumed. “Yes. Beck protected you so fiercely. He protected you like you were all that mattered and then he up and left you to die.”

Lisbet sucked in her breath.

“To die!” Hessia repeated furiously. “The evacuation crews have reported a ninety-five percent evacuation of the planet. The remaining five percent is this pleasure palace and its branches. Vantz is threatening to blow us up along with the rest of the planet if we don’t give ourselves up. We’ve even told him that you are here. We’ve had your cryochamber since the day you went to sleep. Either he doesn’t believe us or he doesn’t care if you die. Which?”

Lisbet looked at them with huge eyes.

If Carlos and Hessia had taken the cryochamber storing Lisbet and Tiffania, then Beck may not have been able to get it back. The first phase in their plan had been for him to get to the surface in his exosuit to get a message to Invocation. Lisbet guessed that whatever happened after that, he had been unable to rescue Lisbet and Tiffania from Carlos’ pleasure palace.

“Are you missing a helocarrier or a land rover?” she asked Carlos.

He shook his head in the negative. “Of course, we checked to see if he’d stolen a transport. He hasn’t.”

Lisbet frowned. In that case, whatever he’d learned from Invocation had taken him away from the area… Or he’d had an accident. Lisbet didn’t like to think that was possible. After all, he was a pro at working on Mars in a space suit. He’d rigged that rocket to explode when he was all alone in the desert, keeping himself safe for weeks. He was fine. He just couldn’t come back for Lisbet.

“I don’t know where he is,” she said, meeting their eyes in an unwavering stare.

It didn’t matter what info she leaked. More than anything, she needed to convince them to leave. That was the job Beck had given her. Suddenly she spoke as confidently as if she were back at The Boiler Room giving a report.

“Of course, Vantz will let me die,” she said, finally answering their question. “He has put forth every effort to evacuate Mars, but your palace is too large to storm and the crews who worked on the other palaces will not accept hazard pay for taking yours. There’s no point in yanking you out of here if you want to stay. The raiders don’t want to die. The project has already cost too much in human life.”

Carlos pushed Hessia aside and got in Lisbet's face. "Are you saying we have been preparing for invaders who aren't coming?"

"I didn't know you were preparing for invaders, but I have privileged information, and it is extremely unlikely that Vantz will try to take your palace by force," Lisbet said steadily.

"Why not?"

"He said you have hidden your wealth, that you are the wealthiest of all the miners, that your palaces were too extensive, and fighting you with so many slaves underground was a waste of time." She hoped she hit the right mix of compliments and death threats.

Carlos did seem oddly satisfied by that. He crossed his meaty arms and looked down his nose at Lisbet. "Can you tell me what happens to the riches Vantz has pulled out of the other palaces? Was he planning to share them with you?"

"For starters, Vantz is broke. His desire to terraform Mars has nothing to do with money. He expects to be prosecuted along with the slave owners."

"Why would he expect that? The only slave he owns is you. Forget it," Carlos shouted, moving to a more important question. "Where is the money from the raided pleasure palaces going?"

Lisbet steeled herself and refused to be bullied. "For starters, he's using it to pay the mercenaries who have been emptying the pleasure palaces. Secondly, there's too much money for them to take all of it under their contracts, so it is being set aside as pensions for the slaves that are evacuated, so they can have some money to start new lives… Presumably on Io where slavery is illegal."

Carlos glared at her. "And why are you defending him so hotly when you cheated on him?"

Lisbet heaved a giant breath before launching in. "I believe in his dream to terraform Mars. I believe in his dream completely. I'll do anything for him."

"Then why have an affair with my son?"

"Why wouldn't I have an affair with your son?" Lisbet shot back. "He's fantastic and this is MARS!"

Carlos stared at her and she stared right back.

"Your heart isn't cut up in enough pieces," he said like he hoped to see her heartbreak in front of his very eyes.

At that moment, a lackey appeared behind Carlos. Cupping his hand, he whispered some news into Carlos' ear. The hand the slave lifted was dark with electric burns. It was then that Lisbet realized they were in the room with the Roman columns where they'd had the party the night before.

Lisbet turned to check on Tiffania. It looked like her eyes were wired open and her mouth was wired shut.

In the next moment, Lisbet was grabbed by her upper arm and lifted out of the cryochamber. She was frogmarched across the room to a screen. On it, Vantz, with his stag head and gentleman swagger, sat in the armchair she had seen him occupy in the VR world.

Carlos held her up like a trophy. "See? I told you we have your wife, but you didn't seem to believe me."

"No. I believed you," Vantz drolled in his English accent. He was smoking from the position of his hand and its to and fro movement. He tapped his foot impatiently. "I'm sorry. Did you expect that information to have an effect on me?"

“It doesn’t?” Carlos said, lowering Lisbet so that her heels touched the floor.

“I’ve tried to explain to you,” Vantz said in measured tones. “There are bombs set all around your palace and all around the planet. The magnetic field is working and once the bombs go off, many canals and mine shafts will cave in. I will not spare you because you have Lisbet, her sister, or a few other people I’m quite fond of. I would burn myself and all of you at the stake to give life to the red planet.”

Carlos tried to interrupt.

Vantz shot him down. “Listen, the terraformers of Mars have been having this same fight with you for years. You’re holding hostages and this is our last conversation. We’re prepared to kill all your slaves and you to end the conflict. If you would like to save even one person’s life, the time is now. The bombs will go off in…” he conjured the red glowing agenda that hung in the air beside him, “Five hours regardless of what you do. Set a timer. Nothing you say or do will change that timeline.”

Lisbet stared at the screen. She couldn’t decide if Carlos was talking to the AI or if he was talking to Beck. His voice and manner were very much Beck’s, but, to her knowledge, she’d never spoken to the AI.

“What about Lisbet?” Carlos tried one more time. “Do you not care about her?”

“I love every inch of her,” Vantz said shortly like his temper was a thousand percent inflamed. “She is the dearest person I have ever known. I love her thoroughly. If she dies, I will die with her. I could never even think of living my life without her… But Mars will live.” The deer's eyes weren’t really looking at anything, but the voice that came across the speaker vibrated with emotion.

It was Beck.

It had to be Beck.

Lisbet’s breath came in sharp and she felt a tear stumble down her cheek.

“If you save her,” Vantz said suddenly, addressing Carlos. “If you save her, along with your other slaves, I’ll do my best for you in the courts after the fact. You may as well know that none of the other slave owners came forward with their slaves to willingly go into orbit. The other miners were all wrenched from their palaces like snails from their shells. But, if you put your people on pods and send them into outer space, I’ll do all I can to see that you are spared from whatever hell you fear, Mr. Beltrose. There are enough cryochambers in orbit for every single person in your palaces. Please consider sending them into space.”

Then the connection cut.

It did not seem like it was done because Vantz had cut the line and it did not seem like it was done because Carlos cut the line.

They stood there: Carlos, Hessia, Lisbet, the slave with the black hand, and other slaves. They stood there on the stained carpet that had seen so many parties. It was a purple carpet with a pattern like confetti. It was discolored, even though it was a color and texture to hide stains. Even so, it was covered in alcohol spills, blood slops, pool water, vomit, and more. Someone had tried to clean it, but it had never come clean. Now they stood on a carpet like that in a movie theater when all the lights had come on and it was time to go home.

Except this was their home.

Carlos looked at Hessia. He parted his lips as if to say something to her. She looked back at him with fear all over her, trembling like worms were writhing under her skin. Her eyes were wide like windows that had been thrown open to show the end of all things.

Carlos turned his face away from her. He couldn't take advice from her. She had fallen into the abyss of panic and a moment later, she started hissing and blubbering into the arms of a slave.

Carlos was thinking. He was looking at the ceiling. Lisbet looked up to see what he saw. The ceiling was just like the floor. Champaign had been sprayed on that ceiling too many times. The color was mottled like parts of it had rotted. It was just so hard to see when the party lights were low and the strobe light flashed.

But in the light of an ordinary day, it all looked like it was about to crumble.

Then the ground shook.

A bomb had gone off.

Dust fell from the ceiling and changed Lisbet's hair from black to gray.

Lisbet turned to Carlos. He was still holding onto her upper arm. His eyes were unfocused as he thought.

Lisbet didn't dare to breathe. She didn't dare to move.

Finally, Carlos turned to her and said with a wicked rasp to his voice. "I'm ashamed I didn't realize it before, but my son is going to kill us all."

"What?" Hessia blurted like her whole brain had gone blank.

"It's the only thing that makes sense," Carlos said sharply. "Vantz isn't cross with Lisbet for having an affair with Beck, because Vantz isn't a person. He's just someone Beck made up to hide the fact that he was betraying us." Then he started shouting to the room at large, "You all heard MY SON. He means what he says! And we all have to go now. Evacuate. Get to the pods!"

The room shifted. The bombs were coming sooner than Beck said they would come.

Carlos fairly lifted Lisbet off her feet as she was hauled back to the cryochamber.

"Get off your ass and come on!" Carlos shouted at Tiffania, who jolted to life and chased after them.

He pushed them down hallway after hallway.

They finally ended up in a space where the pods had been stashed.

He shoved Lisbet and Tiffania into a pod meant for five people with harnesses set against the wall. He locked the door while they buckled themselves in and he set it to launch before anyone else had even made it to the pod room. Lisbet buckled herself and looked through the glass at the man on the other side.

The disgust on his face was so evident, it was putrid. He hated her. He hated what had happened. Hatred filled him for everything he was being forced to do. He was pressing the button to get rid of her without filling her pod to capacity so that he didn't have to look at her for another second.

From the air, Lisbet looked down at the surface and saw other pods launch from their hiding places under the sand.

She also saw dunes collapse. She saw skyscrapers in Noachis fall. She saw explosions and things catch on fire because they finally could catch on fire. The thin atmosphere on Mars was

finally feeding flames. Gasses were being released through the bombs. There was air to burn. The red planet was becoming a torch for the universe to hold up high.

The god of war had won his battle.

Chapter Thirty Two

In orbit, Lisbet and Tiffania floated like debris. From the windows of their escape pod, they could see everything: Mars imploding, the topography changing forever, the other pods filled with the people from Carlos' pleasure palaces, the discarded tech that floated in orbit, and the ships that had been torn apart on the occasion of Lisbet's arrival on the red planet.

"What's that?" Tiffania asked, pointing at something through a window over Lisbet's shoulder.

Lisbet craned her head. It was familiar. It was the ship that had come to pick up Invocation when they had been in the Buckshot. Looking at it from a different angle gave Lisbet a different perspective on the ship. It was used for transporting large numbers of helocarriers. It even had a company logo on it, *Excalibur Helocarriers.*

The ship lingered over them. It had dozens of cargo holds so that it could deliver helocarriers without disturbing the airlock within. One of the bays opened and magnets caught their pod. Soon it was lifted into the ship and the doors shut against it.

Once the air pressure in the cargo bay had stabilized, Lisbet unbuckled her harness and leaped out of the pod. In the next minute, she was in a hallway aboard the ship. She saw a man heading toward the flight deck.

"Invocation!" she called.

He didn't turn at first, but she called his name again.

That time he turned around to see Lisbet chasing toward him. "Invocation," she panted when she caught up to him. "Where's Beck?"

"Slow down," he said to her calmly. "For starters, I'm not Invocation."

She scanned her mind and found the answer. "Are you Invocation's brother? Are you Theology?"

He looked at her funny. "Why does everyone from here to halfway to Hades know that name? I haven't gone by that name in forty years. I go by Gage now."

"Lovely! Thank you for picking us up! Do you know where Beckett Beltrose is?" she asked in a rush.

A pink-haired woman joined them. "We're here to help you. You're going to need to calm down. I've never heard that name before, have you?"

"He works with Invocation?" Gage questioned sensibly.

"He works for Vantz," she said, still breathless.

"We all work for Vantz," Gage said with a smile. "Come with me. I'm just heading to the flight deck. Mars is still exploding under us if you want to see. It's a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity."

"But Beck…" she sputtered.

"I'm Iona and you're Lisbet," the pink-haired woman said gently, as she guided Lisbet toward the flight deck.

"How do you know me?"

"Everyone knows you. You were on every media outlet for months. You're the Beauty of Ares."

"That's what they call me?" Lisbet said in a daze.

Iona nodded. "That's what they call you."

On the flight deck, Lisbet was still dizzy from everything that happened. She located a convenient trash compactor, lifted the lid, and threw up into it.

While she wiped her mouth, Gage pressed buttons and got Vantz up on the screen.

Lisbet stared at it. The interface was the same. It was the same deer head, the same gentleman's coat and gloves. Everything was the same about the image, but Vantz was not smoking.

"Any idea where a guy named Beckett Beltrose is?" Gage asked pleasantly with his face that looked so exactly like Invocation's that it was truly spooky. Even his voice sounded the same.

"Beckett Beltrose is unaccounted for," the tinny British accent explained.

"I have your wife here," Gage continued.

"Excellent," Vantz said automatically.

Did people really believe that rendering was a real person? Lisbet had never seen it operated by the AI before. He was wooden, like a puppet, like a doll, like the AI construct everyone thought he was. No wonder he needed a real person to represent him in a place like The Boiler Room.

"Please give her priority, have Iona give her a quarter physical, and get her into cryostasis as soon as possible," Vantz instructed.

"No!" Lisbet shouted. "I need to find Beck."

Gage gave her a funny look. "Is he your brother?"

Lisbet hesitated. "No… he's…" She struggled with what to say, how to explain the situation, without giving too much away. "He's my handler."

"We have to get everyone into cryostasis," Iona explained, handing Lisbet a cloth to wipe her mouth after she threw up. "We don't have the supplies to keep even a single person awake."

"I don't want Lisbet to be placed with the general population," Vantz interrupted. "I want her in one of the pilot's chambers in the hull of your ship. I don't want her getting mixed up with the other evacuees. You'll be paid triple for her timely return, Gage."

All that made him seem more human, but not as human as he would have sounded if he had been Beck.

Gage swiveled in his chair. "You heard him. Ready to go?"

"What about my sister? She was on the pod with me," Lisbet stalled.

"We'll take care of her and everyone else we pick up," Iona said soothingly as she led Lisbet toward the door.

"Can I at least say goodbye to my sister before I go into cryostasis?" she asked Iona as the doors to the flight deck closed behind them.

"Of course."

They made their way back to the pods and Lisbet helped Tiffania unbuckle her harness. She'd been stuck in the pod because she couldn't get it undone. She was quite upset when they finally made it back to her. She was blubbering and crying.

Lisbet was distraught herself and not great at comforting Tiffania.

Iona stepped in, undid the straps, and told her that everything would be fine. They were going to give her a physical and a snack. Then she would take her to a chamber provided by Sleeping Beauty Inc. and she would be put to sleep. Tiffania would be woken up when Mars' atmosphere was complete in a few months. They needed to spend some time tweaking it, but when they

were finished, they would wake her up and she would be free. Antar would not own her anymore. Iona was as soothing as a nurse in any army hospital, capable and reassuring.

Tiffania started crying afresh.

Lisbet was not in better shape than her sister, but she did not have tears streaming down her face, so Iona took it for granted that Lisbet was in better shape.

“Help me with her. We need to get her to the medical suite,” Iona instructed.

Lisbet helped and cared for her sister, even going so far as selecting the story that was read over the speaker to Tiffania. She chose the story of *The Princess and Pea* because it had nothing to do with their last misadventure. No *Beauty and the Beast* for her.

When they were all finished and Tiffania was safely in cryostasis, Iona took Lisbet back to the medical suite.

“We’ve got to get a move on. More slaves are starting to come in and I have to treat them individually.”

“Would you rather I didn’t go to sleep and instead stayed up to help you with the physicals?” Lisbet offered.

Iona chuckled. “I’d love to do that, but Gage and Invocation would both have my head. You’re not certified and Vantz has asked for you to be put into cryostasis immediately. I took care of Tiffania first because you asked to have her done first. I hope that will put your mind at rest. Are you feeling better having seen her safely gathered in?”

“I suppose,” Lisbet said, worrying about Beck and struggling to think about her sister.

Iona was quick as a cat, meaning that the physical she gave Lisbet was much quicker than the one Invocation had given her aboard the Buckshot. She sped the quarter physical along and then hurried Lisbet to the pilot’s wing of the ship.

“This is my cryochamber,” Iona said, showing her a double-wide cryochamber.

“You share it with Gage?”

Iona nodded. “Vantz requested that we give you one of the chambers reserved for our family. We don’t have any children yet, so they’re empty. Get in. You’ll be safe.” Iona was done reassuring her and held the lid open with an air of kindness that had been missing when Lisbet had been put to sleep by Sleeping Beauty Inc.

Lisbet did as she was told and Iona stood like a guardian angel for a moment before she said, “Would you like to hear a fairy tale?”

“Gah. No,” Lisbet fairly growled. “I’ve had enough fairy tales. I’m ready for my happily-ever-after.”

“Aren’t we all?” Iona said with a pleasant smile before she respectfully closed the lid on Lisbet and flooded the chamber with gas.

Chapter Thirty Three

When Lisbet opened her eyes, she was woken by a bright light. No kiss for her. She breathed deliberately a few times and let the air fill her lungs like balloons. She did not want to wake up if Beck wasn't waking her with a kiss. She closed her eyes and tried to go back to sleep, but it was impossible. Her cryochamber lid was open a crack and uncomfortably cold air was seeping in.

She opened the lid and the smell that hit her was surprising. It was like red cinnamon, like one of Beck's cigarettes. Was he nearby?

When she sat up, she saw that she was in a helocarrier hangar. The doors were wide open and sunlight was all over her face.

She paused.

The sun was too small.

She had thought for a moment that she was on Earth, but if the sun was that small, if the light was that slanted, she was on Mars. She let her lungs fill with the spiced air a second time.

No one was around. Despite the scent of Beck like his presence hung in the air all around her, she was alone.

Slipping out of her cryochamber, she noticed a few figures moving in the distance on the other side of the hangar. They were far from her and uninterested in her movements. It was good that she wasn't utterly alone.

Slowly, she walked toward the light coming in through the wide doors. She was wearing socks, not boots, and the air was crisp, but the floor under her feet was chilly through her socks. She clutched at Beck's sweatshirt that covered her body.

No matter what happened to Beck or what would happen to her in the future, she had to see what he had made.

Mars.

He'd made Mars livable.

Standing at the wide doors, she looked up at the sky and saw Phobos. The irregular moon hung in the sky like a single crescent jewel hanging alone. That was when she realized that the sun was rising and not setting. She was witnessing the beginning of a new day.

Unable to resist, Lisbet stepped out onto the sand. The sand dunes were large around her, like mountains, protecting her from an unvarnished landscape.

She heard a man yell something. Was someone yelling at her?

Scanning the area, she heard him yell it again.

"Found it!"

She came around the edge of a dune and saw a team of men excavating the rubble. There was a pile of twisted metal wreckage and a crane that had all its right angles next to it.

She approached and looked into the hole. They were winching a cryochamber out of a gaping hole in the sand like they were archaeologists removing a sarcophagus from the Valley of the Kings. Except they hoped the king inside was alive.

How long had she been asleep?

She was about to say something to one of the hard-hatted excavators when she realized something odd about the cryochamber. It was hers.

It wasn't the one Iona had put her to sleep in. It was the one Beck had bought her in. She could tell by the pink and gold line. She had been sold inside an advanced cryochamber because she was a gold edition model. Except the whole thing was battered with burn marks on one side.

"Who's inside?" she shouted.

The men turned to look at her and in the process, the man operating the crane dropped the cryochamber. It was still attached to its chains, but it fell back in the hole.

All the men gazed at her, recognition on their faces. They knew who she was. Everyone knew who she was. At one time, she'd made announcements on media outlets every day.

"That's Lisbet Bloomburg," one said.

"What's she doing out of her cryochamber? Vantz's instructions were that she was to be left in cryostasis until given the order to wake her up," the man operating the crane said as he corrected the controls and tried to stop the cryochamber on his line from swaying.

One of the men in a hard hat and a reflective vest approached her. He was a hard-looking man with a twinkle in his eye. "Hi, Lisbet. It's a real honor to meet you. I'm Tuton and I've been working on the Mars terraforming project alongside you, even though we've never met."

"I'm pleased to meet you too," she said, extending her hand for a handshake.

"You're not supposed to be awake. Did someone open your cryochamber?" the wrecker asked.

"No. It popped open on its own. Who's in that cryochamber?" she demanded, pointing to the one that was slowly being raised from the hole.

He looked at her funny. "We don't know for certain, but we're hoping it's Beckett Beltrose, but the cryochamber doesn't say who is inside when it sends out its distress call."

"So, it's functional enough to send out a distress call?" Lisbet asked, sending out a distress call of her own.

"Yeah. It survived a bad explosion," Tuton explained.

"Beck is inside," Lisbet said with certainty. "The thing that exploded was the rocket he rigged, wasn't it?"

"Yeah. It did so against our schedule–"

"I know," Lisbet said, interrupting him. "I was in Carlos Beltrose's pleasure palace when the first bomb went off. It was odd because Vantz had been speaking to Carlos and he said that they had five hours to evacuate, but then the connection was cut and a minute later, the place started to shake. That means that Vantz wasn't going to let the main bombs go off for five hours, but Beck detonated the rocket early." Lisbet was careful to keep their names separate just in case there was still a reason for Beck to have an alias. "He did it to scare Carlos into action, and it did. He put me on a pod and sent me into orbit."

"Yeah… that's what happened. Beck did set it off early. It was a huge gamble considering his plan was to protect himself by being in a cryochamber that was that close to the blast area."

"It wasn't a gamble," Lisbet refuted.

"No?"

"No. He did his math," she told Tuton with certainty.

"Okay. But, Lisbet, orders are orders and I have to get you back into cryostasis as per Vantz's orders."

“No,” Lisbet said, her voice insistent. “He only wants me in cryostasis because he promised me that Beck would wake me up. That’s all. If Beck is in that chamber, which is absolutely certain, then it’s fine if I wake him up.”

Tuton gave her a funny look. “Listen, I know you Sleeping Beauty Inc. models have that weird ritual where you get woken with a kiss like Snow White or Sleeping Beauty or whoever gets woken with kisses in those kids’ stories, but the fact is we’re not going to open the cryochamber here on the sand. We’re going to take it to the medical bay and have Invocation open it and give Beckett a physical. It’s unlikely he was completely unharmed by the event even if it didn’t kill him.”

At that moment, the crane lowered the seared cryochamber onto the back of a land rover. The sounds of the chains hitting the deck peeled through the air.

Lisbet looked at it.

The wrecking crew was moving around on the back of the land rover. They were removing the chains from the crane and replacing them with towing chains from the back of the rover.

Tuton put his hand around Lisbet’s upper arm. “So why don’t I take you back to the hangar and find out why your cryochamber popped open?”

Lisbet refused. “No. I can’t leave Beck.”

“Listen, Honey,” Tuton said, dragging her attention away from the cryochamer on the back of the rover. “I haven’t touched a woman in some time, but I will haul you over my shoulder, with my hand on your ass, to the hangar if you don’t come nicely.”

Lisbet was stunned that he had just said that to her. She gritted her teeth for a second before she said hotly, “Don’t touch me. Vantz wants me to see Beck as soon as possible. That was why he made his order. That’s why my cryochamber is here and nowhere else. Why don’t you ask him if it’s okay if I go with Beck to the medical bay before you get handsy?”

“If only we had time for that,” Tuton said as he stopped listening to Lisbet and neatly threw her over his shoulder.

Lisbet was stunned by how much his thick shoulder cut into her belly. She tried to lift herself up. “Beck!” she screamed, trying to see his cryochamber clearly even though her entire body was bouncing.

The chains had been placed and the land rover started rolling out. Except the sand wasn’t sturdy and one of the tank tracks fell into a sinkhole. Then another one fell. The whole front end of the rover was in a hole, and sinking fast.

Lisbet shouted to Tuton to let her go. “The land rover is sinking!”

Hearing the shouts from the other crew members, Tuton lowered her to the ground and turned to see what was happening.

The hole was growing and the land rover fell on its side. The chains holding the cryochamber in place were not placed to expect that kind of movement and the chamber slid half out of the chains. Part of it had sunk in the sand and the other part hung dangerously from the rover that was still sinking.

All the men stood clear.

“See? It’s dangerous to be out here. The planet is still settling.” Without another word, he grabbed Lisbet by the arm and hauled her back toward the hangar.

There was a series of alarmed sounds coming from the men back at the excavation site, but Tuton didn’t stop to see what was happening. He just kept marching forward.

Lisbet turned to see behind her.

She wasn't sure what had happened. Everything looked the same, except the workers in safety gear had jumped up on the rover. Why would they do that?

A moment later, she saw why. The cryochamber lid had come open.

"You have to stop!" she shouted at Tuton. "The lid of Beck's cryochamber came open. You can't put me back in the box. I need to go to him!"

"Why? He's not your husband," Tuton retorted clearly.

Lisbet hesitated. How much longer did she need to keep secrets? How many more lies did she need to tell? She breathed the air on Mars and suddenly, she was done.

"I'm not married to Vantz. I'm married to Beckett Beltrose and I need to go to him. Now!"

Tuton stared at her like she was crazy and then something in his face changed. He let go of her arm. "Walk back along the path we walked on and don't get too near the rover. Stay a safe distance. You could fall through the sand and be smothered faster than we would be able to rescue you."

Lisbet nodded and hurried along the trail.

Beck was out of the cryochamber and walking toward her with the excavation crew walking with him.

When he saw Lisbet, he started running toward him with the sunlight outlining his silhouette.

The sight of him was unlike anything Lisbet had ever seen. He ran on the sand like running on sand was the most natural thing in the world while her feet felt like lead. Finally, at this moment of beginnings and ends, he was the most beautiful thing she had ever seen. It was impossible to believe that all that beauty was for her. That his ability to turn his dream into the world they were breathing was so overwhelming, Lisbet felt like falling to her knees.

She breathed and it was the most precious breath she'd ever drawn into her lungs, like breathing him in everything around her.

"Do you smell that? Are you breathing this?" he shouted.

"I smell it. It smells like you! The whole planet smells like you!" she screamed in joy, chasing toward him.

She ran, her feet heavy in the cold sand, her breath coming in cold puffs that she could see.

Beck caught her.

They kissed.

She pulled off. "You taste horrible."

"So do you."

He kissed her again. He picked her up and spun her around.

"Why are you awake? I was supposed to keep my promise to you by kissing you when you woke up," he said, taking her hand and walking along the path to the hangar.

"I don't know. My cryochamber opened when it wasn't supposed to," she answered dreamily. "Why are you awake? That cryochamber survived an explosion and it didn't open. Why would it open by merely falling off a land rover?"

"Well," Beck said, swinging her arm. "Cryochambers open if they run out of power or if they receive an urgent message." Beck snapped his fingers. "Vantz did it. He opened both our chambers."

"But why?"

Beck shook his head. "I don't know. Some reason."

“Where are we going?” Lisbet questioned.

Looking around, there was nowhere to go. Every piece of infrastructure on Mars had been buried. There was no Castle Ares, no Boiler Room, no hotels, no tunnels, no pleasure palaces. There was just the makeshift hangar in front of them.

“You’re going to the medical bay. Both of you,” Tuton said as they approached the doors. “Oh, and I should apologize for grabbing your ass. I did wire a communication to Vantz and he was not impressed. He says you’re the Beauty of Ares and no one should grab you. Sorry. I was just trying to do what he wanted.”

“It’s okay… Probably,” she said with a slanted smile.

“Invocation is waiting,” Tuton said, showing them the way to the medical bay.

Chapter Thirty Four

Lisbet was in a VR cage. She had the faceplate on and a set of headphones over her ears. She was aboard a solarship and she was supposed to be in cryostasis, but she and Beck had refused to be put to sleep. They were accompanying the mercenaries from Io back to the Jovian system, though Lisbet was not going to Io. She had been told that Io was not a great place to visit by Iona who proclaimed noisily that if she was going to the Jovian system, she wouldn't set foot on Io or Europa. She would only go to Callisto and Ganymede because they were the only civilized places. She refused to acknowledge that Amalthea was a place where people lived.

Except Europa was exactly where Gage and Iona were taking Lisbet and Beck. Lisbet had had her freedom returned to her, and her Sleeping Beauty Inc. bracelet cracked in half, along with a bona fide offer from Beck that she could divorce him if she wanted to.

Lisbet refused.

Actually, after everything that happened, Beck wasn't going to prison. The governing body of Mars was so pleased by the way things had turned out that Beck was able to drop every pretense. They had found that roughly four thousand people had died in the first space battle. The government huffed. That many people have died on Earth during a tsunami. Besides, they wouldn't have died if they hadn't attacked the Mammoth ships.

Through scans of the planet, information provided by Invocation, and search parties that explored tunnels, they had found and gutted every pleasure palace except for the palace complex of Carlos Beltrose. In the end, he had extended permission for every person in his pleasure palace who wanted to evacuate to do so. They learned from the survivors that most of Beck's family (cousins and other relatives who did not love Beck the way Carlos did), had refused to come out and had died in the collapse.

The miners who were woken from cryostasis to claim credit for their crimes envied them.

Antar died, not in the collapse, but because Tiffania killed him. However, no one was very interested in prosecuting her. He had broken all sorts of laws by replacing her bracelet and that was still on her body when she was interviewed and allowed to retell her side of the story. She had all the proof she needed to claim self-defense when she was x-rayed and the fractures in her skeleton were revealed. She was released from her contract and she was on her way back to Earth where she would be able to start a new life with the money Antar had paid for her.

Carlos and Hessia evacuated. When Carlos gave the reason why he had decided to evacuate when so many of his other family members had not, he answered that he knew Vantz was Beck and he believed in his son.

What was going to happen to them exactly was unclear. The government was still accepting testimonies from his slaves explaining what he had done.

Beck visited and had his father woken from cryostasis for long enough for him to thank him for what he did. As Vantz had explained, none of the other miners had come forward, allowing their slaves to be saved.

"Did you blow up our lives just for that one pregnant girl who died?" Carlos asked from under his untrimmed eyebrows.

Beck shrugged. "I don't know, but if I did, wouldn't that be wonderful? It would mean she didn't die for nothing."

“And would you have killed yourself if I didn’t send Lisbet into orbit?” his father persisted.

Beck looked everywhere in the room, except at his father. “I may have. I may have thought that there was a chance I would die when I set that rocket to explode next to my head after we spoke and I cut the transmission. Sleeping Beauty Inc.’s literature stated what force the cryochamber would take and the math looked sound, but it might have been a defective chamber. I might have died when I pulled that stunt, but if Lisbet lived… My setting it off early to put additional pressure on you would have been worth it.”

Carlos shook his head. He didn’t understand. “Hmph! My heart is cut in two,” he growled. “Half of me wants to kill you for what you did and the other half of me is proud that you daredeviled your way to the top under my very nose. You’re going to be in the history books now.”

“You too,” Beck informed him.

“Does everyone know you’re Vantz now?” his father asked dully.

“Yeah. Every name they used to call him, they call me now.”

“So, you’re Ares, the God of War, who conquered an entire planet, doing something Alexander the Great, Genghis Khan, and Julius Caesar were not able to do.”

“They’re changing the reckoning of calendars on Mars. Now everything before the terraforming is called BB for Before Beckett and everything after will be called AB for After Beckett.”

His father scoffed. “Is that true?”

“No,” Beck admitted immediately, scoffing at his joke. “But they are changing the reckoning. They just haven’t decided what to call it.”

The moment hung for a moment before his father asked, “What’s going to happen to me?”

“I don’t know. I’ve filed every single appeal that could be filed to urge the government toward leniency. I’ll get up in any court and say whatever I can to downplay it all. No matter what happens, you won’t be able to live on Mars. They won’t let you back no matter how soft they decide to go on you.”

“Fine. See if I can go to Europa with Hessia. I can still dig and whether I have ever been a good guy is not important when you need a digger.”

“I’ll see what can be done, but it won’t be for a while. I’ve asked them to have your trial last. I hope seeing all the unrepentant miners before you will help your case.”

“Will you be an old man when I wake up?” Carlos asked.

“Maybe.”

When they were finished, Beck said goodbye. Carlos was put back into cryostasis to await his trial.

Beck was able to take credit for the job he’d done. Then he gave credit to his friends who had helped him create Vantz and to keep him safe while the miners were attempting to assassinate an AI construct thinking it was a person.

Both Beck and Lisbet were given rewards from the government for their service to Mars. It was provided by wealth that had been stripped from the pleasure palaces.

Free at last, Lisbet wanted to check on Cassica and see if she was well in her new marriage. If she was not, Lisbet planned to spend her reward money buying out Cassica’s contract on Europa. That was why they were heading there.

Beck was with her. At that moment, he was in a VR cage next to her. They were playing *Emerald War*.

“Playing this game is how I recruited all those guys from the Church of Voynich,” he explained. “They developed this game. It’s all about anti-slavery. All the quests in this game are about saving people. None of them are about making money, winning the prize, or proving how awesome you are. One day, I was lucky enough to be playing with Benediction himself and I told him that I was playing the game to get ready to do it in real life. He was very interested and I told him my plans. Of course, I told him I was Vantz and he was so fascinated by my ideas that I sent him more information and more information until he decided he was on board. It’s pretty easy for him to keep slavery out of Io. No one wants to go there, but don’t let any of the wrecking crews or the boys from the church hear you say that. They’re used to the smell and they think Io is better than other moons. From there, Benediction introduced me to his brother Leviticus, who introduced me to his brother, Testament, who introduced me to his brother, Invocation, who introduced me to their brother, Gage.”

“How many brothers are there?” Lisbet wondered.

“Ten, though not all of them came to help. Apparently, Apostate isn’t really much for leaving his moon, regardless of the cause. Heretic didn’t come. He said his wife was expecting triplets and he had to stay to film it.”

“Really?” Lisbet asked, making a face.

Beck shrugged loud enough that Lisbet could hear his shoulders heave. “That’s what he said. I don’t care that I wasn’t able to get all of them. It’s not like I’m collecting them. They’re good guys though. Testament and Leviticus are working with the traumatized slaves. Invocation swears by them, saying we couldn’t get anyone more empathetic if we hired empaths, but none of that stuff makes any sense to me. Invocation says that’s because I’m traumatized too and so trauma on those levels is normal for me. He wants me to block off an entire year so he can work with me, but I don’t know. Ripping open old wounds seems like a waste of time when there is science to be done and sex to have.”

Lisbet agreed with him wholeheartedly and immediately lost interest in their game.

“I don’t know,” Beck went on. “I feel like I’m healed. I wrote those fairy tales. They highlighted the sore spots of my life. I showed them to you and your reaction to them let me know that what I went through wasn’t okay. It made me feel justified in the path I had chosen. And when you knew everything about me, you didn’t just want to comfort me once, you wanted to be with me endlessly, like I was still good enough.”

Lisbet pulled off her faceplate. “You are more than good enough.”

Seeing her disconnected, Beck pulled his faceplate off as well and turned to her. “I just felt like a monster.”

“Surely, you don’t still feel like that,” Lisbet said, the corner of her mouth twisting in apprehension.

“I think I don’t,” he said softly. Lisbet’s hand was on the black padded rail of the VR cage with neon tube lights lighting up the space. He traced the lines of her veins with the tip of his finger. “I think all that is behind me, but then I’m making love to you, and for a moment, what we’re doing, how we’re touching, how I’m moving, how you’re moving, they’re all the same as from times in the distant past and the moment we’re having is identical to something I’ve burned down, but I still want it with you. It does feel like the past and the present are the same in a moment like

that. For a few seconds, it's like I didn't give up the old me and, if I feel the way I'm feeling, I would never want to give it up entirely."

"Sex is weird," she said reflectively, lacing her fingers with his. "In that moment when we're together, everything is inside out. It's okay if the world is burning. It's okay if I'm burning with you. In that moment, all of you is open and all of me is open. I wouldn't want you to think that you needed to remake yourself to be something acceptable to me in the moment when we're the most honest. If little pieces of your abuse come back to haunt you at that moment, it's okay. I won't blame you for it."

He smiled and drew her close so her head rested against his chest.

"Though I'm not entirely clear why you were so set on me. You were set on me before I even got here," she said, hearing his heartbeat with her one ear.

"The heart wants what the heart wants, although it was probably the monster in me that wanted you."

Lisbet pulled away so she could look at him. "Why?"

"Because you would never choose me under normal circumstances. You are nothing like the other women who have been sent my way. Even Charcoal, who was the tamest, was nothing like you."

He was absolutely right. In her life back on Earth, her father would never have approved of her romance with Beck. Even if there were still huge sums of money involved, her father would have said no. Thus, she would have said no because she wasn't acting for herself in those days.

"Well," she said with a mild shrug. "I want to know whether the monster in you was the one who smoked like a stovepipe. I haven't seen you with a cigarette…" she trailed off, realizing something. "You know, I don't think I've seen you with a cigarette since we woke up from cryostasis."

"Huh…" he said, licking his lips. "Actually, I completely forgot that I smoked."

THE END

A Note from Stephanie Van Orman

Hi Ink Drinker!

I'm Stephanie Van Orman and I'm here with your daily dosage of ink. I hope you like being called an ink drinker more than you like being called a bookworm. I would much rather drink my ink than be called any kind of a worm.

Welcome to the Teardrop Edition of *Beauty of Ares*. Here's how the teardrop edition is different from the First Edition. Ready for it? This book has an AI generated cover that was practically free for me to produce. That means I can offer the book at the lowest possible price: free. Teardrop Editions of books will become available as First Editions get older and as my bills get paid.

I would really like to offer my books for free all the time, but I have a few expenses as a novelist that make that hard. The cover is one expense as I pay the artist or artists. Sometimes the fancy cover is AI generated as well, but I used a more expensive AI generator and that wasn't free. Another expense is the software used to make audiobooks. They're autonarrated, but that doesn't make the service free. There's also the service I use to make trailers and other videos on YouTube. So, I have a few bills to pay. When you buy a first edition, you support me in making new books. When you download a free book (the Teardrop Editions), even if it cost you something, the price is so low that I didn't make a penny off the download. The money you paid goes to the distributor.

That's still great with me. I'd like you to read my books, even if I don't get anything out of it. If you'd like to thank me, please leave a review, recommend the book to a friend, follow me on social media (Facebook, Instagram, YouTube), or post about my book on one of your channels. You know the drill.

Thanks for reading. I hope the book was as fun for you as it was for me.

Stephanie Van Orman
Independent Novelist

Books by Stephanie Van Orman

Solo Novels
Whenever You Want
Kiss of Tragedy
The Blood that Flows
If I Tie U Down

Sleeping Beauty Inc. Books
Rose Red
Sleeping Prince
Beauty of Ares
Goldilocks Zone*
Wild Princes*

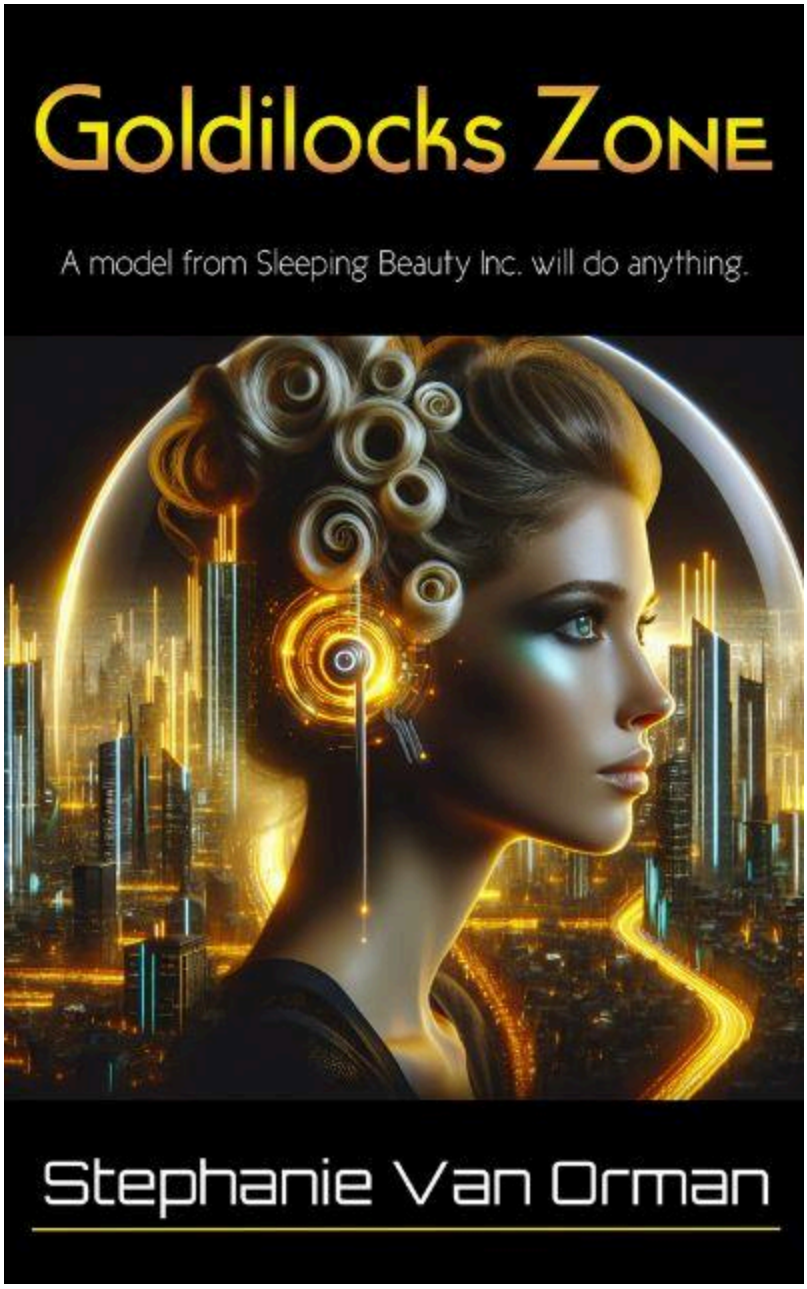
Octavia Girl Vol I - IV*

Spell Books
Behind His Mask
Hidden Library

His 16th Face
His 16th Face
If Diamonds Could Talk

Novelettes
Tiny Wishes
Born in January
Cut Like Glass
The Land of Umbrellas
Heart's Key
The House With Two Halves

**Goldilocks Zone, Wild Princes,* and *Octavia Girl Vol. IV* are available for purchase as an ebook and an audiobook on Google Play, Apple Books, Barnes and Noble, KOBO (and pretty much every other online bookstore). They are available in print and ebook on Amazon.



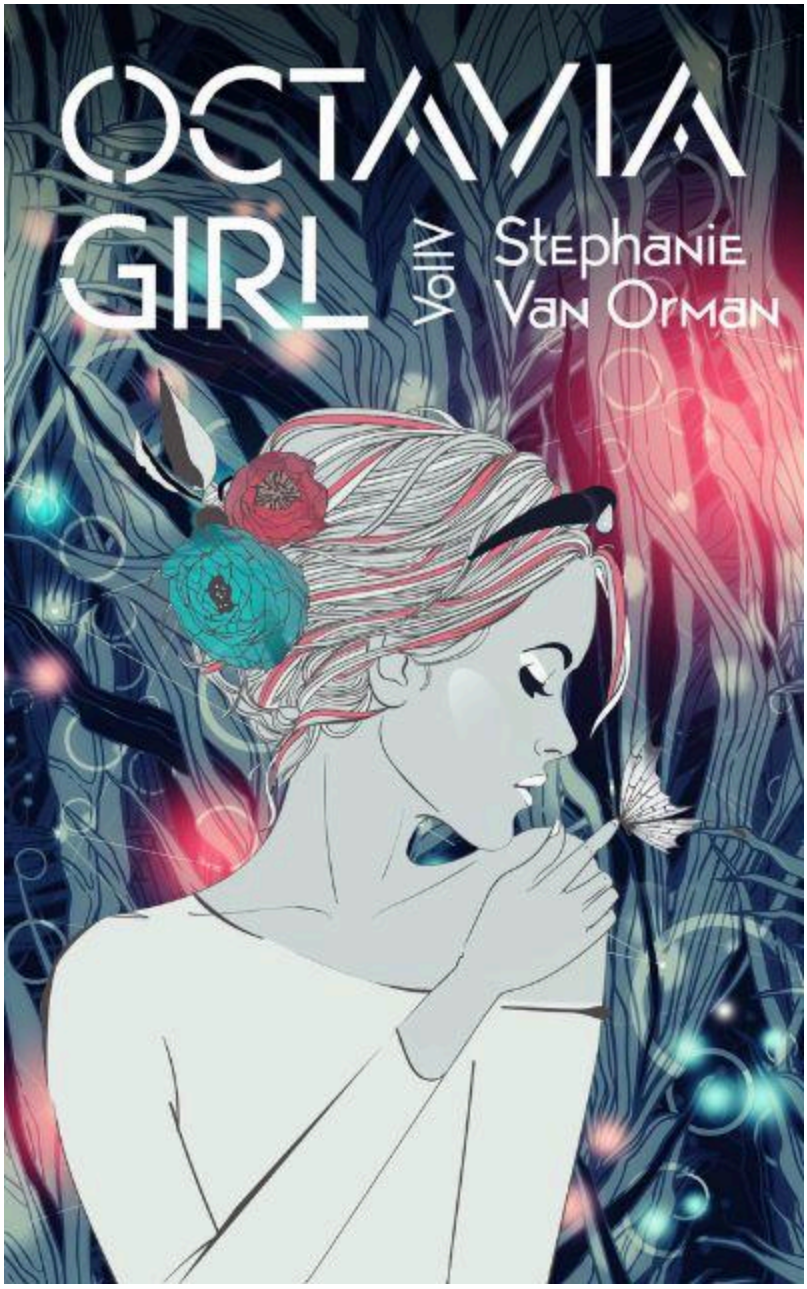
Sleeping Beauty Inc. Book 4

Welcome to Venus! On the floating panels of the yellow planet, they're hosting *Goldilocks Zone*. It's a game show, reality TV, and a beauty pageant all rolled into one! Ornette is a Sleeping Beauty Inc. model who has disobeyed her owners so many times that her left hand has been burned black. How will she compete in a game show where the object is to impress Papa Bear, Uncle Bear, and Brother Bear, but a man named Desmond, like the Cheshire Cat, keeps appearing to turn her heart upside down?



Sleeping Beauty Inc. Book 5

Once upon a time, there was a King and a Queen who longed for a child. The Queen prayed to ten magical fairies, and each one of them granted her wish because she gave birth to ten princes... Not really. Far in the future, ten baby boys were born as part of a genetic experiment, and after the scientists were gunned down, each of the boys went wild in his own way. Join each of the princes as they have a single adventure of their own. Start the book with the Prince of Ocean Spray and finish the book with the Prince of Time.



Octavia Girl Vol. IV

The Octavians are fed up with attempts on Jenna's life, so they've taken matters into their own tentacles with a jewel installed in Jenna's crown that provides a force field no one can penetrate. If no one can touch her, can Sardius?