

Sleeping Prince

A model from Sleeping Beauty Inc. will do anything.



Stephanie Van Orman

Sleeping Prince

The sequel to Rose Red

By Stephanie Van Orman

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Book design by Stephanie Van Orman
Author photograph by Alison Quist

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

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Chapter One

“How’s she doing?” Tanya asked over the speaker.

“The pickup went fine if that’s what you’re wondering,” Gage replied, his voice husky in the lunar light.

He was sitting in the cockpit of his Cannonball III solarship. Blinking lights and screens registered colorblind readings all around him. His seat was comfortable. The artificial gravity was a few ticks lighter than it had been on Earth. It was meant to mimic the gravity common to the four large moons in the Jovian system. He was orbiting Callisto while he waited for the instructions Tanya was going to relay from head office.

Gage had said that the pickup had gone fine and it had gone fine. Tickety boo, but there was something wrong that he couldn’t put his finger on.

The model he had retrieved was Iona Stirling. She was the third most expensive model Sleeping Beauty Inc. had on offer on Callisto. Ninth most expensive for the Jovian region. In truth, she was the most expensive model that Gage escorted on a regular basis.

It wasn’t because she was the most expensive that she was Gage’s favorite. At least, he didn’t think it was. He had seven models regularly assigned to him and then any oddball assignments that came his way. Those seven were very expensive and they often had assignments between moons. Since it took months to transport them, it was his job to oversee their transport.

His duties included picking them up from their previous job, bringing them aboard the Cannonball III, and resetting them. They weren’t robots. That wasn’t what a reset meant. It was his job to look them over for any damage, ensure that they were properly washed, fed, and put them to sleep on his vessel. Five Jovian moons had divisions of Sleeping Beauty Inc. on their surfaces: Ganymede, Callisto, Europa, Io, and Amalthea. Sometimes the models were returned to one of the headquarters. However, some models had requested travel in their details, so they were never reassigned to the same moon twice.

Iona was one of those models. She was his favorite because she never fussed. She didn’t come aboard the ship crying about what her last owner had asked her to do. If she had a medical problem, she had already had it seen to it while she was still under contract because she was just too valuable to herself not to speak up about what she needed. However, even with that attention to detail, she usually had a cold when she returned.

Looking over her body was one of Gage’s favorite things to do. Sometimes, he thought of ending his contract with Sleeping Beauty Inc. and finding some other way to kill time. However, hauling space garbage and rescuing starships were really the only things he was qualified to do in space and if he switched jobs, he wouldn’t have the joy of giving Iona her quarter physical.

A quarter physical was nowhere near as thrilling as he’d hoped it would be when he went in for training. During the routine check, he looked in her ears and tested her hearing, measured her eyesight, looked at her teeth, took a swab of the inside of her cheek, checked for rashes and other skin problems, tested her for allergies, and gave her a device that checked her internal health without giving him a free peep show. Sleeping Beauty Inc. was very serious about that. If you wanted to see up a model’s skirt, you were going to pay for it.

Liking Iona especially was a little secret of his. She was entirely too famous and valuable for a self-respecting handler to admit to liking. She wasn't like most of the models he escorted in that she was always purchased for commercial use.

The other models were rented out to individual men who needed help with their lives. A model from Sleeping Beauty Inc. would help her client organize his life, give him style, flair, improve his situation, and sleep with him if that was how he needed his life improved. For a cost, of course. If all he wanted was sex, there were better places to get that. The more awkward the man was, the better his money was spent on a model from Sleeping Beauty Inc. Most of the clients were rich enough that some women would put up with him for his money, but there was something really special about that specific dollar sign amount that many clients found appealing. The model isn't trying to screw him out of his money. She's very upfront about what the deal is. He gives a specified amount of money, she enters his life, and finds ways to improve it by working with him. When the time is up, he can renew his contract, get a different model, or try his luck again in the real world with women who were 'free'.

Iona wasn't one of those girls. She was a commercial model, which meant that she was hired by a company. For the last year, Iona had worked in a showroom for a helocarrier company called Excalibur Helocarriers. The people buying those transports were not lightweights who would buy one and leave. They were company presidents who were going to buy a fleet of carriers.

Gage knew exactly what was asked of her. He had read the contract when it was transmitted to him. As the captain of his vessel and Iona's handler, he read it with her, with a visual transmission of a lawyer back at head office. It was Iona's job to lead customers through the showroom and give them all the information required to make the sale of a helocarrier. The reason she was hired instead of a normal girl was that the customers kept grabbing the sales girls. There were lawsuits. It was crazy, so the deal with Iona was that she was hired to tolerate those incredibly inappropriate touches. If she got grabbed, she was to laugh it off, but tell the man very firmly that not only was she a temporary asset of the helocarrier company, but she was also a model of Sleeping Beauty Inc. Therefore, if he was interested in bedding her, he was welcome to put in an offer.

That was how she had become the third most expensive model on Callisto. She made contact with a lot of really powerful men. The individual men bidding on her drove up her cost. The companies had to outbid the individual purchasers. Except Iona had graduated from being rented by individual men and never entertained those offers. Sleeping Beauty Inc. ran confidential auctions where the exact offers were kept secret, therefore it was completely possible for a man to outbid a company in numbers, but would be told that he didn't win the auction because the company had added some benefits that the individual man had not offered.

The benefit was always that Iona didn't have to sleep with a single person if she was purchased by a company. True, she had to tolerate the somewhat revealing uniforms they gave her, the pinches and the pats, but she did not have to go to bed with anyone. That was the benefit an individual buyer could never offer.

It was also worth it to the company not to piss her off. Because she worked in the showroom, it was in her power to cause a serious dent in their business if she decided to turn on them. She knew all their best customers. Sometimes it was even her job to wine and dine them, take them out for entertainment, and show them a good time while they considered how large and long

their helocarrier contract should be. She was close friends with some of them as Iona had a personality that was both warm and cool. She could cause more damage to their company than she had done good if she had a complaint with enough gunpowder behind it. Since she had them by the balls, they treated her like a princess.

And so did Gage.

That morning when he picked her up, she looked too ravishing for words as she dropped the Sleeping Beauty Inc. bracelet in his hand. It was his job to remove it when her contract was complete. She smiled at him and he smiled back at her, knowing that even though he liked her in his own little way, she was not for him. Her grand beauty had nothing to do with him. Her pinkish hair was swept to the side in a cascade of curls that covered her shoulder. Her white dress was made with thick, expensive fabric, yet had intentional windows to show tiny views of her creamy skin. Her heels were too high, but her balance was as steady as if she was barefoot. Her eyes and lips were where the true beauty was. Her eyes were honey brown and her lips were painted coral pink. No man could keep all that warmth to himself.

Gage took her inside the Cannonball III, which was a step down from the transports she had been selling, but she said she liked getting picked up in the dark brown starship that had seen a dozen too many reentries. She said it made her feel like she was being picked up by her badass boyfriend.

Gage had smiled at that and stroked the stubble on his chin. He didn't dare hope that he looked like her badass boyfriend.

Inside, he locked the doors up tight and took her to the medical room, where he left her alone for a few minutes to undress and wash. She'd call for him when she was ready for him to begin her physical.

He would wear a lab coat and a stethoscope to help him feel like a professional as he went through the health checklist with her. He was always especially proud of how collected he looked and acted when they were alone and she was wearing nothing but a paper dress.

When she called for him, he entered the room with a smile. In the tray next to the medical table was enough jewelry to fill a jewelry box. He eyed it. "Good haul?" he asked, his disposition utterly friendly.

"Yeah," she said dryly like she didn't care. "Please look at my throat. I think I'm coming down with something."

It was completely normal for Iona to get sick as soon as she finished a job. All the stress was gone and her body just stopped fighting whatever viruses it had been fighting before. It was almost a usual routine for Iona to spend a week awake on the Cannonball III recovering from an illness before Gage put her to sleep.

"I'll have a look," he said, intentionally under-eager.

She opened her coral lips and let him look at her throat. He was having the best time, but it was imperative that he didn't show it.

"Yeah, it looks swollen. Enough to give you a tickle in your throat."

"Have you got anything you can give me? I'm having trouble swallowing."

He nodded. "Yeah, I've got a few things, but let's finish here first."

The physical went smoothly and it ended too soon as far as Gage was concerned. He gave her the pills for her throat and excused himself. Alone, he took off his lab coat and returned to

the cockpit. Since she was fine, it was time to get back into orbit, so as soon as she was dressed, she'd come to the cockpit to join him where she would strap down for liftoff.

That had been uneventful as well. Iona didn't scream or cry when they went back into space like some of the other girls did. If he had to guess, they screamed because they wanted him to comfort them, but he was always bad at that. He didn't want to comfort them. He wanted them to grow up. With them, he always felt like their angry older brother who could not be seduced by any application of puppy-dog eyes or pouty lips.

Iona asked for nothing. She was quiet, resigned, and completely professional. That day, even with her sore throat, she said nothing. Once they were in orbit, she got herself a water bottle, took her pills, and retired to her room.

Gage snapped back to the present, Tanya from head office on Ganymede was saying something. "I've just sent you a contract to review. Have a look at it and get back to me." She signed off.

Gage licked his lips and loaded it onto his main screen. He'd have to go over it again later with Iona, but he didn't want to bother her now. She needed a rest. She was true to form and feeling sick after pickup.

Gage looked at the contract with squinted eyes. What was he looking at? It was entirely more sexual than the contracts Iona usually entertained. Why, in the heck, was head office sending this to her? It wasn't even for that much money and it was for only three months? Iona wouldn't sign a contract like that!

He was about to get all snarky and call Tanya back when he realized that he had been reading the contract wrong. It wasn't a contract for Iona. It was a contract for him... and the buyer was Iona.

He glanced at the door, toward where she was sleeping. What was going on?

Chapter Two

Sleeping Beauty Inc. was completely within its rights to send Gage a contract of this nature. He was under a contract with them himself. Like Iona and the other models he transported, he spent quite a lot of time asleep in a cryochamber aboard his solarship. His sleep was a little different than the others as he was not quite dead asleep the way they were, but it put a hold on 95% of his aging while he was inside and gave him the flexibility he needed to continue working in space without wasting his life between jobs.

Like Iona, he had a corporate contract where he was merely hired to do a job. For the time being, he had a contract with Sleeping Beauty Inc. until he turned 30. When he was awake long enough that his body was 30 years old, they would renegotiate his contract. However, there was nothing that stated he couldn't accept another contract at will if the right one came along. He was twenty-eight.

Looking at the contract in more detail, he saw that Iona was trying to rent him and the Cannonball III for ninety days of sexual fulfillment.

Nothing sounded less natural to Gage than that proposition. His relationship with Iona made the request sound impossible. There had to be something about the contract that he wasn't understanding. Possibly, she wasn't asking him to be her partner on her ninety-day vacation. He was going to call it a vacation. Maybe she had some other partner in mind and he was just supposed to ferry them around while they experimented in her room? But as he read over the terms, it was very clear that that was not what the contract was describing.

She was requesting sex with him. There were boxes she had checked that outlined what he had permission to do to her. He knew the form. She didn't have to write out the sexual acts herself. She only had to check the ones she was interested in. Gage had seen many of those forms before in the contracts of the other models he ferried. Iona had checked a lot of boxes.

He slapped himself across the face. There had to be something about this that he didn't understand. He started at the top of the contract and read every word like a primary student who was reading in front of the class. Reading it that way helped it make a lot more sense. Now it sounded like what she wanted was merely a guaranteed break from work and she was using the pretext of hiring him as a way to safely get one according to Sleeping Beauty Inc.'s work standards. But if that were true, why had she checked so many boxes?

He huffed and left the cockpit. He didn't want to have a conversation about the contract with her when she was in her bedroom, but he was also no longer in the mood to wait for her to wake up.

He tapped on her door lightly.

"Come in," she called.

At the very least, he was the only other person aboard the ship, so she knew who was knocking.

He came in.

Iona was in her sprawling bed, resting between lines of pink silk sheets. She rubbed the side of her neck and sipped on her water. Her honey-colored eyes rested on him.

"I got your contract," he admitted, hands on hips.

She raised her eyebrows in mock indifference. "What did you think of it?"

"It left me a little confused."

“Did it?” she said, averting her gaze. “Why?”

He pinched the bridge of his nose. “We’ve always been friends. You get sick every time you leave a job, so you’ve been awake with me more than the other models I transport. We chatted and shared food. I’ve always kissed you when there’s been no one to do so when you wake up from cryostasis and you’ve always acted like that was fine by you, but I’ve never once gotten the impression that you wanted me to rip your panties off with my teeth.”

Iona snorted.

“Is it funny?” he asked.

She was a professional and got control of her features immediately.

“I’ve also never got the impression that you wanted me to haul you off to the bedroom by your hair,” he said as he flicked the screen that now displayed a copy of the contract. “Is there something going on that I don’t understand?”

She sighed and the smile on her lips made his heart skip a beat. “You know everything, Gage. You’ve always known everything. Yes, that contract is not what it seems. I’m angry and I think you can help me be a lot less angry.”

“Yes, I did notice that you checked a lot of angry sex boxes, but—”

She interrupted him by waving her hands. “It’s nothing like what it looks like. Let me explain. I’m angry because I’m going to fall in the ranking during this round of bidding. I didn’t get as much attention as I normally do at the showroom this last year. Everyone there knows me and the novelty is gone. I played it safe and I took a job that would make me very comfortable. I hoped I could be comfortable *and* rise in the rankings. It didn’t work. I want more money.”

Gage stared at her. She had a lot of money. She wasn’t as rich as God, but she was getting there faster than any of the other girls he transported.

“I need to do some campaigning. I want you to take me back to Callisto and help me retrieve the spotlight.”

“Wait. Explain these boxes.”

“They’re not really—”

“Explain them!” he said firmly.

After a significant hesitation, she said, “I need it to be known on paper that I’m not a prude. My reputation has sunk and if I’m not willing to do anything in bed, I won’t be able to pick up a reasonable individual buyer.”

“An individual buyer?” Gage asked, knowing exactly what that meant. It had always been true that she could make more money from an individual rather than a company. “Oh. I see.”

“Are you disappointed?” she asked quietly.

“Disappointed?” he replied, echoing her tone. He knew there were quite a few things included in the contract that he was not willing to do to Iona or any other person. Not only that, but he didn’t want anyone doing some of those things to Iona. Screw consent. No one deserved that treatment. There were very real reasons why he lived on a solarship with no company in a very convincing imitation of a celibate monk. He couldn’t quite interpret everything he was thinking and feeling. “No, I’m not disappointed. We’re friends. I wanted an explanation and you’ve given one, but I don’t understand why it has to be me or why we spent the fuel to come into orbit if you just want to go back down again. You could have gone to Sleeping Beauty Inc. headquarters on the surface to get dolled up for your campaigning. They help with that sort of thing all the time. It’s in their best interests for you to get the highest price possible. They get a cut of the money.”

"I don't want their help on Callisto," she said. "That was another reason for the contract with you and all those boxes. I had to make it seem like if I didn't have at least a vacation's worth of sex and relaxation, I'd quit, which I'm seriously thinking about doing. That's why I need to find an individual, not necessarily a buyer. If possible, I want to get married and quit this. You know Sleeping Beauty Inc. will not like that. They don't get pay cuts from consensual marriages, only the price of slaves."

"You have a ton of money. Why do you have to get married?"

"It's not just about money," she said, calm and still. "I want more."

Gage stroked his chin. He thought a lot of things about what she was saying, but if she was planning to get married, then the things he was afraid of for her were probably less likely than he originally imagined. Marriage, in his mind, was still an honorable estate and he believed in marriage even if he wasn't married himself. But then he also guessed it had more to do with who she married. "Well, do you have someone in mind? Or are we just throwing a net out?"

"I have three men I'm interested in chasing. One of them is on Callisto, but the other two are not. They're on Europa and Io."

Gage shuttered. He did not like going to Io. Better Io than Amalthea, but still, nothing good ever happened on Io. "If we're traveling between moons, three months isn't a lot of time. What's your game plan? Why me and the Cannonball III?"

"I have to get better first, but I planned on being sick. Our contract can't start until I'm well, but if I'm not better by next weekend, that's going to cause a problem."

"What happens next weekend?"

"We get started."

"Hmm..." he said, taking a step forward. He didn't normally spend much time awake. He would normally spend three to ten days awake out of thirty. He had a little plan of his own. Aside from his models, who he pulled through time along with him, he wanted everyone he had once been connected to, to be dead. Then he'd take his money from working for Sleeping Beauty Inc. and retire to Iapetus in the Saturn system, where no one had ever heard of him.

"I still don't quite understand why I need to be involved in this," Gage said slowly. "If you want to take a vacation, Sleeping Beauty Inc. is pretty understanding of that. You could take a break, get a spot by the ocean on Europa and chill out. Why this hot hustle to find a husband secretly? I'm not the only way to get around and a commercial carrier would be more luxurious than the Cannonball III. Give me a reason that makes sense."

She hesitated. "I need a friend. I don't want to do this by myself."

"Yeah, but you don't normally ask your friends to sign binding agreements that allow you to electrocute them if they don't drop their pants."

She shrugged her shoulders and huffed. "I didn't think those things would bother you as much as you're claiming. I would prefer to leave the contract as it is, but if you need to curate it, then mark what makes you comfortable and we'll go back and forth until we come up with something we can agree on."

As indifferent as Iona looked, sitting in the bed, as placid as a plant growing out of the mattress would have been, Gage had not always worked for Sleeping Beauty Inc. the way he was now. He had once been a model that had been sold. The contract between a buyer and a model existed to draw the line between what was real and what was fake. He knew it from

experience, without a strict contract, someone could act like anything. What was written in the contract they signed was an undeniable statement of what they wanted.

Iona was trying to make him forget that by hiding her true feelings behind a layer of heavy indifference.

He thought about forcing her to admit what she wanted from him. If he was taking a stab in the dark, he thought it looked like she wanted to clear her head about whatever romantic inclinations she had toward him by having sex with him during her search for another man. In the end, she would leave him because there was no doubt in his mind that she would get whichever man she decided she wanted.

Was he okay with that series of events?

Actually, he wasn't.

"Sorry," he said sternly. "I can't sign your contract the way it is at all. I don't know what you know about me because we have never had the sort of relationship where we have sat around and swapped stories of how we have been abused. I have the job I have for a vast collection of reasons, but one of the biggest is that I'm not interested in being used in this way anymore. If you were in love with me and this was the only way we could try a relationship, I might be interested. I haven't had any close friends or lovers in many years. But this... just the idea of someone using my body for their fun times makes me feel sick. I'm not your toy."

He watched Iona exhale in a way that reminded him of someone taking their last breath, but all she did was keep her light brown eyes on him in a way that made him feel like getting away from her would be impossible if he didn't fight hard. Eyes that soft, that beautiful, had a way of fooling a man with their form. Like many others, soon he would believe that a woman couldn't be evil under all that beauty.

Chapter Three

Iona clamped her teeth together and made her face a perfect mask of calm. She was not going to throw a fit just because Gage wasn't giving her what she wanted. The truth was, she didn't exactly know what she wanted. She knew that she wanted more money than she was getting. At her current rates, yes, she made a lot of money and there were plenty of opportunities for a woman with her skill set. The problem with her was that she was not getting enough love in her life.

She knew it.

She wanted to fix it, but when she thought of what she ought to do to get more love in her life, she could only think of three things.

She could simply leave Sleeping Beauty Inc. and find something else to do with her life that made her happy. She had enough money to do almost anything she could think of. Except, she couldn't think of anything. Once upon a time, she had dreamed of being a fairytale princess and her life working for Sleeping Beauty Inc. had given her that completely. If she wanted to keep living in fairyland, then the best thing for her was to continue living as a model who was treated like a princess.

Her second choice was to choose to be the object of love for one man. If she found a worthwhile husband among the super-rich then the problem was solved. She'd still be a princess and she'd get the love she was craving.

Her third choice was stupid. She knew it was stupid, but she couldn't get it out of her head. She had this sneaking little attraction to Gage, who always kissed her when she woke up. She had always thought of him as the best part of her job, but in the last year, she had started thinking of him more. Sometimes she got slapped on the ass by a man she did not like at all, but she had gotten into the habit of imagining that it was Gage who had smacked her and when she turned around to scold the man who had touched her, she was so sweet that her reprimand didn't work at all. If she could convince Gage to leave Sleeping Beauty Inc. with her, what kind of life would she have? Would she still be a princess?

It was all Gage's fault. Every other man she met looked at her like she was a steak and he was a hound dog who hadn't eaten in a week, but Gage wasn't like that. He looked at her like she was more than her face, more than her body, and more than her fake smile. He hadn't done that much because their time together was always so short. They were together for one week out of fifty-two, but she had to admit he had become her most trusted friend.

There was also the problem that he was ridiculously attractive. His body proportions had a 1% margin of difference from the perfect standard of beauty. That meant that if you took off his shoes and looked at his bare feet, you'd want to use them as a model for a marble statue of a man's feet. You could look at ninety-nine other men's feet and you wouldn't find better ones. That went on as your eyes traveled up his legs, knees, and thighs. True, she hadn't seen him with his pants down, but when he mentioned dropping his pants on pain of electrocution, her mouth had filled with saliva. She was very interested in whether or not he was in the top 1% there. The same went for the rest of his body. Perfect hands, wrists, arms, he was perfect all the way up. Then his face was a miracle.

It was a miracle because he wasn't handsome.

He was like a male Scarlett O'Hara because he had a perfect body and a face that nobody could forget because it wasn't like anyone else's face! It was hard lines, it was soft curves. He had light brown hair and eyes so blue that Iona thought he looked like the God of the sky.

Something terrible had happened to him. She had always suspected it, but having him say it was something else entirely. She wanted him to tell her more about himself and hear why he felt the way he did.

She could guess what had happened. She had been passed around from man to man before she started getting corporate contracts, but what he was saying felt like it was on another level.

Instead, she found herself saying. "No problem. Let's change the contract to say that if anything sexual happens between us then it isn't a big deal. I can't electrocute you if you refuse me and that change will make sure it's a casual contract. Besides, no one would ever believe you didn't want to have sex with me."

Gage looked at her sideways.

She was confusing him. He had a right to be confused. There had never been anything remotely sexual about their relationship before. All those sexual clauses had been left in because she had lost control of herself when she was creating the contract. It may have been because no one had ever asked her what she might like in bed. She had temporarily forgotten that Gage was not amenable to everything just because the sample contract provided by Sleeping Beauty Inc. had all those crazy things in it.

"Perhaps we need a second contract," he said slowly. "One that is just between us."

"Why?"

"So I can understand what you really want."

Iona frowned. She didn't have any clue what she really wanted.

Over the next few days, Iona was still ill, so they ironed out the details. No matter what she said, Gage wasn't happy. He didn't like the contract. He didn't like what he was asked to do. She increased his pay twice, but that didn't seem to ease his mind about what was about to happen.

She was going to use him to try to catch a bigger man. She was going to take him out in public in order to achieve this. He was going to have to shave with a razor against his skin, which was something he hadn't done in years. He was going to have a tailor measure his inseam. He said all this to Iona, but she merely brushed his concerns aside and told him she would measure him instead of the tailor.

"After all," she said haughtily. "You've seen me in the paper dress on your medical table often enough that my measuring you with your pants on shouldn't be that big a deal."

"Those creepy men are always so damn happy when they see the numbers," Gage complained.

"I'll be the only one touching you. Surely, that doesn't upset you," she said, reaching forward and touching him on the thigh.

He rolled his eyes and tapped his fingers on his bicep in a show of mild irritation. This wasn't the only plan of hers that he disapproved of. He disapproved of everything.

Iona sat back. "Just out of curiosity, what would you do if you were me?"

"I'd make a plan," he said simply.

“What sort of plan?”

“I’d plan to do corporate jobs until I had enough money stockpiled that I could live off the interest and then I’d go find some little hermit hole and hunker down.”

She gawked. “You would not.”

“I would so. What’s happening right now is that I’ve found a hermit hole where I’m getting paid to be here. Sometimes I wonder if I’m not living my absolute best life right now. Someday, I’ll leave all this behind and have a life somewhere quiet, but I’m not sure that right here isn’t the best I’ll ever have it.”

The idea of that made Iona squirm. Her highest ideal was to be treated like a princess with pretty clothes, pretty looks, and a calendar of fun meetings with nothing but parties on the horizon. When she worked for the helocarrier company, every day had been a bit of a party. There was always a party atmosphere.

Just now, she realized that Gage did not have anything like that. She tried to get it to make sense to her, so she asked a question. “I’m not sure I see the appeal, but I guess the food on board the Cannonball III is pretty good.”

He laughed. “I don’t get the same food to eat as you. Actually, none of the models get the same food as you.”

“What?”

“Well, for one thing, most of the models only eat two meals aboard this ship. They’re not sick, so they don’t sit around sipping cold nutritious bubbles. They come on board, get reset, have a bite to eat, brush their teeth, and go straight into a sleeping chamber. That bite to eat is either a blueberry smoothie with a sandwich or a bowl of french onion soup... with a sandwich. When they wake up, they get a bowl of hot oatmeal and a banana or a bowl of cold cereal... and a banana. That’s mostly what I have on board for the models, but that’s not what you get.”

Actually, Iona had never been offered any of those meals. “Do those models not bring in as much money as me?” she asked slowly.

“It’s true that they make less than you, but many of them don’t want to be aboard this ship for any more time than they have to be. They take vacations and this ship is not their home-away-from-home. They don’t like me. They resent me.”

“Why?”

“Because I don’t comfort them. In all fairness, I don’t comfort you either. You just don’t seem to mind.”

Iona stared at him, perplexed. “You always comforted me after my jobs.”

Gage huffed a laugh. “Really? How have I done that?”

“Well, for one thing, it’s always you. It’s been you who has dropped me off and picked me up for the last seven years.”

“How old are you?” he suddenly asked.

“Thirty-one, but I’ve only been awake for twenty-seven years of it. But I started doing this when I was sixteen which is the earliest they’ll let anyone do this legally. I used to have a revolving door of different handlers. You have been a constant. That’s comforting. Why? How old are you?”

He replied that his personal clock said he was twenty-eight, but he was much older.

“What do you eat when you’re on board?” she suddenly wanted to know.

“Whatever I want. I stock the ship.”

She refrained from chuckling. If he stocked the ship then he was treating her like a princess personally. He was also doing something different with her than what he did with the other models. Iona had always wanted to know what their stays aboard his ship were like, but she'd never been impetuous enough to ask.

Gage's frown deepened. "Why don't you show me your boys?"

"Okay. Let's do that." Iona flipped a few buttons on the remote placed next to her bed and a picture came up of the first man she was going to try for.

"This is the man I'm trying to get on Callisto. His name is Dante Hemmington."

When the picture of Dante came up on the screen, Iona tried to see what Gage was thinking when he saw him. The pictures she'd chosen for Dante and the other men were the best she could find: the most heartstopping, the most captivating, the most jealousy-inciting. At least, Iona hoped they were.

Dante was gorgeous in the picture. Iona knew the picture did the man a dozen favors, but that was exactly what she was looking to accomplish. He had dark hair, bronze skin, and eyes the color of pewter. His bone structure was nothing to smirk at as people with as much money as him needn't look less than beautiful, but his figure was quite impressive in person. Not as impressive as Gage, as Dante was less chiseled but more imposing in his height and shoulder breadth.

Iona glanced at Gage for his reaction and received nothing. His face was blank.

"He's the son of the CEO of Solarship Inc. His father was one of my first serious clients when I was in my early twenties. I wasn't his main model though and my entire job was merely to train with him in the gym. Dante used to visit and occasionally, I thought I saw his mouth water when he looked me up and down. He's put in bids for me on more than one occasion, sometimes the highest bid, but I always chose the corporate client instead. If I can get his mouth watering again, I might get him to open his wallet even more."

Another sideways glance at Gage gave her nothing.

She went on.

"This is Sherman Wilson," she said, flicking to the next picture. "He's on Europa."

In the picture on the screen he was handsome in a Texas farm boy kind of way with sun-bleached hair and a sunkissed tan, but Iona knew that his looks were both unnatural and his only good quality. He wasn't a bad person for a trillionaire and he habitually purchased Sleeping Beauty Inc. models to try to help him with his inflexible personality. He was known for shutting down, crying, and finding it impossible to deal with real life. It was the job of the model he purchased to placate him and transition him from one part of the day to the next.

The reason he was on the list was that he was the highest-paying buyer in the Jovian region. There was talk that the primary model he had had for the last three years, Jessica, was tiring of him and unlikely to sign another contract with him. Iona didn't have any desire to marry him herself, but if she impressed him enough that he offered her a contract, she would go up in the rankings dramatically. In the case of Sherman, she only wanted a temporary contract. She wasn't sure she would be able to tolerate him any more than Jessica.

"Sherman is the son of the genetic engineer who not only revived an extinct species of sea cow but also genetically altered it to survive life in the frigid oceans of Europa," Iona explained. "I'm sure you've heard of him. His father is still around, but most of his wealth is in the hands of Sherman, who is better with numbers than his father ever was."

“So, who will we be meeting on Io?” Gage asked tentatively.

“This is Benediction Hallows,” Iona said, moving to the next picture. “He’s head of the Church of Voynich.”

Benediction was so tall and dark and handsome that there actually wasn’t a woman in the solar system who didn’t know who he was. Information on him was sketchy as he rarely talked openly about himself but only taught the Voynich Bible. Iona was not religious herself, but she did find the gospel of Voynich to be compelling when Benediction preached it.

Without question, he was the one Iona was most attracted to and actually, she wasn’t sure whether she thought Gage was better looking or not. They were very different as Benediction had undergone a treatment that turned his skin onyx black and his hair forest green as was the custom for followers of Voynich. All of them got the pigment removed from their eyes as well so that they had no color, they only reflected light. It was something they all did to show their devotion to their Lord.

When Iona had been back on Callisto working all hours, she had taken a little time to herself to run a simulator to see how she would look if she had the procedure done on herself. Goodbye pink hair and honey eyes. The end result was startling. She didn’t look anything like herself.

“Him?” Gage asked, bringing Iona back to reality.

She nodded. “Though, that’s not actually why I’m interested in him.”

“You’re attracted to him?” Gage asked, obviously more interested in her answer to that question than any other question he’d asked her all day.

She tilted her head to the side. “He’s very attractive. Especially the way he speaks.”

“So, do you have a plan to try to snare each of these racehorses?” he said coldly as he leaned back in his chair.

Iona put a practiced smile on her face. “I do.”

Chapter Four

Gage sat back in his chair and focused on keeping his expression vacant as Iona showed him the pictures of the men she was scouting.

The first one was Dante. Gage had met him a few times in casual settings. He was fine... sort of. If Iona found herself sold to him, she would have to explore the underbelly of all that. If Iona could convince Dante to buy her, Gage would say that she was as good as sold if she wanted to be. On the other hand, once Dante had gone to bed with her, she would not be able to convince him to marry her. If she kept her mystery, and by mystery, he meant pants. If she kept her pants on, she might be able to bait him into matrimony, but no matter how it was sliced, marriage with a guy like Dante would not be something Iona wanted.

What could Gage say that would send her back to the helocarrier showroom?

The second guy was Sherman Wilson. Gage didn't know him personally, but Sherman was a very common person of interest once someone started talking about the super-rich. His foibles were well known, but from experience, Gage knew that Sherman was probably being protected by the media. It didn't do any media conglomerates any favors to piss off the head of underwater ranching on Europa just to get the scoop on his son's sexual deviance. After all, everyone had a little sexual deviance and people who lived in glass houses shouldn't throw stones.

If Iona chose Sherman, Gage thought the contract offered to her had very little chance of protecting her. But, it might not matter much depending on the role she was given in the house. They might pay her an obscene amount of money to be a dog watcher. Who knew?

The last man, Benediction, worried Gage more than the others. He was on the list of people Gage was waiting to die. The silver lining there was that he thought Benediction was extremely unlikely to offer Iona a contract.

If Gage's predictions of the future went as he had foreseen, the three months would end in tears. He needed to make a backup plan to run alongside Iona's timeline. It wouldn't be too difficult. On the off-chance she wanted a trap door at the end of the three months, he'd make her one.

To distract him from his backup plans, Iona had begun explaining her plan to get the notice of each of the men. Gage listened and offered his input, but she already had every last detail nailed down, especially for her plans on Callisto. She had had a ton of time to plan her moves there.

Gage stuck a swab down Iona's throat. "If you test negative after this test, we can head back down to the surface."

"Great," she coughed, clearing her throat. "So you're going to sign the contract?"

He hadn't signed it yet.

"Does it need another layer of revisions?" she asked, her nervousness on her face, in her voice, and in her eyes.

"Maybe," he said. "I'm curious about a few things."

"Like what?"

“Did you really think you could keep a clear head about your manhunting if you were fooling around with me?” he asked smoothly as he screwed the top on the test tube. He inserted it into a transportable lab and the centrifuge clicked on inside.

She exhaled heavily. “I don’t know. I’m not sure what I expected from my time with you, except that I wanted to get to know you better. I have a million questions about you. For instance, I have never seen you wear a shackle around your wrist like the ones the other models wear. Yet you are owned by Sleeping Beauty Inc. Where is your bracelet?”

“Why would I need to wear a shackle? I live inside a prison. No one can come in except Sleeping Beauty models. There’s no need for a wrist monitor. Not only that, but my contract with Sleeping Beauty Inc. is too long to wear the same piece of technology forever.”

She nodded. “If I touched you right now, without a signed contract, would you get shocked?”

“No.”

She put out her hand as if to touch him.

Gage backed away, out of her reach. That had been quick. He hadn’t thought she would try anything like that. “There are cameras everywhere,” he reminded her.

She dropped her hand. “Oh. I see. They will turn them off after you sign the contract.”

He glanced at her. Her honey-colored eyes were looking downward like she was left deflated by the interchange.

“That’s what you wanted with your contract with me? To get to know me better?” he asked gently, hoping his gentleness would help her to confide in him.

“Well, I...” She hesitated. “Have you ever had a real relationship with anyone?”

“Yes.”

“A romantic relationship where you went to bed with them because you wanted to and not because you had to?” she reiterated.

“No,” he replied shortly.

“Neither have I,” she said the words like they were easier to say because he had said them first. “Can you tell me about the first time you were sold?”

“No,” he said briefly. Before approaching her as she sat on the examination table. He put his hands on her hands in her lap. “I think I understand now. You want to experiment with a real relationship. I can see why you want that. The truth is that you can’t have a real relationship any more than I can.”

Iona tried to talk, but Gage silenced her with a look.

“The reasons may be different but the outcome is the same,” he said firmly. “I’ve made up my mind. I’ll be your friend through this, but I can’t promise more than that. You’re paying me and I’m taking the money to do what you want. I will make one more change to the contract and then I will sign it.”

Her eyes shot up to meet his. “I was getting worried you weren’t going to sign it at all.”

“I needed to understand what was going on. I think I get it. You see me as a friend and you want someone to help you navigate this next stage of your career. You said as much before, that you need a friend. I’ll be there for you, but it would be best if you forgot about love. I’m a model as much as you are, and nothing is stupider than a model falling in love with their master.”

Iona’s expression went steely when Gage said that. Sleeping Beauty Inc. said a lot of things to their models when they trained them. Some models got more training than others, but Iona

had been trained by some of the best models in the industry. Gage knew the propaganda that had been fed to her.

“Don’t fall in love,” one poster said.

“If you fall in love, fall in love with everybody,” the one next to it said.

“There’s no right way to do this,” the last one proclaimed silently.

Gage turned to check on the throat swab. “Looks like you’re healthy. Is there anything further you want to do before we head back down to Callisto?”

“Wait,” Iona said, hopping off the exam table. “What do you want to change in the contract?”

“I’m going to add a clause that states that I have no obligation to answer any questions about my past in addition to removing any sexual obligation. If I share anything with you, you’ll know it’s because I want to and not because you’re forcing me. I think that will help both of us feel more comfortable.”

Gage watched as Iona agreed, a pleasant warmth covering her features. It seemed she agreed with that.

Like most models, she didn’t know what a real relationship looked like. He had been there too, when he had been a slave for so long, living for another person’s desires. That was a life flipped on its head. Everything was fine if your master was fine, not if you were fine. Asking for one thing for yourself was asking too much unless you had an obvious injury like a cut. Even then, you were often asked to forget about yourself and improvise.

It isn’t about you.

Nothing is about you.

The world of Sleeping Beauty Inc. allowed women (and sometimes men), to live the life of royalty. It was a mistake to think of royalty as a life of privilege. It was in some ways, but it was also a life of profound duty. There were pretty clothes and many fine occasions. You looked the part, but you didn’t belong to yourself. Sleeping Beauty Inc. offered that life in the most literal way possible except you didn’t have subjects, you had masters you had to satisfy.

Everything was okay as long as you could satisfy them.

Gage had done what he could to make the contract with Iona as friendly and conducive to a real relationship as possible, but it wasn’t enough. The automated contracts created by Sleeping Beauty Inc. made it very clear who was the master and who was the slave. There was no such thing as a friendship contract. Iona would be his master once he signed the document. Was it so strange that Iona wanted to flip the tables and be the master herself for a change? He wished she hadn’t chosen him.

Gage was still unhappy about signing the contract when he did so. He traced his finger on the screen in the shape of his double g signature and for a moment he thought about all the people he was waiting to die.

If things went on as they had been, it would be a very long time before all those people were dead and he was free. Suddenly, he had the horrid idea that one of them was asleep in cryostasis at that very moment and he wasn’t asleep matching their speed through time. The idea gave him shivers. He had to see them all dead if he was ever going to find peace.

He regretted signing the contract immediately.

Chapter Five

Gage and Iona were going to a nightclub on the surface of Callisto to enact the first phase of Iona's master plan. The club was called The Crater and it was dug out of a hole in the pink light district in the city of Mitsina. The truth was that Gage would not have been caught dead in such a place if Iona hadn't requested it. It was a members-only club, which meant that the place had no front facade. In order to find the place, you had to meander your way through a labyrinth of pink rock palaces, find the secret door, knock the secret rhythm, say the password, give a backward glance down a deserted alley, and enter like a thief in the night.

Iona had visited the place on a wide array of occasions since it was one of the hot spots for the ultra-rich that she had been expected to entertain. From what Iona knew of the place, it existed more to give the rich people the thrill of visiting an underground club than that anything truly grotesque happened there on a regular basis. However, that didn't mean that debauchery wasn't on the menu. It just meant that it was legal.

When Gage and Iona left the Cannonball III, she had done everything she could do shy of electrocuting him to get him to wear normal clothes. However, her pleas fell on deaf ears. He wouldn't listen and instead wore the skintight bodysuit/body armor he wore when he went to sleep in his personal sleeping chamber aboard the Cannonball.

"I never wear a space suit when I go into cryostasis. What's with that gear?" she complained.

"Yes, it's all fine for you, but if the ship malfunctions, *you* are not expected to fix it or rescue any merchandise onboard. I have to do both things and I cannot do my job properly if I'm in my jam jams."

"Did you just call me merchandise?"

"Yep. I did."

"Why?" she asked through tight lips.

"It's to dehumanize you," Gage answered without hesitation.

Iona smacked her lips together and huffed. "I'm a princess to Sleeping Beauty Inc., but I'm not a human?"

"The instructions aren't stupid. They tell you to do it that way in every manual. For one thing, it stops pilots from being squeamish about selling girls into slavery, even if it's temporary and voluntary. For another, it's easier to talk about what happened aboard a vessel that was lost if you don't say, 'I lost the princess to the void of outer space.' It's much nicer to say, 'I lost the merchandise.' When that sort of thing happens, it's usually not the fault of the pilot anyway."

"I see. Well, at least you look good in that suit. You'd have to for me to let you off the hook about wearing a suit and tie. Please tell me you plan to leave the helmet behind."

Gage looked at the suit. It fit very well and it made him look good because outfits that highlighted a man's muscle groupings were always in fashion, no matter how much time passed when he was asleep in space. It was dark silver and blue. The silver was the plates that were stiff like armor protecting his forearms, arms, pecs, hips, thighs, calves, and every other place. The black was a mesh almost like chain mail that bent at his flexible parts like his elbows and knees. It did make him look a little like a robot, but the suit wasn't so unusual that people didn't know it for what it was.

He grabbed the helmet.

Iona groaned. "You're going to wear the helmet, aren't you?"

“Only until we get back to the Cannonball III.”

“Why wear it at all?”

He started rattling off excuses in quick succession counting them on his fingers. “One: I’m too gorgeous. I don’t want to hijack the spotlight from you. I’m not stealing any prospective customers and I’m not taking contract offers from randos. Two: I don’t want you to look at me. Comparing me with your prospective buyers will only ruin your resolve since I’m so much better looking than all of them. Three: I want to look more intimidating than I would look in normal clothes. Four: it makes you look more important to have me dressed like this. Who has a bodyguard like this?” He paused his jovial rant, waiting to see if she bought any of the excuses he had listed. “Do any of those reasons check your boxes?”

She let out a resigned breath. “You’re right. With that on, you look like an incredibly serious bodyguard. And you’re right again that you’re ridiculously attractive—mouthwatering even. I just didn’t know that you knew you were. You always act like you’re oblivious to your chiseled jawline and daydream blue eyes,” she said with a little mockery in her tone.

He looked at her squarely. “I’m at odds with my face, but I know I have it.”

“Don’t you like the way you look?” she asked, taking his forearm between her fingers and doing up the snaps at his wrist.

Gage hesitated. “I imagine most people would like to spend some time separated from the way they look just to get some perspective. Would people still like me if I looked differently? Would I still like myself if I suddenly had a different face? How much of my love for myself is based on my face?”

Iona chuckled. “It’s not your face anyone’s looking at.” She ran a hand across the armor plate that covered his butt.

“Why stop there?” he chided. “Touch wherever you want. When I’m wearing the armor I can’t really feel it and neither can you. Does the feeling of the silver plate excite you?”

“About as much as it does to run my hand over the front grill of a brand new helocarrier.”

Gage swallowed. Doing something like that excited him quite a lot. Watching Iona do it would have probably got him going more than her grabbing his butt without the armor. Someone grabbing him didn’t do anything for him.

“Okay,” he said as he slid his helmet on.

The helmet was particularly marvelous because it was impossible for someone watching him to see who he was underneath, or which direction he was looking. That meant he could look at Iona in any way he wanted without attracting attention.

Iona was ready to go and she looked like the starlet she could have been in another life. Her pink hair was swept away from her face in a way that made sure it would stay out of her way, secured in a bun on the left corner of her head with ringlets spilling down far enough to brush her shoulder. Crystals and beads sprung from her messy bun and hung from metal wires above her head giving her a slight halo effect. The makeup on her face was pink and white in horizontal stripes across her nose and cheeks. It made the line of her black eyelashes a miracle above the striped blush.

She wore a black trenchcoat. It was covering the costume she planned to perform in. She had a pile of them she had delivered to the Cannonball III once they returned to Callisto. She modeled each one for Gage. It was not against the conditions of the contract, but Gage felt that

he should have made a rule against a thirty-piece lingerie show that he was forced to watch and choose favorite pieces.

She was tempting him.

When he sat down for it, he thought that it wouldn't turn his head. He hated the physical display of a person's assets. It disgusted him. However, unintentionally, he had let his guard down and found that he had a lot of opinions about which outfit would work the best for Iona's purposes. It also helped that he knew exactly which man Iona was hunting—Dante.

By the end of the exercise, Iona had been annoyed that Gage had been so businesslike about the selection and not more interested in ripping it off her. She did not need to say so. Her expression showed it all.

It was in his best interest not to give her tips, so he refrained from saying, 'You won't get me in bed this way. I'm not sexually attracted to traditional seduction methods. They've been used against me to hurt me too many times.'

Once they made their way through the pink rock labyrinth to The Crater, Iona didn't bother with the front door to the club and went straight for the back doors. Once inside, she greeted the manager, Frikzen, with a smile and a handshake. He welcomed her pleasantly and parted a curtain to show her what she had come to see.

"Dante is right there. He came with an entourage of three women," Frikzen explained.

"Should I be worried?"

"I wouldn't be worried if I were you. Nothing in this world is more beguiling than what you can't have," Frikzen replied.

Iona threw off her coat and tossed it at Gage, who caught it. She was wearing an elaborate wrap dress over her costume, which she planned to remove once she was on stage. Before she began her performance, it was imperative that she pass Dante, show him what he was missing close up, and then take the stage.

Gage looked out at the club over Iona's head. It was arranged like a traditional club from hundreds of years ago. There was a crescent-shaped bar that covered the back wall. Then there were rows of tables on a higher platform, then circular tables closer to the stage which covered a wall. The only thing that was edgy about the arrangement was the floating tables. They weren't really floating. They were elevators in old-fashioned cages that were raised to the height the patrons inside desired. The people in the elevator shafts got the best views of the stage.

On the stage, there was a male performer who sang shirtless and pulled on the front of his pants to give the audience the best view of his eight-pack.

Gage swallowed. He had been forced to do that sort of thing. He'd had his pants torn to the floor more than once.

Looking at the jewels on wires on the top of Iona's head; they made her look pure, like an innocent creature. He couldn't help but wonder if she knew what she was getting into. It was only one performance, but people who saw these types of performances tended to want to see another, and another. And then more. He ran his hands over his armor and felt sick at the idea of taking it off.

Suddenly, Iona took his hand in hers and pulled him forward. He went along with her. It was his job to make sure she was safe. He stiffened, let go of her hand, and followed her, acting as her bodyguard.

She made a beeline for Dante, her gaze elsewhere. It was Gage's appearance that alerted Dante of Iona's arrival.

He stepped forward, large and angular. "Iona!" He greeted her like she was an old friend.

Gage remembered that she said she used to be his father's trainer.

Dante threw off his three other escorts with a curt nod that sent them all scurrying to the bar. Then he placed his fingers on Iona's bare shoulder and skimmed her body with those two fingers until they were resting on the swell of her hip. Then he glanced at Gage as if to get permission to touch her further.

Gage shook his head in the negative.

Iona took his hand off her hip herself and held Dante's hand delicately between her fingers. "How are you, my dearest one?" she asked in a voice Gage had never heard her use before.

Gage did a double take. Was that Iona who had just spoken? It didn't sound like her. It didn't sound like her voice, all cute and motherly, like a little girl who was suddenly taking care of Dante because his comfort was the highest priority in her mind.

"I haven't seen you in ages," she went on. "I've worried about you since the last round of bidding. Are your girls taking proper care of you?" She was alternating between tracing the lines on the inside of his palm and glancing up at his face in innocent micro peeks. "Are you properly cared for?"

Dante smiled. "They're alright, but they're not like you."

"I used to work with Georgina," Iona said, glancing toward the girls at the bar. "She's a sweet model. You have such delightful taste in women."

Her act suddenly got a lot more interesting to Gage. Iona wasn't going to insult them? Instead, she praised them?

She continued in a rapturous little girl voice, "I don't know the other two, but they are so beautiful. Like buttercups sitting in pearls. I love them!"

No wonder she was always sick when she got back to the Cannonball III if this was how she acted when she was working. It was so against her personality, she must have been exhausted.

Dante was whispering in her ear then, but Gage just needed to turn up the volume on his suit and he heard everything through the speakers in his helmet. "They're nothing compared to you. When will you let me win the bidding to get you? You must know I would rather have you. Tell me what I have to do to beat out the benefits the helocarrier company gives you and I'll let those girls go... for you."

Iona's eyes were pleading almost begging as she returned his greedy stare. She hooked her fingers around his neck and brought his ear close to her mouth. She whispered, "You have to bid higher." Then she kissed him.

It was very obviously the first time she had laid her lips on his.

His reaction was sudden and spontaneous.

She had laced her lips with a drug that brought sudden ecstasy to her kiss. It was called rush. Gage knew it well. It had been used on him many times. It brought a sudden gush of happiness so intense that the happiest moments of Gage's life had been when he had ingested a lick of it. It was the sort of thing that made him distrust happiness that wore off quickly because rush wore off very quickly. It was illegal, but they were in a place where those lines were blurred.

Iona wasn't hoping that Dante wouldn't realize what was happening. She was clearly hoping that he would recognize what was done and like the spunky nature of it. If she was going to win him, her plan was to attack him on all fronts.

First, she was reminding him that she was very nurturing. Second, she was giving him a taste of what she was like as a woman and how satisfying she could be. Third, she was going to get up on the stage and show him what a good trophy she could be.

It wasn't a question of whether or not Dante would bid on her. It was a question of how much he was willing to bid.

Chapter Six

Iona stepped away from Dante. She couldn't give him a taste of rush without getting one herself, so she was feeling dizzy from artificial happiness. The feeling disgusted her, but she had been given a stockpile of the stuff from a former model who pitied her and believed that it would give her the edge she needed to escape the tyranny of modeling. That model had felt very different from Iona, but she hadn't had corporate contracts, so her situation had been more complex. Pleasing a master was much easier if they were blissfully happy whenever you kissed them... and they didn't have to pay for the rush.

As it was, Iona had been trying to get rid of the stuff since she had originally been given a thousand doses. Usually, she laced drinks with it when she was entertaining guests for the company and only in seedy places like The Crater. That way she could claim someone else smeared it on the lip of the cup.

In any case, she had done what she'd set out to do with Dante. Although the whole thing was less exciting than she hoped it would be. Gage had warned her that he was better looking than Dante and that if she compared the two of them, he'd have the edge. That was one of the reasons why he said he had to cover his face. It didn't help though. Iona had seen Gage recently and the memory was more than convincing. Gage was better.

Dante had even been on his best behavior and Gage still outshone him something fierce. Regardless of their faces and bodies, Gage was a better man inside. Iona had to remind herself that Gage was part of the industry that sold people. It was voluntary but voluntary in name only. People did things they didn't want to do all the time because they disliked both choices but chose the lesser evil or the bigger reward.

Her life had once been like that too and she would do anything to stop her life from reverting to what it was before she was a model. With a contract on her side, she felt like she had some power. It wasn't the kind of power the buyer had, but it was something, and no job lasted forever.

Putting some space between her and Dante and their kiss, she wasn't sure how effective her little act had been. It was hard to tell when she was forbidden from turning around to look at his face. Now that she was walking away from him, had he forgotten all about her? Was he back with Georgina and the others? Or was he still watching her? What was the look on his face?

She didn't mean to, but she turned to get a peek anyway.

It was more than luck that Gage was behind her to block her view. The metal of his gloves against her elbows two at a time kept her body moving forward toward the stage.

"Have you taken rush before? Is that why you're babying me? You're worried I'll fall forward?" she whispered, knowing that he would be able to hear her.

"I'm worried your boy will see you at less than your best if I don't block his line of sight. Not only that, but the choir boy with the eight pack has almost finished his set and you're up next. I don't want you to be tipsy. The gravity is less here than on Earth, so you're less likely to fall. At least, I thought you were less likely to fall before you took a half dose of rush."

"I'm not going to fall," she replied firmly.

"Breathe harder. Big deep breaths in and out. You can breathe your way out of a rush dose if you breathe hard enough and you need to be at your best."

She followed his advice as they went back behind the stage. Frikzen met them and Iona went over the movements of the acrobatics she planned to perform before the show. Gage had made her go over them with him numerous times back on the Cannonball III, not just listening to her explain what her show would look like, but almost going through the motions with her.

The singer finished his last song and got applause from the audience before the MC came on the stage and made a few jokes while the set was changed.

“Tonight we have a special treat for you. Long ago, Iona Stirling won the crowd right here at The Crater with her spontaneous acrobatics. She’s on break from Sleeping Beauty Inc. and Excalibur Helocarriers and she has a great act planned. Everyone get out your recording devices. You’re going to want to prove you were here when this act goes viral.”

Iona winced at that, but that was the sort of world she lived in. If only she didn’t still feel like she was going to fall over. She breathed heavily as Gage instructed.

“Welcome her! Iona Stirling!”

The crowd hooted and clapped for her and she parted the curtain and stepped onto the stage. She went to center stage and bowed while the rings and aerial silks were lowered. She straightened and the music began.

The first thing she had to do was remove the dress she wore over her costume. She called up a man from the audience. She specifically chose someone who stood a few paces from Dante. She even had the gall to look Dante in the eye for a moment before she skipped over him and chose someone else. The man came up and she made a silent show of how she needed help undoing the buckles at her hip.

He must have been very experienced in undoing clothes as he had her unbuckled faster than the music had tempo for. Playfully, she tossed her helper off the stage, threw her dress off her shoulders, and then flung it in his face over the audience.

Her costume under the wrap dress was the one Gage swore would be the best. It was black and pink and she looked much more naked than she actually was as most of the outfit was made out of stretchy fabric made to imitate skin. It cut high up the legs with huge amounts of tulle that flared at the small of her back and gave the impression of tail feathers. The front was pink glitter from her waist to where her legs parted. The glitter went all the way back, which would look amazing when she did the splits between the silks and rings. The black of the outfit was a black sash around her waist that faded as the bodice became pink satin. She finished the outfit with a black velvet choker.

She felt perfect as she did two cartwheels to land next to the ring she planned to mount. She landed them like a champ, but when she sat like a bird on the perch of the ring and it went up, she was suddenly accosted with a wave of motion sickness.

That never happened to her. She was dizzy. She was faint, but she tried to go on with her performance.

She lifted herself further up so she was no longer inside the hoop, but above it. She clenched her fingers around the chain and went up into the air.

Iona was never able to explain what happened when she got to the top of the stage. She saw white—white lights. She saw black—something blacked out her eyes without closing her eyelids. She was falling, though she was not screaming. She was used to falling in a way a normal person was not. Instead of panicking, she reached out and her hand caught the silk that

was made for bearing her weight. She was swinging though she could not see the hand that caught her.

She let go of the silk because she trusted the touch implicitly. She was encircled in arms she trusted, hands that touched her carefully. She was bent over his knee and he was kissing her. The last of the rush was licked off her lips and she suddenly came to, her sight returning to her.

Gage was under her and on top of her. He wasn't wearing his armor and instead, he was dressed as if he had always meant to go on stage with her, wearing athletic black pants, no shirt, and a black blindfold over his eyes. Of course, it wasn't a normal blindfold and its greatest function was to cover his face. He could see her perfectly.

"Did you take a double dose?" he asked, breathing out the ecstasy that was rush onto her face.

"I didn't mean to, but I must have," Iona murmured.

The crowd had clapped for Gage's catch of Iona, but it was a little hesitant because they weren't sure if that much danger had been part of the act.

"You have to finish. I'll help you," he said, lifting her up and giving her a little twirl.

She got back up on her ring and Gage climbed a silk hand over hand to catch up with her as she went up and up. She brushed fingertips with him as he stretched out to touch her.

As he accompanied her through the dance, she wondered how he was so steady on his feet with all that rush so recently in his system. Like his body, which was so perfect, so were his movements. Had he been a pole dancer in a previous life? Had he joined the circus? He caught her twice and threw her up in the air like she was a bird that could take flight if he got her high enough.

At the end of the routine, he put her directly on the extended stage and straddled her. For a second, she realized that was what she had wanted when she marked all those crazy boxes on their contract. She wanted to be this close to him.

The lights went out and she wanted to disappear with him.

As it was, he hopped off her when the lights were off and returned to the back of the stage.

She got up too and when the stage lights flicked back on, she was alone on the stage, bowing in front of the audience.

They screamed and hollered. The fuss was more than it had been when she had performed before. The fuss was more than she had ever had on her own and Gage was gone. She knew he was behind the curtain tightening his armor.

She found Dante's eyes in the crowd and blew him a kiss.

She didn't think about the dress she had discarded and instead bowed three more times and joined Gage backstage.

Around the corner, the man she had danced with was gone, and instead, her blue and silver clad bodyguard was all that was left. He held her coat open for her and folded it around her. Then he led the way for her to exit the building and took an odd escape route through the pink stone palaces. Soon they were safely back aboard the Cannonball III.

Chapter Seven

Gage was back in the pilot seat in the cockpit of the Cannonball III. Through the flight deck windows, he saw Callisto floating like a piece of jewelry on the throat of the universe. The moon was stone gray with tiny points of light shining all over it. Originally, all those lights had been white, but with the colonization of Callisto, some of them now shone pink and others shone yellow. The view almost murdered him with its beauty.

On the way back to the ship from The Crater, he had unconsciously licked his lips so many times that he'd made them sore. He had some stuff he could put on them in the infirmary if he was proactive enough to get off his butt. Except he wasn't feeling proactive. If he got up, he'd pass Iona's room and he knew she'd want to debrief before he put her to sleep for the trip to Europa. He didn't want to talk to her yet.

He wasn't ready when she came into the cockpit, wearing a white satin housecoat and wooden sandals.

He swiveled in his chair to face her. "What did you think of Dante?" he asked in a dull voice. "Ah... he was how I remembered him," she said noncommittally.

"Hmm. I've never heard you talk the way you spoke to him before. Is that your secret for earning the big bucks? You talk to the men in that little girl voice that makes each man feel like he's the biggest man in the room because you're so little and feminine? He has to be smarter than you? Stronger than you? He's the man and you're nothing more than an accessory to his vanity?"

Gage made his accusations and glanced at her. She was smiling. She had skin as thick as dragon scales. She was proud of her little deception and her ability to let whatever terrible thing was happening roll off... even his insults.

She giggled. "It's worth a lot of money to make someone else feel like they're in control. I have to thank you for what you did tonight. You were heroic!"

"Your little act won't work on me," he said coldly, swiveling out of her sight. "I'm not like those guys. I don't need to be in control."

She came around and leaned against a bare panel in the controls of the ship and looked earnestly into his face.

He caved and told her his side of the story from earlier that night. "You had clearly taken too much rush. Either you accidentally took a double dose, or you didn't give Dante enough when you kissed him. Whatever happened, you were still taking it when you went onstage. I would have kissed you before you went on if I hadn't been wearing my helmet. I got changed and hoped I wouldn't cause a ruckus if I had to catch you. It seemed like it went pretty smoothly."

"It went very smoothly," she said softly. "Thanks for kissing me. You never slip me the tongue when you wake me up. It was awesome. Can you..."

"No," he interrupted firmly. "I cannot slip you the tongue when I wake you up on Europa. Putting your tongue in someone's mouth when they're waking up from cryostasis is revolting. Buyers are warned not to do that in the manual issued by Sleeping Beauty Inc."

She slipped her foot out of her sandal and rubbed her toes against his bootlaces. "Can you slip me the tongue before I go to sleep?"

Gage let his head loll back. "What are you doing?"

"I'm asking for what I want. I'm not playing games," she said, the expression on her face was earnest.

Earnestness did go a long way with Gage when nothing else went anywhere. More than turning him on, it reminded him that she was a person and that he had a job to do. He still had to do her quarter physical. "Are you hurt after your tumble?"

She winced and nodded. "I'm a little hurt, here in the shoulder. I tore something when I caught the silk," she admitted.

"Okay, then we'll go to the infirmary and I'll work on it." He got up from the chair and led her to the medical room.

He turned on the lights and scanned her arm. At least, she wasn't making up her injury, which he worried she might do.

"Lie down. I'll massage a cream into it. The cream will help you heal when you're asleep. Take your arm out of your sleeve and lie down on the table."

She did as she was told.

He retrieved the cream and warmed it between his fingers before placing a hand on her.

"It would help me if you could tell me why you're rejecting me," Iona suddenly said as she obviously found it difficult to relax.

He thought for a moment before he answered. "All my relationships have been under painful circumstances. The kind of love you're hoping for isn't something I have a blueprint for. Sometimes, I had to do what I was told even if it was intolerable. Sometimes, I wasn't treated like a human."

"Did you ever fall in love?" she asked.

"No. The only thing I ever learned about love was how to stop myself from being used as a toy. Normally, I'm really good at protecting myself. The best part about it is that I don't take these kinds of contracts. I'm only tolerating this because I like you."

Gage's eyes went wide. He hadn't meant to say that. He rolled his eyes and kept rubbing.

"You like me?" she blurted.

"As much as I like anyone," he replied drolly. "If that contract had come from one of the other girls, I would have turned it down."

"Surely, if you like me, a little fooling around would be good for you," she said excitedly, attempting to get up from the table and almost flashing him.

Gage pushed her shoulder down and got her back on the table. "Don't start." He rubbed her shoulder so well that she temporarily forgot what she was trying to talk to him about and he successfully derailed her. "Why don't you tell me your plan for Sherman?"

"There's nothing to that. There's going to be a show at Sleeping Beauty Inc. headquarters on Europa. He's going because it's been confirmed that he's replacing Jessica. I'm already slated to be the second girl down the catwalk."

"I thought you didn't want help from Sleeping Beauty Inc.?" Gage reminded her.

"I do if it's Sherman. I don't want to marry him. I want to legally lift a bunch of cash off him and as you said before, Sleeping Beauty Inc. is completely happy for me to do that. He's not the type of man who would understand a contrived meeting. He knows the deal and he's going to the show to see what models are for rent. Have you ever been to a model show before?"

He nodded though Iona couldn't see it. "Yeah, it's different than a fashion show because they aren't showing the clothes, they're showing the people under the clothes. I've done a few."

“What did you wear?”

“Mostly I was displayed in my underwear, sometimes something more like metal booty shorts, and once I was asked to walk the catwalk completely naked.”

Iona gasped. “Did you do it?”

“Yeah, but I was shocked four times for noncompliance before I gave in. I wasn’t working for Sleeping Beauty Inc. when that happened. They don’t display their models naked because they want the profit. You know, that whole idea that if you want to see up a model’s skirt, you’re going to pay for it.”

“Why did they want to see you naked?”

Gage didn’t have to answer that, but he wanted to. “They wanted to show that I was identical to the other models in every way.”

“Were you being sold en masse?”

“Yes.” His voice was quiet in the infirmary.

Abruptly, he finished massaging the cream into Iona’s shoulder and arm. He helped her up and took her through the steps of the quarter physical.

“Nakedness really doesn’t mean the same thing to you as it does to other men,” she commented as she hopped down from the table. “It’s something more precious and yet cheaper, isn’t it?”

“I suppose that’s a good way of describing it,” he said kindly.

“And if I dropped my robe right now, you wouldn’t feel like jumping me? You’d just feel sort of sad that I was giving something precious away so cheaply, wouldn’t you?”

He swallowed and looked away. “Don’t drop your robe.”

Iona fingered the edges of the white satin like she might drop her robe at any second.

Gage was about to protest when a white signal started blinking from the corner of the infirmary. “Excuse me. There’s a message in the cockpit for me.”

He strode out and Iona followed him.

“Hey, Tanya,” he said, pressing the button to open the communication link.

“Hi, Gage. I know you’re on your super hot sex romp with Iona right now, but I’ve got a girl going to Europa and it would be a huge favor to me if you could pick her up on your next revolution of Callisto, keep her asleep, and take her with you to Europa. I swear she won’t be in the way and Sleeping Beauty Inc. will pay you half the price of Iona’s contract for you to take her and Iona will get a fifty percent discount on your rental price. What do you say, you two lovebirds? Can you take her?”

Gage glanced at Iona. “Hang on, Tanya. We’re going to have a couple’s meeting.” He turned off the communication link. “What do you think?”

“Will we have to see her?” Iona asked skeptically.

“Not here. If I’m picking her up on the next revolution, that means that we’ll be doing the handoff in space. They’ll put her cryochamber in the cargo hold without either of us saying hi. However, we will have to wake her when we get to Europa.”

“I don’t like the idea of getting a discount on you. I want to pay the highest amount for you,” Iona said stiffly.

“I’ll get more money if you say yes,” he pointed out.

“You don’t mind picking her up?” Iona snarled.

“Normally, it’s the only thing I do, so no, I don’t mind.”

Iona put a hand on her hip. “What happens to her after we drop her off? Will she try to weasel her way back aboard for our trip to Io?”

“Let’s find out.” Gage turned the communication link back on. “Hey, Tanya. Iona seems to be game, but she needs reassurance that our vacation will not be interrupted further. If we take your girl to Europa can you guarantee that you won’t ask for another passenger to Io?”

“Aw, Gage. You know I can’t promise anything like that,” Tanya whined on the other end of the line. “I’d love to, but you know as well as I do that space travel is unpredictable. If a spaceship blows up anywhere near you, I’ll have to send you as a rescue crew even if you’re in the middle of—”

Gage pressed the communication link button in rapid succession so Iona would hear a beeping sound instead of the end of Tanya’s sentence.

“What are you trying to do, Tanya? Kill the romance over here?” he complained once the beeping stopped.

“Sorry,” the communication specialist murmured. “It’s been a tough time over here. The only thing I can promise is that if your vacation is horribly ruined, Sleeping Beauty Inc. will provide money or time to compensate for whatever is lost.”

Iona was shaking her head uncomfortably.

“One sec,” Gage said as he turned off the communication link. “What are you thinking?”

“I think that I’ve already let go of so many of my expectations for this trip. Not only are we not fooling around as I hoped we would, but if Sleeping Beauty Inc. is willing to pay that kind of scratch to get this girl to Europa in time for the show, she’s going to be competing against me for Sherman’s attention. What are they going to do to compensate me if she gets that big fat contract and I don’t?” She huffed out a breath and turned to Gage. “How badly do you want to take her?”

Gage didn’t care if he took the other model to Europa or not. He didn’t care about the money, but his old self was kicking in as Iona expressed her unhappiness over their contract. He couldn’t let his master feel that way about their contract.

He stood up and almost did something that couldn’t be undone. Instead, he took refuge behind an old standby. “We can do whatever you want while we wait for her to be dropped off,” he offered.

“Done,” Iona said before strolling out of the cockpit. “I’ll meet you on my bed.”

Gage frowned. That was a game he used to play with one of his old owners. The way she played it had been horrible, however, it had always made her happy and that had always made things better. Apparently, Iona liked it too because she had gotten awfully excited.

He got back on the communicator and told Tanya they’d stay and pick up the model.

“Great,” Tanya said. “It’s Cinni. Do you remember her?”

“Gobs of cinnamon-scented perfume? Reddish brown hair, brown eyes, freckles, and a dead ringer for Strawberry Shortcake?”

“That’s her.”

“Tell me. Are we picking her up so she can also be at the Sleeping Beauty Inc. model show on Europa?”

“Yeah. Did Iona put that together? Is she annoyed?”

“She’s a little annoyed, but it’s nothing I can’t fix,” Gage said coolly.

“I should save up and buy a little time with you,” Tanya said over the speaker system with a saucy click of her tongue.

Gage rolled his eyes. “Goodnight, Tanya.”

He got up from his pilot’s chair and made his way to his room. His room was not like Iona’s in that it had no bed in it. If he was going to sleep, he slept in his cryochamber. Aside from that, he had a locker that held the things he needed to make himself more presentable. He used them sparingly when he was working, but since he had temporarily signed away his freedom, he performed his checklist.

He stripped and showered. It was never much of a shower in space. It was wet air blown on him from all directions, but it helped him feel cleaner, especially his hair. When that was done, he put on fresh clothes, cleaned his teeth, applied scent, and finally got around to putting the ointment on his lips he’d been promising himself he’d apply. That was the most he had ever done for Olivine and she’d never complained.

He snapped his door shut and made his way to Iona’s room.

Chapter Eight

Iona watched Gage stride toward her. She was sitting cross-legged on her primly made bed. He joined her by sitting at the foot of the bed and matching her position.

“What do you want to do?” Gage asked.

“I want to start by asking you a few questions. Nothing too taxing, but a few personal questions so I can get to know you better.”

Gage nodded.

Iona nodded back at him and she began. “Do you like boys? Is that why you keep blowing me off?”

He shook his head. “No. I keep blowing you off because one of the rules of my new life is what I said before. I’m not your toy. I’m not anybody’s plaything. I live by my own rules and I don’t need the money enough to sell myself in that way.”

“But you used to?” she asked, suddenly feeling like he was somehow looking down on her for having sold herself in the past.

He shook his head again. “No. I never did.” He clenched his jaw.

Iona did not expect that. “If you’ve been toyed with before then that must mean?”

“Yes, that I was sold into involuntary slavery... more than once.”

“What was that like?” she asked tentatively. He might not answer her.

He sighed. “It was nothing like the contracts you’ve signed that I’ve supervised. I’m not here to ruin your holiday by explaining all the ways I was toyed with.” He scratched the back of his neck. “All you need to know is that I have a general distaste for sexual experiences that are not a thousand percent voluntary. I think all forms of BDSM are an abomination and anything that is intended to humiliate and degrade another human is sickening.”

“You must know that a lot of the girls you ferry around do things like that as part of their contracts,” Iona said, having been subjected to both whipping and whipping others during the early years of her career.

“Yeah, but I can’t control what other people do,” he said with a slight wave of his hand. “I can only control what happens to me, and I can only do that *some* of the time. I wanted to tell you that a few of the boxes you checked on your original contract were telling. Do you find that sort of thing interesting?”

The truth was that Iona didn’t normally go for BDSM. She hadn’t checked any boxes that allowed for whipping. She had mostly checked boxes for dirty talk and yelling, but it was true that she had checked a few boxes that leaned towards the BDSM that he hated so much. One was the reason she’d already stated. She didn’t want to look like a prude, but most contracts were confidential, so the truth was that she didn’t want to look like a prude in front of Gage. What had been offensive if it were done to her by a master had appeared provocative if Gage had been the one to do it to her.

“Honestly,” she said, pulling his hand to her and stroking the inside of his palm the way she had with Dante. “I thought you were harder than this. I thought that if I checked those boxes, you would be more interested in signing that contract. I was very surprised by your objections.”

“Why?”

“Because you look like a sex machine from the neck down. From the neck up, it’s a different story. Your eyes gleam with this friendly light, but I don’t know that that friendliness isn’t just

because of our roles on this ship. You're supposed to take care of me and you do that with complete professionalism. When you're alone, when you need pleasure, certain lines of your face suggest that you couldn't be satisfied by something homegrown. In secret, you want something more."

He scoffed. "I'm at odds with my face... and my body." He rolled his eyes but kept his palm between her fingers allowing her to touch him.

Iona only let a corner of her mouth tick upward. She almost had him. She continued softly, "That said. Do you find me attractive? If you don't, it would soothe my ego quite a lot to know it," she asked with a nervous chuckle attempting with all her might to appear vulnerable.

"You are very attractive," he said, placing two fingers on the point of her knee and running his fingers down her calf to her foot. He pulled one of her feet free from under her and pulled it into his lap. Gently, he began rubbing it and it felt so good to Iona that she almost fell over.

"Are you doing that so I'll forget to ask you questions?" she asked.

"Ask me another," he allowed.

"What do you think of the men I'm chasing?"

"They're all dirtbags, but if you want a rich man, you aren't going to get a good man. There aren't that many men who could afford you and a good man would never bid on you." He left one hand on her while he reached for a throw blanket that drooped off the edge of the bed. He slid it over her bare legs and continued the message.

Iona wanted to complain. She wanted her legs bare so he could see them, but she couldn't deny that she was more comfortable in the cool spaceship with her legs covered.

"What do you think is pretty about me?" she ventured.

He looked up as if he were thinking. "Rose petals could learn a thing or two from the softness of your cheek."

"I'll kill you, Gage," she replied crossly.

"Oh? You didn't want the poetry special, taught to particularly beautiful boys so they don't say the wrong thing to anyone's daughter?"

She stuck out her tongue. "Ugh, I'm just thinking of the very special appeal of you only saying what you truly mean instead of all that crap you dish out to improve the mood of the heiresses."

He smirked. "Can you really say that with a straight face after what you just did to my palm? Tracing lines all over my palm like I'm your little snowflake? You probably do that to every man you want to sway when you can't bear to look at his face."

Iona colored slightly. He wasn't wrong. "I didn't mean to do that. It's just hard to remake all my moves on the fly for you."

"I understand," he said before hissing his breath through his teeth. "That's why you're getting a foot rub."

"It's a good foot rub."

"Iona," he said, clearing his throat. "The thing that is the nicest about you is that you don't weary me with your complaints. I have never heard you make an unpleasant sound. Even just now, when you threatened to kill me, you still sounded beautiful. The truth is, you never needed to get me under contract to get me to touch you like this. If you'd asked me for this, I would have done it. You are a darling to me."

He let go of her feet and slid off the bed. He took the two steps necessary to her end of the bed and touched the side of her face gently.

“Forgive me,” he said. “This is going to feel exactly the same as it felt when I kissed the last person I was forced to under contract. That’s what you get when you pay for a date, the same moves they used the last time.”

Gage bent over her and his gaze was adoring in a way Iona never dreamed a man would ever look at her. When he put his lips on her, it was with the most delicate pressure she’d ever felt in a kiss. There was no rush and a remarkably small amount of heat as he had made his breathing very shallow. Instead, his lips explored hers in a way that made her feel like he could actually sense every line, groove, and sensation in her lips. It was a kiss that asked for nothing except the continuation of worship. She was the one being worshiped.

Then the heat came. He couldn’t hold his breath forever and he let all the heat that was held up inside him come out in a rush. He parted her lips with a flick of his tongue and the feeling was everything she dreamed of since their kiss on the stage.

Perhaps it could have gone on. Perhaps.

Gage turned his head away from her and Iona saw the light from the silent alarm. Gage was needed in the cockpit. He said nothing as he moved away from her, but took her hand in his and kissed the perfume point on her wrist before leaving the room with swift easy strides.

Iona didn’t realize what the words he said before the kiss meant before he left. She knew he’d been owned before, but what he showed her was both wonderful and horrible. It was wonderful that he’d been willing to share that part of himself with her, but it was also horrible because it meant that he had been a love slave which was not the same thing as a model from Sleeping Beauty Inc.

Chapter Nine

A model from Sleeping Beauty Inc. was a person with a collection of skills intended to elevate the lifestyle of their owner. They were not a whore. No one made sex with a model illegal, but from Iona's experience, the whole premise for Sleeping Beauty Inc.'s services was to help in a myriad of other ways.

She had worked as a saleswoman, a personal trainer, an interior designer, a nutritionist, and naturally, she had been the pretty little woman on a grotesque man's arm more than once, but she'd concentrated hard on forgetting those years. The only thing she really remembered about those days was how much she disliked the look of red hair on a man. Everything else was a blur because she refused to think about it.

What Gage had revealed was that he had been sold involuntarily and forced to play the love partner for a woman he despised. It was less than being a model, less than being a whore, less than an escort because he would not have been paid for anything and he would have been punished cruelly for any misbehavior.

Iona followed him quietly to the cockpit and watched him from around the doorframe as he maneuvered the Cannonball III into position. She would never have guessed something like that about him. His every movement was so assured. It was hard to imagine a situation when he hadn't been in control.

"Cargo has been loaded and the docking bay is sealed," he informed the other ship.

"Thanks, Gage," the other pilot called merrily over the speaker. "My ship is a wreck after the asteroid belt. I don't think I would have made it all the way to Europa."

"Are you dropping down for repairs on Callisto?" Gage asked, equally cheerful.

"Yeah. Just as soon as we sign off."

"Say hi to Lex for me, would you? Tell him my duct system has been working like a dream since my last visit."

"Will do."

"Goodnight, Stonic."

They signed off and Gage leaned back in his chair with his hands behind his head. The view of Callisto was large through the glass plate in front of him as he silently watched the other ship enter the moon's atmosphere.

Iona had seen Callisto from space quite a few times watching it from her bedroom window as she recovered from her after-work illnesses, but it didn't matter how many times she saw it, or the pink twinkles that shone from the surface. She didn't come here for the view of the moon. She came for the view of the man.

"Can I sit on your lap?" she asked quietly.

He started when she spoke, but he waved her in. "Sure."

She pressed her bare feet into the metal flooring of the cockpit and slid her white satin form onto his lap. He cradled her against his chest and swiveled his seat so she could see the moon better from where she was.

In the near-darkness, she asked him. "How did you get to be so strong after what you were through?"

"Oh... uh... I don't know that I'm that strong," Gage stammered. "Mostly, I just think about what's ahead of me instead of what's behind me."

“What’s ahead of you?”

“Right now? Callisto. I like the Jovian moons much more than I liked Earth. I like to feel like Earth and Mars are gone and the moons of the gas giants are all that is left. Isn’t life out here better?”

“It’s darker,” she mumbled.

If the Cannonball III turned to the side and showed the sun, it would be much smaller than it had been on Earth, and warmth from the sun felt nonexistent. It was warm on Callisto because of the geothermal poles that had been placed all over the moon. They provided heat and a magnetic field that protected the moon from radiation. It had been one of the most successful terraforming projects humans had ever known.

Europa had not been developed like Callisto, but Iona had been there before. She had spent several years working there. It wasn’t built upward toward the sky. It was built downward, toward the warmer oceans. That was what Europa was, skyscrapers built backward. The surface of the moon was unchanged. You set down over a landing pad and everything went down, down into the dark, down into the water, down into the heart of the moon, the heart of yourself.

It was a lonelier place than Callisto even though a lot of money had been used to try to make the place cheerful. It was like a mall that never ended. Which tower were you in? Did your room have a view of the ocean? Could you see the lights of other towers? Instead of traveling left and right, you traveled up and down.

The same went for the runway Iona would walk when they arrived. It was stairs. Clear stairs with no railings and walking them displayed a model’s balance and concentration more than anything else. Iona felt more confident about walking those stairs before she fell from the ring on the stage of The Crater.

She put the terrible feeling out of her mind as she rested in Gage’s arms. She closed her eyes and she only noticed a little jostling when he stood up. He was carrying her princess style. Was he taking her back to her bed? She felt unhappy as he placed her in her cryochamber. She didn’t want to go to sleep! She didn’t want to sleep through the month it would take to get to Europa. She wanted to stay awake and spend time with Gage. If she just had a little more time with him!

“No, I want to stay awake,” she balked—half asleep.

“We don’t have provisions to stay awake until we get to Europa,” he explained gently. “You know as well as I do that Europa is the butcher shop and the breadbasket of the Jovian region. We always get supplies at Europa. Anything else is highway robbery. We can talk about staying awake between Europa and Io. Okay?”

She fussed, but his hands were around her, securing her in the pod with straps so she didn’t bounce around inside her chamber if anything happened to the ship.

“You’ll go to sleep too?”

“Yes, little princess.”

“Can’t you go to sleep in here, with me?”

“No. I have to put on my suit and go to sleep in the pilot’s cryochamber. Not here.”

“But I’m lonely,” she whimpered, not realizing that was the first time she had complained to Gage.

“Then breathe in,” he said steadily.

She did as she was told, but was immediately disappointed. Of course, he didn't have a dose of rush to share with her. What she breathed in was the sleeping gas they gave every model to help her enter cryosleep without a fuss. She hated breathing it in, but she did.

Two deep breaths and when she breathed again, Gage was kissing her.

"That wasn't so bad, was it?"

She opened her eyes. He looked almost the same, but before he had been wearing a dark green T-shirt and now he was wearing a dark blue button-up shirt with half the buttons undone. It was much sexier and it took a moment for her to understand it.

"We're already on Europa?" she asked.

"Yeah."

"Have you already woken up the other model?" Iona said, getting up in her seat.

"I haven't. I was going to ask you what you wanted me to do with her before I put you to sleep, but you fell asleep so quickly."

"I did not!" Iona refuted.

"You did. Actually, I settled you in my arms, checked the weather forecast for our journey from Callisto to Europa, and you were asleep by the time I turned back. You must have fallen asleep in under two minutes."

Iona wanted to call him a dirty liar, but she was still pretty tired. She took the water bottle he offered her and took a refreshing sip.

"Do you want to see the model in the cargo hold or do you want me to send her downstairs without a meet and greet?"

"No. I want to be there for the whole thing. I want to see how it goes."

Gage swung his head. "Fine by me."

"Do you know the model?"

"Yeah. Her name is Cinni and I've moved her a few times."

Iona didn't change her clothes but stayed in her dressing robe as she followed Gage down to the cargo bay.

Chapter Ten

Gage was actually happy to take Iona to the cargo bay to show her how he dealt with the models in his care. He thought that if she saw it, she would understand on another level what he was and what he wasn't. He also thought it would help him remember his role since he was a little scrambled. That kiss he had given Iona on her bed had really hit the spot as far as he was concerned.

Every time he thought of it, he got a goofy grin on his face. It was unintentional, but it was also very real. It hadn't been the first time he'd kissed a woman of his own accord, but it had been the first time he had felt any of the things a person was supposed to feel when they put their mouth on another person. He was inwardly delighted.

It also felt like a personal triumph because he expected the kiss to be an exact replica of the last time he had kissed the dead maid Olivine had forced him to kiss on pain of electrocution. His kiss with Iona had been nothing like it and he felt like a rockstar for having painted over the painful memory of his last kiss.

Gage led Iona into the cargo bay. There were lines of unused cryochambers. Cinni's was the one closest to the door as it had been the last one loaded.

Through the glass of the chamber, Gage saw that Cinni had been prettied up for her journey and she was dressed in a red ball gown and crowned like a princess. She was probably planning to be displayed at the model show wearing the dress.

Gage started pressing the buttons used to ease the drugs that froze the blood in Cinni's veins like ice. Most of the process was automatic, so it was just a matter of waiting for her to wake up.

"What are you wearing for the show?" Gage asked Iona. "I half expected you to show me another round of costumes. We're not doing that?"

Iona was rooting her tongue around in her cheek so hard she made a smacking sound when she pulled it free. "Uh... I had a costume picked out. The last five models Sherman has chosen were wearing red at the show, so I thought that I just needed to wear a red dress and I'd have his bid iced like cake. It looks like I wasn't the only one who had that idea."

Gage chuckled. "Do you think the whole show will just be women parading around in red dresses?"

"Yes," Iona said blankly. "He's the highest bidder, so yes. They all want to secure his bid if they can."

"So don't wear red," Gage suggested.

"Red is a powerful color. This little miss is a Rose Red. She has auburn hair and will probably wear red contacts. Sherman wants to get a model who fits his description of the Lady in Red from that song. If she looks at him and manages to make him feel like they are completely alone, he'll bid on her."

Gage slipped his arm around Iona's waist and pulled her close to him. "There isn't a problem here," he whispered. "Forget about the red dress."

"It was such a hassle to get a red dress in the exact shade that didn't clash with my hair," she said, forgetting that she wasn't supposed to whine when she spoke to Gage.

"Look, unless I'm mistaken, Sherman is not your favorite. Wouldn't you rather get Dante or Benediction?"

Iona hoed and hummed.

Gage hooted. "Okay, you don't like any of them, you little gold digger."

She laughed. "Like I'd be offended by anyone calling me a gold digger!"

"Tell you what, after we drop Little Miss Cinnamon Bun through the floor into the complex, I'll help you go through that obscene mass of costumes you brought with you. I'm sure you have something that will leave a strong impression on him without making you look like the identical twin of every other girl at the show."

"Shut up. She's almost awake," Iona prompted.

Gage opened the lid and Cinni's eyes fluttered. She was awake, she just hadn't opened her eyes yet. She was puckering her lips.

"Do you kiss all the girls when they wake up?" Iona asked Gage in a hiss.

He grunted. "I think she's expecting someone else."

Upon hearing their voices, Cinni opened her eyes. "Oh, it's you. How did I get aboard your vessel? I was supposed to be woken up by Stonic."

"Yeah, he got banged up in the asteroid belt. He had to drop down to Callisto for repairs."

Cinni's face paled. "Is he alright?"

"He's fine as far as I know," Gage said.

"I've never met Stonic," Iona suddenly said. She turned to Gage and asked him, "Is he as good looking as you?"

"He's better looking, dummy," Cinni said as she threw her legs over the edge of the cryochamber.

"Is he?" Iona whispered to Gage.

"How the hell should I know? I've never seen him."

"He has a cuter face," Cinni said as she rushed to a mirror on the wall of the cargo bay to see how well she'd traveled.

"That wouldn't take much," Gage agreed as showed her the way to the infirmary.

"I just had a quarter physical," Cinni protested in a nasal voice.

"Yep, and you were changed to a different solarship, so you'll tolerate another one, or I'll put you back into cryostasis. It's regulations."

Cinni bounced her reddish curls and popped up on the table, her strapless gown bouncing in a way that made Gage wonder if it would stay on.

"Do you need your corset tightened?" Iona asked.

Cinni jiggled a few times with her eyes looking toward the ceiling. "Yes. I think I do." Then she looked at Iona suspiciously. "Wait. Who are you? Aren't you Iona Stirling? Aren't you also going to be in the show with me?"

"I'll be in the show, but I—"

Cinni cut her off. "I'll get someone from the agency to help me. I don't need a saboteur to *pretend* to help me."

Iona nodded. She clearly didn't disagree with that logic at all.

"Hungry?" Gage asked Cinni when he was finished looking her over.

"I want to eat at the agency. When is someone coming?"

"I see you haven't been to Europa before," Gage said kindly. "We are parked over the shaft that leads directly to Sleeping Beauty Inc.'s main Europa office. No one is coming to get you. You just have to step on the elevator and go down. They know we're here. They're expecting you."

“You won’t come down with me?” she asked, her eyes suddenly huge and pleading.

“No. Today, I’m being paid extra to escort Iona, so I can’t be at your beck and call.”

Cinni shot Iona a look verging on hostile. “You think with his extra help you’re going to win the auction?”

“It’s not an auction. It’s a show and no one wins it,” Iona retorted.

“Hmm...” Cinni huffed. “I’m pretty sure there is a winner.”

Gage was bored with everything he was seeing. Normally, he kept his models separate but he had thought it would be interesting to show Iona his work. He was wrong. He had to separate them again.

“Iona, why don’t you head back to your room? I’ll join you there shortly. I’m just going to escort Cinni to the elevator.”

Iona looked disgusted but left the room with a flourish of her satin robe.

“She *bought* you?” Cinni asked once Iona was out of earshot.

“Yeah.”

“Can I buy Stonic?”

Gage shrugged. “I have no idea if he’s willing to entertain that kind of contract.”

“But you are? How much did she pay for you?”

“Please watch your step as you get off the table. I’d hate for you to step on your dress,” Gage said as he offered her a hand down.

She got off and walked by his side toward the elevator shaft.

“Why did you go to sleep in that dress? It’s a little full to cram into a cryochamber,” he asked conversationally as they walked. “Usually the dresses models go to sleep in for show aren’t made with that much fabric.”

“I stole it from another model. She was on her way to Enceladus and she didn’t need a red dress. I mean, of course, she needs her dress, but she doesn’t need this particular dress as much as I need it. I admitted to the theft and wired her double the amount she paid for it. Once I was asleep and en route to the Jovian system, she couldn’t get it back.”

“Will you give it back to her?”

“Who knows? If I win and get Sherman then I will need the dress for as long as I work for him.”

“Hmm...”

“Are you judging me?” Cinni flounced angrily as Gage pressed the button to call for the elevator.

“Not at all. I’ve done far worse things than steal a dress.”

“What’s the worst thing you’ve ever done?” she asked, looking at him slyly.

He smiled back at her. “I haven’t done it yet.”

She swallowed but didn’t say anything more until she got on the elevator and the doors closed.

Once that was done, Gage went back to Iona. It was stupid to look forward to dressing her, but he was. This must be part of the fun of having a model of your own, even though he was only getting such luxury because Iona wasn’t pushing him around as hard as was legally allowed.

He knocked on her door and she opened it for him, wearing a blue dress and looking at herself awkwardly in the many mirrors that were pointed toward her.

“Do you hate it?” she asked.

“Yes. Let’s get it off you.”

She groaned. “You say that, but you’re only teasing me.”

“You want something that’s a high/low dress or something floor length with an enormous slit. Show me what you’ve got that does one of those things.” He stretched himself on the foot of the bed and began giving instructions to the awe-struck Iona. “What you want is something that shows a little leg without giving everything away. Cinni’s dress was very pretty, but it didn’t give any hint of how pretty her ankles or legs are. You want to hint that you have beautiful legs.”

“You think you know what Sherman is going to want?” she asked.

“Who in the hell cares what Sherman wants? He’s gonna have a hundred models lining up to please him. I’m going to show you what I want and I think there’s an excellent chance that there will be a buyer at the show who will agree with me and spit up the cash to prove it.”

Iona looked instantly more interested. “What *you* want?”

“Yeah.”

“Okay,” she agreed, getting more excited by the second. “What about the top? There are a lot of different styles.”

“Go for a wedding dress style,” he said, his face deadly serious.

“That’s too flagrant.”

“It’s not,” he refuted. “The ultimate show of a woman giving herself to a man is her walking down the aisle at a wedding. It’s the moment every man dreams of. There’s a sense of rightness that has been drilled into him all his life about a woman coming toward him in a white gown. Seeing her walk, she appears innocent to him. Wearing white, she appears free. It’s the greatest deception of the hidden catch which is all the cash he’ll have to dole out, but that will feel natural too. Weddings are not cheap.”

“I... uh...” Iona hesitated.

“You said you wanted to get married. Maybe not to Sherman, but what do you want to bet Dante will watch the show from Callisto? He’s probably stewing about how much he ought to bid for you.”

“I don’t have a wedding dress in my luggage,” she faltered.

“Yeah, you don’t have one in *your* luggage,” he chuckled.

Iona cut her eyes to him. “Are you saying you do?”

“I have an entire cargo bay filled to the brim with clothes. I can’t ever drop off a model who doesn’t look like a superstar, so I have clothes. I even have something special in mind for you.”

“Why didn’t you pull something like that out when I was preparing for my performance at The Crater?”

“That wasn’t a Sleeping Beauty Inc. event. You think I’m going to dive into my cargo hold and find you a dress for something I won’t have a proper excuse for? I have to give an accounting report explaining what happens to every piece of clothing in that hold. But this is on our turf. I can open my drawers for ya.”

She put a hand to her forehead. “There you go again with the sexual innuendo when you’ve already told me not to expect any private lovemaking aboard this ship.”

“Shut up and take your clothes off,” he said as he strode out of the room.

He knew she was still gawking as he opened the lock to cargo hold B.

Chapter Eleven

There was no need for Gage to dress up in his armor if he was going to be in Sleeping Beauty Inc.'s inverted tower on Europa. He didn't need to wear the blindfold either because he was seriously not expecting to run into anyone he knew. His seat for the show was on the bottom level, which was considered the nosebleeds, but that was a silly superstition. All the seats were good.

The stage was a huge glass tube with a helix staircase that spiraled up both sides. There were five donut-shaped viewing rooms. That meant that every model had to walk down five floors worth of stairs and then walk back up them. It was challenging, but the gravity on Europa was less than the gravity on Earth, so it wasn't quite as taxing, but that was why the places in the top viewing room were the most valuable. From there, you saw the model when she first came out in all her glory, and then you saw her after she had gone down five flights of stairs and come up another five. Sometimes, they were less than pristine on the way back up, but if you had seats on the bottom level, you weren't going to see that.

However, even though Gage was not expecting to see anyone he recognized, it was not all that unusual for people to recognize him. He hated that because he was usually mistaken for someone else. He put on a baseball cap and a pair of thick-rimmed glasses. That was enough of a disguise for a place like Brigid on Europa.

Gage didn't see Iona before she left. They had made their plans together and he had seen her in the dress he brought up for her, but she had tried it on without her war paint or her hair done. She told him to leave her alone for the last parts of her preparation.

"If I'm doing all this to wow you, I want you to get your first sight of me on the stairs like I'm your little bride."

"You'll stop my heart," he said to her back that was turned toward him.

"What did you say?" she asked, whirling back to him.

"I'll appreciate the show," he amended as he left her in peace.

After all, he had to change his clothes too. Okay, he didn't have to change that much. The addition of the cap and glasses was hardly anything. However, he did need to don a Sleeping Beauty Inc. wrist piece in order to gain admittance to the show. He slid it on and felt the metallic zing reminding him that his skin wasn't thick enough to stop the metal of the bracelet from scraping against his bones. It wasn't a Sleeping Beauty Inc. bracelet that had hurt him in the past. He repeated the fact aloud several times as he laced his boots.

Once he knew Iona had left, he just about left the Cannonball III with half the buttons of his shirt undone. However, he caught himself on the elevator trip down and did up all of them, except the last one at his throat.

Gage scanned his bracelet at the entrance to the stage and was deeply surprised when he was directed to the top floor. He was surrounded by crowds who were pushing him to get through, so he thought that the organizers must have changed the orientation of the stage. He bet that meant that they were starting the models at the bottom of the stage instead of at the top. In which case, he had better hurry.

Nothing could have surprised him more than when he got to the top floor and the place had obviously been arranged for the comfort of the super-elite.

The first person he recognized was Sherman. He was surrounded by women in red feather dresses like a group of cardinals at a birdfeeder. If his favorite, Jessica, was in the cluster, she wore the same thing as the lesser models.

Gage felt a fresh wave of aversion to the man as he turned away from him, thanking his lucky stars that Iona had avoided being one of the girls who were obviously seeking his approval.

The next person Gage recognized was Dante. If he was at this show, then he had always intended to be here. He would have had to have left Callisto around the same time as Gage and Iona to have made it. He had his three girls surrounding him, but he looked so much less than Sherman that Gage thought that Dante was giving the other man daggers.

Gage didn't like him either, but he didn't dislike either of them as much as he disliked the next person he saw.

Olivine.

What was she doing there?

She saw Gage, recognized him, and came over immediately. The first thing he noticed about her was how much surgical work she had done to try to make herself beautiful. In the old days, Olivine had not been ugly, but nor had she been beautiful. She had been an ordinary-looking person whose looks had been enhanced by youth. Her youth was gone. She was approaching sixty and nips and tucks that had been applied to her face were unmistakable. Otherwise, she had blond hair, a very square face, and a figure that had been sucked out with a machine. She wore a black and white striped pantsuit with no shirt under to show a cut of very artificial cleavage between the lapels. The whole effect was hideous like she had finally embraced her inner mobster, but it may have only looked that way to Gage who knew the beast that lurked within her was several ticks crazier than the most heinous mobster.

"Are you Gage?" she asked, peering at him from over the lace of her red patterned fan. It looked like the surface of Mars--mottled pink like skin that had been slapped too many times.

"Hello, Olivine," he said, keeping his eyes on her. He was only polite because being rude to her on the top level of a Sleeping Beauty Inc. platform before a show wouldn't do a thing for anyone.

"I haven't seen you in decades!" she said with a snap of her fan that matched the unpleasant click of her tongue.

He immediately suspected that the reason he had been given a better ticket to the show was so that Olivine could look at him. Sleeping Beauty Inc. knew that he wouldn't accept a contract from her, but they weren't above orchestrating a time and place where she could look at him if she was willing to pay for the privilege. Already, he planned to complain that he hadn't received a cut. He couldn't stop one of the worst people in the solar system from looking at him, but he could cause a stink and get some money later.

"You look gorgeous!" she said, eying him in a way that made it seem like she was just as interested in the inside of his body as the outside. How warped had she become over the last forty years? It felt like she was fantasizing about licking his liver.

However, he did look gorgeous. He had spent the last four decades spending as much time in cryostasis as possible so he could outlive her. Only a few more decades to go.

"Are you here to bid on a side piece?" she inquired in a pleasant-sounding voice.

"No. I'm here to watch my mistress walk the stairs."

Her expression fell flat. “You have a mistress? What an unusual situation! Didn’t you swear that you’d never have another one after you were taken from me?”

Gage pursed his lips and gave her an expression that meant them-the-brakes.

“Honestly, Gage, if you needed money or help or anything you could have contacted me. I’d be happy to renew your contract,” she said in a voice that grated.

He had never had a contract with her. There was nothing to renew. He had been sold to her father and forced to do every dehumanizing act she could think of. As it was, it was taking all his self-control not to kick the hell out of her on the spot.

He played it out in his mind, watching her head ricochet against the display glass of the stage.

Beyond the first bounce of her head and the blood splatter, the fantasy wasn’t very satisfying. If Sleeping Beauty Inc. was at all liable for his behavior, they’d be forced to give him to her for a lifetime contract. Then he’d never get away from her.

He put his hands in his pockets. “I didn’t take the contract with her because I needed money.”

“Well, then why did you?” Olivine demanded while fluttering her fan impatiently.

“I’m sure you’ll see when she comes out.”

“Are you going to tell me which one she is?”

He smiled.

The show was about to start.

“I haven’t decided yet,” he said, wishing he could look away from Olivine at literally anything else. He had to keep his eyes on her. On her fan, on the tips of her toes, on her tongue, on her eyes, and on her. But what could she do here? Her play for him would not be here beyond her goal to see him and offer him a contract.

He bent his shoulder and tried to relax.

Before Gage saw Olivine, the thing he wanted most for the show was for Iona not to be the second opening model on display. He wanted to see a few girls come out in red before she came out, not just one. That way her appearance would have more impact.

He was not at all surprised when the first woman to take the stairs was Jessica. Sherman’s little red birds were delighted to watch her. Her name was displayed on a screen in opera subtitles as she descended the staircase and Sherman’s face betrayed the sorrow he felt at her loss.

“What do you think of her?” Olivine rasped in Gage’s ear.

“She wore a red dress so she wouldn’t piss Sherman off. I think that was probably a pretty good move. She looks appropriately grateful for his patronage.”

“Do you know Sherman?”

“Only that he likes his women in red.”

“Everyone knows that, Silly,” Olivine prattled in a hollow tone, elbowing Gage.

Gage didn’t know the next two models, both clad head to foot in red. Cinni came after that and he saw immediately that her theft of the dress had been a hundred percent mandatory. She looked a head and a foot better than the other models. He hoped Sherman would bid on her and forget all about Iona. He hoped everyone forgot about Iona.

But if he thought that, why did he personally dress her?

He shouldn’t have.

And he really knew it as she came down the stairs. The music changed for her from a sputtery dance track to something breezy in its melody. She wore pointed-toe white high heels and as her leg parted the folds of the dress for her to take each downward step, the curve of her calf up to her knee was a kind of delight that was almost painful. A little of her thigh was visible with certain movements and abruptly...

Gage wished he was dead.

He scratched above his eyebrow and thought that he would be dead just from watching her.

The dress did exactly what it was supposed to do. It flared out in a separate piece over her bottom and made the lines of her hips an illusion. It tightened at her waist and made her waist look trimmer than it was. The neckline was a hoop that circled behind her neck with a tiny notch cut in the fabric at her cleavage. The sleeves were so tight that she could barely move her arms, but she didn't need to move them much as she held the folds of her skirt out of her way like a real princess.

The true victory was the way her hair was styled. It wasn't styled. It hung in salty beach waves that stuck together in perfect clumps. Her eye makeup was overdone and her dazzling lashes fanned out under her pink fringe. A white feather flower emerged from behind her ear and her smile was the thing men dreamed about as they fought off lice in trenches.

"I'm going to bid on her," Olivine announced at Gage's elbow as she pointed to Iona.

"You're going to bid on her?" Gage repeated. He was about to ask why, but then he remembered Olivine's character and he stopped himself from saying more. Her life goal was to find the happiest people and humiliate them until happiness couldn't find them anymore.

As it was, Olivine hadn't been punished because of what had happened to him because she hadn't been the one to buy him. At the end of their time together, she had been an angry 17-year-old who could denounce anything her family said and get off scot-free. Her father and her uncle went to jail for what they'd done to him and others. She wasn't included in any of that. She took her family's huge fortune and continued doing everything she had done before, except under legal contracts.

"Of course, I'm going to bid on her. She's the finest piece of flesh Sleeping Beauty Inc. has in this backwater spaceport. I'm going to be stranded here for another five years and I need entertainment. How do you think she would look in a maid costume?"

Gage swallowed painfully, squashing memories flat. "This isn't where you go for that."

Olivine smiled coyly. "If you're rich enough, it is."

"Can you outbid Sherman?" Gage challenged.

Olivine's smile got even bigger. "The question is whether or not he can outbid me."

Iona went out of sight and Gage was forced to watch the rest of the show at Olivine's side, hearing about which models she liked.

The silver lining of the event was that toward the end of the show, the girls who had no hope of landing Sherman started waving to Gage as they immediately pegged him as the next most powerful buyer on the first floor. It wasn't true, but he enjoyed the attention.

"Why aren't they waving at me?" Olivine wondered.

Gage bit his tongue on the true reason. He didn't say, 'I'm a better-looking man than you,' or 'If you're picking your poison, I'm a nicer pick.' After all, he was simply dressed, but he was always dressed in his muscles, so he always looked good.

Gage left the show thinking that Olivine had learned a lot about what was okay to say in public because she didn't say anything that made him feel justified in calling the police. Not that the police on Europa were incredibly useful. He felt full to the brim with hate as he boarded the elevator that would take him to the head executive office of Sleeping Beauty Inc. He was spitting it like fire. If only that woman would die sooner.

Chapter Twelve

Iona had her hair in adorable rhinestone ringlets before the show. Each tendril of hair was sparkling like the Milky Way. She was supposed to be second after Jessica. Jessica's last contract had been the highest-paid contract in the Jovian region and Iona was number nine, but numbers two through eight were not at the show, so Iona was supposed to go out after Jessica. However, an entire mop bucket full of dirty water had been deliberately poured on Iona's head just minutes before the show began.

Iona had noted who had done it. Obviously, it was someone she'd never seen before, but she saw their face.

Lucky for her, Iona had suspected that something like that would happen and she had refused to put on her dress until she was standing in line to go out. Yes, it meant changing in front of all the other models, but Iona wasn't squeamish. She ran her hands through her ruined hair, placed the feather bow behind her ear, and thanked her lucky stars that the makeup she'd put on wouldn't get smeared even if she were hit by a meteor.

She came out and spotted Sherman along with the other top-floor bidders. She saw Dante and his little girls who he had not had the foresight to dress identically. He was regretting it because he was feeling less than Sherman. Then she saw a heart-stoppingly beautiful man standing to the side. A man that looked like that didn't need to hire a model! Surely he didn't need one. Why was he even there? That was weird enough except for the person in stripes who was standing next to him. Iona's first thought was that it was a man dressed in drag who couldn't stop being straight even though he wanted to.

Then she focussed on the stairs. She got to the bottom of the five flights and did a twirl. That was when she saw Gage. He was standing apart from the other spectators with his arms crossed over his glorious torso. She thought he looked so fine in his sunglasses and the slight reddish tinge that he'd added to his hair that she did an extra little twirl for him before she took the stairs upwards.

It was so funny, she thought as she blew a kiss to someone random on the fourth floor. She hated men with red hair because of what had happened to her all those years ago, but when Gage tinted his hair red, he only became more appealing. Would she forgive him for anything?

She got to the top and looked and felt as fresh as a spring breeze as she entered the dressing area.

After the show, a Sleeping Beauty Inc. associate approached her immediately. "About what happened before the show? Madam Damsel would like to speak to you about the incident."

Iona had met Madam Damsel on many occasions in the past and was happy to see her. She was going to meet an old friend.

Once in Sleeping Beauty Inc.'s Europa Division's head office, Iona finally felt like she could relax.

Madam Damsel was a woman in her fifties. She had once been a model who worked for Sleeping Beauty Inc. and she was beautiful still with her silver hair and open smile. Madam Damsel was not her real name, but there were loads of people in their industry who did not use their real names.

"I'm sorry about the difficulty before the show. We've already nailed down what happened."

"Did Cinni make her do it?" Iona asked.

“No. It’s more complicated than that. It was a model named Loxanna. Apparently, you’re always receiving bids from clients who she has scouted. When questioned, there were actually seven incidents when you were chosen ahead of her. She didn’t know you’d be here and she just snapped. That’s all. She’ll be fined and you’ll get the money as a form of compensation.”

“For frick’s sake!” Iona burst from her chair, rubbing her forehead. “Let her keep her money with my compliments. I think I looked better with my hair ruined since everyone else looked so prim. Surely, I stood out more than the others.”

“You did,” Madam Damsel agreed.

“Look, I’m not sure if I want to do this anymore,” Iona admitted with a puff of hot air.

“Why not?”

“Because I want to crawl down Gage’s pants and stay there. Can’t I pay some fee to stay aboard the Cannonball III and just live with him until his contract is up?”

The Madam looked startled. “Gage? Does he know you feel this way? I knew you bought him for your break, but I also saw how much he trimmed down your contract and that you had to raise the price to get him. Does he want you aboard?”

“I don’t know,” she replied nervously.

“You’re telling me this because you want me to seal your bids from today?” the older woman asked practically.

“Yes. Please. I’m campaigning and I still have one more stop on Io. I’ll look at all the bids once I’ve finished there. I don’t need to see them today.”

“I’ll put that note on your profile downstairs. Quite a few bidders on the floor think they’re taking you home tonight.”

Iona stuck out her tongue. “I don’t know if I’ll ever want to be taken home by one of those men again.”

Damsel frowned, but a light turned on inside her clear desk. She pressed a button and the voice of her receptionist came through the speakers.

“The pilot of the Cannonball III is here to complain.”

“Tell him he’s a hell of a sport and we’ll triple his income for the year as a thank you for not throwing a hissy fit.”

The speaker went silent.

Iona’s brow furrowed in concern. “That was Gage? Wasn’t he here to complain about the water incident?”

Damsel shook her head in the negative.

The speaker came back on. “He says he wants a deluxe food package thrown in.”

“Tell him he’s a shrewd trader and we’ll have the crate loaded on his ship before he lifts off tomorrow. Oh, and tell him that he and Iona can have a honeymoon suite for the night at the bottom of the tower if they want to watch the sea cows swim by. I’ll throw in a privately served dinner and she can keep the dress she wore to the show. Does all that suit him?”

There was a pause before the voice came back on. “He says you’re still lucky he didn’t paint the display window in blood.”

“You tell him that I know I am. I saw the surveillance footage. It was an awful trick I pulled and if I’m ever forced to pull it again, he can count on me to compensate him accordingly. Just remind him to keep his cool and he can stay in space on our dime until he’s a hundred.”

“Will do.”

The speaker went dead.

“What are you talking about?” Iona questioned.

“Gage. He’s like sixty, maybe closer to sixty-five. He might make it all the way to a hundred if he can stay asleep.”

Iona cocked her head. “Is he trying to stay in space forever, so that everything passes him by?”

“Hasn’t he said so?”

“I guess he has,” Iona said, straightening.

“I may as well tell you. I had a request from someone who wanted to see him. They have wanted to see him for years, but he was never going to be where they were, so they always missed each other. Frankly, I didn’t want to help the bidder. Gage had it in his contract that he would never entertain a contract from this particular person. For a long time, the head office on Ganymede agreed with me and we kept giving the bidder the slip. When the person became a shareholder here on Europa and Sleeping Beauty Inc. finally had enough money dumped in their lap that the head office in Ganymede ordered me to arrange their meeting. It was a lousy thing to do, to make a model see someone they don’t want to see, but that bidder doesn’t just own part of the branch here, they also represent a large portion of the higher bids made on Europa and they were threatening to cancel their contracts and take their business elsewhere. Every staff member in their house is a model from Sleeping Beauty Inc. That said, they’re a below-average master. No one comes back from their tower happy, but Sleeping Beauty Inc. is not particularly concerned with whether or not their models are happy on every single job. You know the deal. It often boils down to giving up a year of your happiness for the money of four years in another job. Anyone can quit once their contract is fulfilled.”

Iona tried to think of who had been standing next to Gage when she saw him on the bottom floor. No one had been near him. He had been alone.

“Huh...” Iona mumbled, confused.

“Please thank him for me. It makes everything about my life easier that he didn’t make a scene,” Madam Damsel said wearily. “Want me to send up drinks too?”

“I’ve never seen you this rattled. Who is this person, Damsel?” Iona asked sympathetically.

The head executive rubbed between her eyes. “No. I don’t want to think about that person anymore. They give me a headache.” She leaned back in her chair and waved Iona away. “Go fool around with Gage. I promise you that privilege has not been extended very many times. Nor is it likely to be again.”

Iona got up and said goodbye to Madam Damsel. She waved at Iona and didn’t look back at her.

Iona passed through the office doors at just the right time. “Gage,” Iona called to him before he left.

He turned.

Something about the way he looked in the Sleeping Beauty Inc. office made him look different than he had looked when he was aboard the Cannonball III. There, he was surrounded by the harsh metal of the inside of a spaceship. In the office, he was standing next to enlarged photos of some of the most successful models the company had ever sponsored. Their pictures were touched up to make them look even better than they looked in real life.

Yet he was better looking.

He waved a keycard in her face. "Guess where we're sleeping tonight?"

"I was already told. The bottom of the tower. Ever been there? Madam Damsel says we'll be able to see sea cows."

Gage smiled and offered her his arm on their way out.

Chapter Thirteen

“Did I look fresh when I got to the bottom floor?” Iona asked Gage once they were alone in their suite.

The room they had been given was immaculate. Gorgeous beyond gorgeous. It was a velvet affair with royal blue curtains everywhere and exposed white marble everywhere else. The bed was a huge circle in the middle of the room that turned like a merry-go-round if you pushed on it.

“What is that for?” Iona wondered out loud.

“Orgies,” Gage replied. Then seeing the stricken look on her face he amended, “Or for fun. I could spin you on it if you’d like.”

“I’m good,” she said, settling herself into a chair sideways and putting out her white high heel so Gage would take it off for her.

“To answer your question, I was moved to the top floor, so I didn’t see you when you were on the bottom floor. I saw you when you were on your way up though. You should be proud. There wasn’t a model there who was more alluring than you.” Obediently, he slid her shoe off and reached for the other one.

“But I saw you on the bottom floor,” Iona countered. “You had a red tint in your hair and you gave me the flirtiest smile ever. Why are you denying being there?”

Gage dropped her shoe on the floor with a thud and backed away from her. “You saw me on the bottom floor? You’re sure?”

“Yeah, our eyes locked for an eternity and I did an extra little twirl for you.”

Gage turned away from her and thought hard. If the guy had red hair, was it Leviticus or Invocation? Maybe neither. Gage had lost track of most of them over the decades. Not only that but he had hoped to lose them coming all the way to the middle of nowhere. Were the Jovian moons so popular now that he had to move further out? He planned to retire to Lapetus, but maybe it was time to take a detail between the moons around Saturn. The Neptune moons were so far out that the joint wasn’t yet civilized, but he’d take a job on Makemake beyond Pluto if that got him away from them.

“Iona,” he said, trying to keep his voice casual. “Was there anything distinctive about the guy you saw, besides the fact that his hair was tinted red? Was he wearing colored contact lenses or glasses? Can you describe him for me?”

“He was wearing sunglasses. Was that really not you?” she asked, perplexed.

“Nah. It wasn’t me. There are a few guys running around who look quite a bit like me. I wonder which one it was.” Gage stopped and considered. Did he need to tell her more about what was happening in his life in order to make it through the next few weeks? If he was thinking about threats, the biggest one wasn’t the guys who looked like him. “Hey,” he said, changing the subject. “If you get a bid from a woman named Olivine, please promise you won’t take it, no matter how much money is offered.”

“I’ve never had a woman bid on me who wasn’t bidding on behalf of a company. It’s on my file that I’m straight and I don’t accept contracts from women.”

“All the same, please don’t take a contract from someone you don’t know on this round. I met one of my previous owners at the show. That’s the reason for this room and the deluxe food provisions I secured for us for the flight to Io. Sleeping Beauty Inc. arranged for her to

meet me even though she is the last person I would ever want to meet. She told me she was going to bid on you. Whatever is said in the contract will more than likely not be honored and what will happen to you in her care will not be something you'll be able to shrug off."

Iona brought her knees to her chest and hugged them. "That sounds really scary. I've never had a contract violated before."

"Let's keep it that way. If there's anything I could say that would stop you from taking a contract with Sherman, I'd say it. I don't trust that things will be kept above board with him. He's a baby who always gets his way. That's why Jessica is leaving."

"Of course, bad stuff happens. You think I haven't had yicky experiences while working as a model?" Iona refuted.

"Yeah. I imagine you haven't had a great time, but people with that much money are different and they might ask you to do stuff you never thought of. You didn't think to ask for it to be excluded from the contract because you didn't know people did that. I'd prefer it if you didn't learn about it. Please take another corporate contract."

She stuck her nose in the air. "What did you think of Dante? He came to the show. Did you see him?"

"I saw him. He wants to be a mini Sherman. Forget him too. Take another corporate contract."

"What about Benediction?"

Gage was uncomfortable, but he hoped he could change her mind about going to see the third man altogether. "Uh... I know him."

"You know him?" she asked, gobsmacked.

"He won't offer you a contract. He would never offer you a contract. If you went to him, he'd have your skin torched black, the pigment drained from your eyes, and chemicals inserted in your skull so that your hair turns forest green forever. I don't want to see you like that. I don't want you to end up like one of his followers. Not only that, he'd drain your assets so that you didn't have a penny to your name and then defile you with pointless purification rituals."

"You know him?" she asked again, still horrified.

"He doesn't need a model from Sleeping Beauty Inc. He needs followers. If you go there that's all he'll see you as—a potential follower."

"Why are you only telling me this now?" she asked, suddenly standing up to face him.

"Once you see him in the flesh, I'm not going to be able to hide anymore."

"Why? What are you trying to hide?"

Gage's face transformed into an angry snarl. "My face, my body, the exact shape of my nose, my vocal cords, my kidneys, my liver, my heart! You name it, I'm trying to hide it."

"Why?"

He dropped his hands. "Haven't you noticed I'm a little too perfect?"

"Of course!" she agreed, warmth spreading on her face because they were finally talking about something she understood.

He put up a hand, deciding for the second time not to talk to her about the truth of his circumstances. He needed to downplay it. "He's my brother," Gage hedged, trying to make his breathing normal. The truth was Benediction was not his brother, but their genetic code was identical, so it was like they were twins.

Iona looked at him. "All the more reason for us to go see him. You can introduce me to him."

"I'm not on good terms with him!" Gage spat.

"If Benediction is your brother, then who is the guy I saw on the bottom level of the stage?"

"Another brother," Gage said, thinking he couldn't have sounded less credible if he tried. "So princess, you should understand that if you're in love with me for my face, you have a number of other options."

"How many brothers do you have?"

"Oh, enough that you could shop around."

Gage wasn't expecting it, but that was the moment when their dinner arrived. There was a tap at the door. Iona opened it, and the server arranged their food on the dining room table only a few feet from the bed.

Gage smiled pleasantly at the server until the food was all out. When they were finished, they left and shut the door firmly behind them.

"Don't touch this food, Iona," he said coldly once they were alone.

"Why not?"

"Because it's laced in more drugs than you'd find under the floorboards at a crack house," Gage replied icily.

"Why would they drug us?"

"It might not be Sleeping Beauty Inc. exactly who has done this, but they're allowing it because they can't offend Olivine Bouvant. She's a monster and if she owns enough shares in the company, they might not be able to do anything about this."

"Who is she?" Iona asked, but Gage had already crossed the room and taken her hand in his.

"We can't stay here. Let's get back to the ship. We need to get into orbit. Forget your shoes. Just come barefoot. We'll take the stairs. We're going to need to run."

Outside the suite, there was a security guard posted. It was a woman leaning against the wall. When their door opened, she got on her earpiece and Gage could hear her explaining to someone on the other end of the line that the target was on the move. Gage glanced back at her. She wasn't going to try to stop them. All that would have amounted to was a broken nose for her and where could he go? This was Europa.

"Change of plan," Gage said as he pushed Iona into the open elevator. "Let's take as many floors as we can this way."

The doors closed.

"We can go all the way to the ship through this elevator," Iona pointed out as she pressed a button to take them directly to the Cannonball III.

Gage shook his head. "We can press that button, but we won't get all the way there before there's someone to catch us. I hope the other me isn't in this tower. He won't like Olivine any more than I did."

He leaped up and grabbed the light fixture that was hanging from the ceiling of the elevator and pulled himself up. With one hand, he opened the emergency flap in the ceiling.

"Won't an alarm go off if you open that?" Iona asked in a sound that was almost a screech.

"Probably. But an alarm went off when we left the suite. Another alarm will go off when we get to the ship and a whole whack load of alarms will go off once we blast off."

"I can't believe Madam Damsel would do this to us."

"I told you, she's not doing this." He pulled himself through the emergency hatch. "She's powerless to stop this," he shouted downward. "But I'm not powerless and if there's one fricking

thing I'm not doing with my life, it's spending one more minute with that elephant woman. Now jump, you little acrobat. I'll catch you."

She tried a few times but was met with harsh disappointment. She breathed hard and explained her problem. "It's hard to jump in an elevator. The floor is moving up while I'm jumping," she carped.

"I'll slow it down for you," he said, fiddling with a set of controls on the outside of the elevator as it sped upward.

True to his word, it slowed down and Iona leaped high enough to catch his fingers. With an effort that made Gage's face red, he pulled her up through the hatch. Once she was out, he replaced the section of ceiling he'd removed and he kept the elevator going at the same slow pace.

"I don't know how many people will be chasing us, but they'll have people at the top by our ship."

"Do you have a plan for getting on board the Cannonball III if they're going to be waiting for us?" she panted.

"Yup. There are half a dozen ways to get on board without being noticed by security."

"Such as?"

"If we can get some utility uniforms, we can unload a few empty cryochambers and when we get back on board for more, we lock down the ship and leave. We can say we're loading cargo and leave once the cargo is locked down. No matter what, they don't want the Cannonball III sitting around like an idiot. Spaceships die if they're not in space. They're made for space, not hanging out here on the surface of a world, so we could even get on board in utility uniforms and tell them it's our job to get it into orbit."

"Could you trick the security guards into letting you do that?"

"Yes. Although, I do keep thinking about little red-haired me. I hope he doesn't get caught by that nutjob."

The elevator came to an abrupt halt. Gage put a finger to his mouth to tell Iona that it was time to be quiet as whoever entered inspected the elevator. Gage couldn't see them at all, but he heard the muffled sound of their voices as they moved around beneath him.

When the elevator doors started to close with the inspectors inside, still talking, the elevator was ordered down and Gage literally scooped Iona off the floor and threw her at a horizontal I-beam that was part of the elevator shaft. She landed badly, but quietly, sagging against the wall. Gage followed but, but missed her beam and got the one under it.

"Are you okay?" he whispered to her.

"I am. Gage," she said, matching his tone. He couldn't see her, except for a tendril of her hair that spilled over the edge of the beam. "There's a camera pointed at me."

He put his hands around the beam and did a chin-up that brought him up to her level. He looked at the thing she was referring to. "That's not a camera. It's the home of a very powerful laser beam."

"That's supposed to comfort me?"

"It comforts me. They're not for us. They're for those," he said, pointing toward an armored lizard that scuttled across a beam on the other side of the elevator shaft.

The machine Iona had been pointing to changed directions and fired at it. The thing was burnt to a crisp and left in a pile of ash and bone.

Iona gasped and grabbed Gage's arm. "If that laser is shooting anything that moves, will it shoot us too?"

"Relax," he said, soothing her by stroking her hand in his. "They're not programmed to kill people. The control room won't be able to track us through that laser's movements because they don't keep information about rillos in the air ducts."

"Why not?"

"Frankly because there are too many of them to keep count. We're going to see a lot more of them down here and the lasers intended to kill them will be few and far between."

"Will these rillos hurt us?" Iona asked, staring at the pile of ash.

"Maybe. They're pests indigenous to Europa. Before humans settled the place, rillos had very few places that matched their needs, but it turns out that an upside-down tower with air kept a little warmer than the warmest places on the moon gave them a collection of perfect habitats. The first worst thing about them is that they have very little bladder control, so every downward surface we'll touch is coated in a little bit of their piss. The second worst thing is that their saliva is slightly poisonous when it's fresh and five licks from one will likely see a person of your weight unconscious. Their tongues shoot out far."

"How many licks would it take you?"

"I dunno. More than five," he said hopefully as he examined his surroundings.

"Where do we go from here?" she asked, looking around for a path that made sense.

"How acrobatic are you really?" Gage asked her with a sly look on his face. "If we can go upward, we can cut across to the cargo bay two floors beneath where the ship is docked. Take a look. Can you get yourself up safely?"

Iona looked up the shaft skeptically. "Not in this dress."

"What have you got on under it?"

"Panties. No bra."

"Not even a strapless one?"

Iona cleared her throat. "I would have loved to have worn a bra, but it would have tugged at my back fat. Do you know how much back fat a woman has to have before her bra pinches at it and makes her look like the bra is barely containing her rolls of fat?"

"Like none," he answered with a sympathetic shrug.

"Yeah. Like none."

Gage started pulling at the buttons of his shirt. "Wear mine and get out of that dress."

Iona winced. "I can't get myself out of it on my own. I need you to undo me. Can you do that, Mr. Chastity?"

He sighed in annoyance. "Of course, I can do that. I'm great with naked people. I never want to screw them."

"Oh, yeah," she said as she turned her back toward him and let him undo her zipper.

"This is the smallest zipper I've ever seen," he said as he fumbled with the tag.

Eventually, he got it.

Iona pulled her dress over her head with her legs falling over the edge of the I-beam. Gage whipped his shirt off his shoulders and handed it to her. She took it and wrapped it around her bare skin.

"What do we do with the dress? Drop it down the elevator shaft? Leave it for the rillos to nest in?"

Gage scrunched it up in a ball and pushed the whole thing into a pocket above the knee of his pants.

“Men’s clothes are the worst,” Iona commented crossly as she did up the buttons of Gage’s shirt. “As if you have pockets there!”

“You’d rather look sexy than have pockets. What you’re really ticked off about is that you don’t look as sexy as men do with weird bulges on your legs.”

“Yes, I am ticked off about that,” she agreed. “I’m also ticked off that I have to do all this in bare feet. The floor is smelly and sticky.”

“You can get washed up on the Cannonball III when we get there,” he said, standing up and testing his weight against the I-beam above him. “I’d better go first, then I can lift you up if you have a problem.”

“On Europa? The gravity here is so light, we could probably fly if we put our minds to it.” He smiled at her before lifting himself up to the next floor.

Chapter Fourteen

“How did you know the food was drugged?” Iona asked as they took a break on the fourteenth floor.

Gage looked around for a way to escape, but seeing none, he answered her. “I have been drugged a lot. I’ve had owners that thought that if they gave me enough rush I’d like what they did to me, or if I was sleepy enough, I might not notice what they did to me. If they gave me something that unlocked the inner parts of my psyche, I’d discover somewhere deep down that I loved them. It was all so foolish. I’ve also endured times in my life where every meal I had was drugged.”

“What did you do? Did you stop eating?”

“That’s actually the end of the explanation I’m willing to offer,” he said lightly. “I don’t think about any of that old stuff, but I do remember that if you are served mashed seasonal roots with spices, it is the best place to hide sedatives. Mulled wine does a very good job of hiding what’s happening with the sedative and making it more effective. There were crystals on the tips of the fork prongs. It’s salt laced in rush. Not a half dose, but a full dose. There were also grilled mushrooms on the plate and I can’t be sure, but they might not have been kitchen mushrooms. Without doing research, I’m not exactly sure what they were.”

“I’m asking you though, is it better to starve yourself rather than to eat that food?” she asked as she repositioned the feather clip to keep her hair out of her face.

“The situation was different today and so, yes, the correct answer today was to starve. But if you’re owned by a master and what happened today happens every day, then the answer is no. If you starve yourself to avoid the drugs they’re trying to get you addicted to, someone in the kitchen might take pity on you. But if they do and they’re caught sneaking you unlaced food, what will happen to them will be worse than what happens to you if you take all the drugs in the world.”

“So, you took them?”

“I took the sedatives. I chose to take the sedatives. Truth be told, I’m still taking sedatives and I’d rather be asleep than awake.”

“Madam Damsel said that you’re over sixty years old. Is that true?”

“Olivine was a teenager when I was given to her as a slave. I was twenty when I got away from her. She looks like an old woman now, so that number isn’t crazy. I don’t know what she still wants from me. I thought she already had her fun.”

That was when Iona put it together. The hottie she had seen on the top floor of the stage had been Gage. She was now wearing the shirt he had worn to the show. The person next to him, who Iona thought was a man dressed in drag, had been Olivine. Iona tried to remember as much as she could but came up a bit blank. Had they been wearing stripes?

“Here,” Gage said, reaching for her hand.

“You shouldn’t lay a hand on me. I’m disgusting after everything I’ve been touching down here,” she warned.

“Yeah, well, I’ve been touching all the same things you’ve been touching and I’m worried your sleeves are getting in the way. Let me roll them up.”

Iona sat still while shirtless Gage got her sleeves out of the way.

“Are you ready to keep going?”

She nodded and stood up.

They made it to the cargo bay. Iona watched Gage walk around like he owned the place. He checked tags on bundles of cargo and strode into the deserted office like he belonged there. It was quite the feat considering he wasn't wearing a shirt.

Iona was hiding between two crates, worried there would be cameras in the cargo bay and thinking it would be better if she wasn't seen.

When Gage came back into view, he was wearing a blue and yellow reflective vest, a hard hat, and a pair of orange-tinted sunglasses. He even had a walkie-talkie in a holster at his belt. He smiled at her, flashing his white teeth before showing her a dolly with an open cardboard box on it.

"Your chariot, my lady," he said with a mock flourish.

She whined and got in. He closed the flaps over her and then to her surprise, he taped it shut. Just once, but it was enough for Iona to feel extra uncomfortable.

"Calm down," he whispered like a cowboy whispering soothing things to the horse under him. "We're doing this so we can stay together while I search the warehouse for the food order I spoke to Madam Damsel about. I want to know if it's already been loaded onto the Cannonball III or if it's still here."

"We need it?" she asked in a hushed voice.

"Yeah. We need it. If I knew we were going to have this many issues, I really would have insisted on getting provisions on Callisto no matter how much it cost."

Gage wheeled her down aisle after aisle. Iona held herself tightly together like an egg, with her knees to her nose, and tried not to put any weight on the sides of the box. It was better for her and Gage to stay together, even if she felt like a magician's assistant who had to keep the illusion intact until the end of the act. She'd done that sort of thing before. She had a good body for cramming it into unusual boxes and a visiting magician always knew that an assistant the audience was familiar with made for a better distraction than any woman he could provide.

Iona hated working for those guys, both the magician and her boss who had hired the magician. However, even if she spent every afternoon in a rattling cardboard box, she'd happily be Gage's assistant.

How had he known how to do all that he'd done? The food was drugged. Skip dinner and get out of town. The way out of a moving elevator is up. Everyone knows that, but he had known how to slow it down so she could get out too. He'd known about the lasers and known the layout of the tower so he'd been able to get them directly to the cargo hold.

She could see a little of his face through a crack in the box.

Suddenly, she realized that the only thing she'd ever really admired in a man had been how much money he had. It was a sobering thought as she bounced around on the dolly. Was that really why she wanted to get together with Sherman? Because she wanted to be bought by the richest buyer in the Jovian system? It didn't matter how he was going to treat her or how he treated any of his other models? As long as she brought in the most money? As long as she took the maximum amount of money from him? Did she feel the same about Dante? She smoothed out her forehead with her middle finger. She knew that was the truth.

In the clarity of a cardboard box, she realized that she had been waiting to love herself until she had distinguished herself. She needed to be the best in some way out of billions of people. It wasn't enough to be the best person out of a hundred. Not even one in a million. She needed to be one in a billion—the fanciest, prettiest, highest-paid woman before she could love herself.

How many rich men had to treat her like a princess before she was a princess to herself? Before she was priceless to herself? Suddenly, she understood there were no limits. She'd never hit the threshold where she could be satisfied with herself if she didn't draw the line somewhere. Once she conquered the Jovian region, would she have to beat the highest-paid Martian girl, the highest-paid girl on Ceres, and eventually beat out the highest-paid model on Earth?

Fuck.

Did anyone have the stamina for that? And if she gave everything she had to being a model, what would be left for her when her career was over?

"Gage," she whispered. "I think I might throw up."

He stopped the dolly. "Take a rest. I found it. We're lucky. The crate is still in the warehouse. There's a note for me on it from Madam Damsel."

"What does she say?"

"Just that she's sorry and once I get in the air, I should never come back to Europa."

"She thought you'd escape?"

"The note doesn't read like that. It looks like she expected Olivine to get what she wants out of me tonight. I'd be sedated and I'd black out. If all went according to plan, in the morning, I'd have no idea what had happened the night before. Right, like I'd have no idea what that woman did to my body, or not be able to guess what she did to yours. This crate is scheduled to be loaded up tomorrow morning before the drugs would have worn off."

"Should we wait?" Iona wondered aloud since she couldn't see his face.

"No. We need to go now. In a perfect world, I'd wheel you over to the forklift, load you onto the back of it and then drive back here to get the supplies, but if you're feeling motion sick, I don't want you to throw up in the box. The warehouse is deserted. I mean, I haven't seen anyone. Do you want me to leave you here while I go get a forklift?"

"No!" she said decisively. "If I throw up in the box, then I throw up in the box. We have to stay together."

There was no answer from Gage for a second. Then the dolly started moving. Quietly, he whispered, "Well, that's very cool of you."

The trip to the forklifts was vomit-inducing for Iona. For one thing, it took a great deal of butt balance to stop the box from falling off the dolly. For another, there was no fresh air in the box, so she was smelling a sickly combination of the chemicals from her hair products, whatever was in the filthy water that had been dumped on her, the musk from Gage's shirt which was completely corrupted by the stink of rillo piss. She was motion sick without a vantage point and the ride seemed to last forever.

When they finally got to the forklifts, Gage pushed the box onto the back of the forklift and she felt him strap it down.

The egg she was holding herself in broke and she could finally lean against the side of the box. It tore a little under her weight, but she could still relax quite a bit.

"Hold on," Gage whispered to her. "You're doing great."

“Do you know how to drive a forklift?” she asked.

He laughed. “I can drive a solarship, babe. Everything else is less complex. This should be smoother than the dolly.”

She felt him jump up into the seat and turn on the forklift. They got moving.

He was right. It was a nicer ride. It was also faster and not two minutes later, he had picked up the crate. Then it was only another few minutes until they were in the cargo elevator and heading up to where the Cannonball was docked. The elevator doors opened and the temperature in the air dropped dramatically.

There was yelling, but Iona couldn't hear the exact words until Gage replied. “Hi!” he called cheerfully. “I'm delivering cargo for the Cannonball III.”

“You're going to have to hang on,” Iona heard a security guard say. “This pilot doesn't have clearance to board his ship until tomorrow morning at eight. You can load your cargo, but we need to return him to his room.”

“Are you Gage?” Gage called out to someone.

“You know I hate you, right?” the other voice called out.

“Yeah, well the feeling just goes around and around, doesn't it?”

Then there was the unmistakable sound of a struggle. Iona smashed open the lid of the box above her and stood up. Gage and the other man she'd seen who looked like him were beating the tar out of the security guards.

Aside from the red hair and their clothes, the two men were identical.

Chapter Fifteen

Gage finished loading the cargo. When he backed the forklift out of his cargo bay, he turned to Iona and Leviticus, who were making sure the security guards stayed down while Gage loaded his cargo.

“Get aboard!” he called to them.

“I freaking don’t want to get aboard your ship,” Leviticus screamed at Gage.

“Well, I guess you can stay here,” he said from the cargo doors as he watched Iona leap on board.

She must have been frozen in the hangar.

Leviticus eyed the security guards on the floor. “I hate you so much!” he hollered before he fixed his collar, straightened his back, and joined Gage in the cargo bay of the Cannonball III.

“What are you doing here?” Gage asked Leviticus as he locked the cargo doors.

“You stink,” Leviticus replied.

“Yeah, and I’m going to stink for a while longer while I lock us up and get us into orbit. We’re on our way to Io.”

The redhead rolled his eyes. “That suits me fine, even if I hate you so much!”

Gage groaned. “You don’t need to tell me you hate me every two seconds. I get it. I hate you too. It’s natural. We all hate each other.”

“Except Benediction. He *only thinks* he’s over all that.”

Gage laughed. “Yeah, we’re the only people he doesn’t want to join his church.”

“True that,” Leviticus joined, putting his hand up for a fist bump before remembering how much he hated Gage and dropping his hand. “That way he can keep his *unique* look. I swear that was the only reason he joined that dumb church. It was a super dumb church before he joined it and took it over.”

“You’re not going to get an argument from me.” Gage left the control panel in the cargo bay and headed for the cockpit.

“Where’s your girl?” Leviticus wondered.

“If she’s a good girl, she’s in her seat preparing for liftoff. If she’s a bad girl, she’s completely naked in a shower tube.”

“Well, I hope she’s a bad girl,” Leviticus said as they entered the cockpit and saw Iona strapped down. “So, she’s a good girl!”

“Shut the hell up and get strapped down yourself,” Gage barked. He took his seat and started up the controls.

“Do you think they’ve messed with the ship?” Iona asked from a seat behind Gage.

“No. Getting me naked doesn’t usually involve ruining my whole life. At least, not since I became a free man.”

The jump through the atmosphere into outer space was easier on Europa than it had been on Callisto because of the lack of a sturdy atmosphere. The view of Europa from orbit always made Gage sad. To him, the moon looked like a marble woman who had been scarred by barbed wire that had been ripped across her skin. He always had a moment where he wanted to save her like she was something that could be saved.

As it was, it was always hard enough to save himself.

“Iona, this is my brother, Leviticus,” Gage said, as he turned himself around in the pilot’s chair.

“Yuck,” Leviticus said. “Please don’t call me your brother. It makes us sound way closer than we were. It’s not like we were grown in the same test tube.”

“Fine,” Gage stormed. “Since we’re apparently not keeping any secrets. Neither of us are homegrown humans. We’re part of a genetic experiment and there are ten of us. Gage tightened his jaw as Iona looked between the two of them.

“Ah, I see,” she said softly. “That’s why you’re perfect. That’s why you’re at odds with your face and why you can’t show your face in public. There are a bunch of men out there who look exactly like you. And I mean, exactly like you.”

“How much time have you spent asleep?” Gage suddenly asked Leviticus.

“I haven’t.”

Gage looked at him with incredulity. “You’ve been awake the whole time? You look exactly the same as me.”

“Who said we were going to age normally?” Leviticus shot back. “We wouldn’t. We were made to be superior to the average human. I suppose it’s a lie that I’ve been awake the whole time. I haven’t. I slept on my way out here, so I slept for about two years, but that’s it.”

“None of you are going to die, are you?” Gage lamented.

“Well, that’s actually what I came to talk to you about,” Leviticus said, turning to the side and scratching his nose. “Heretic and Testament are dead.”

“And they were my favorite ones!” Gage frowned.

“Shut up. You hated them as much as the rest of us. You only like them now because they’re dead.”

“No,” Gage amended. “I actually did like Testament. He and I were once sold as a pair. I just never wanted to see him again because if I saw him I’d remember what he looked like after—”

Leviticus covered his ears with both hands and started screaming. “Don’t tell me! I hate comparisons of abuse. The only thing that’s fair is if we say we were all abused, we’re all messed up over it, and none of us will ever be normal because of it. But, what the hell Gage? You and I were once sold as a pair, but I don’t hear you reminiscing about it.”

“True. I also hate you a little less than the others.”

“Don’t say another word, I’ll break,” Leviticus said, his face looking as likely to break as a bronze statue. “I hate being here. I hate seeing you, but there are a couple of really bad things happening right now and I wouldn’t be able to live with myself if I didn’t tell you and that prick, Benediction, what was going on.”

“What? Does someone need an organ transplant?”

“Nah. It’s Apostate. He... uh... I’m pretty sure he was the one to kill Heretic and Testament,” Leviticus said through dry, smacking lips.

“Why would he do something like that? Despite his name, he always had the softest heart of the crew. Always crying in the background while the rest of us took our needles.”

“He went crazy. That’s the only explanation I can offer. You’re already in the middle of nowhere, so seeing you wasn’t my top priority in the Jovian region. I wasn’t going to bother you at all until I saw that video of you throwing Angel Wings into the air.” He looked at Iona meaningfully.

“You mean you saw a video of our show at The Crater and you recognized him from his chest?” Iona asked in a shocked hush.

“Of course I did,” Leviticus replied with a sharp look behind his eyebrows. “Every rib, every muscle, every pore is the same on him as it is on me. I know my rack of lamb anywhere. Beautiful performance, by the way. If I had any money at all, I’d bid on you, Iona.” He turned back to Gage. “Back to business, I’m out of cash, so I’m grateful for the ride to Io. Think I can get any money out of Benediction to help fund my mission?”

“I doubt it,” Gage grumbled.

“Can I get any money out of you?”

Gage cleared his throat. He had been waiting for this man and all the others to die. That dream seemed like it had been snatched from him. They were never going to die and if they did, dying at the hands of Apostate seemed too crazy to be a possibility.

“I can give you a lift to Io, and when you’ve finished your business there, I can probably run you back to Callisto or Ganymede. After that, I’m not too sure what my situation will be. However, you should be aware that I’m not shuttling Iona around under my normal pretexts. She’s my master and is in charge of all this.”

“She *owns* you!” Leviticus howled. “That is a terrific gig! Iona, buy me too. Gage and I make a great set. He can throw you up in the air and I can catch you. He can rub your feet while I rub your back and if you’re even a little bit naughty—”

Iona had turned pale.

“Shut up!” Gage interrupted. “You saw her walk the stairs at the Sleeping Beauty Inc. model show. She’s campaigning for a bidder herself.”

“Oh, yeah,” Leviticus said as he leaned back in his chair. “That’s a real shame. I’ve never been owned by a woman like her.”

“It’s a first for me too,” Gage said, turning his head away. “Okay, here’s what we’re going to do. We’ll all go get cleaned up. I’ll give you one of my hatch rooms, Leviticus.”

“What’s a hatch room?”

“It’s a room that’s less fancy than hers and less functional than mine. It has a shower and a bed. All you need to do is have a shower. I’ll give you a quarter physical and ensure that you are well enough to be placed in cryostasis. I’ll put you to sleep and you can wake up on Io in about a month.”

“I don’t know if I trust you enough to let you put me in cryostasis,” Leviticus complained.

“If you didn’t trust me enough for that, you shouldn’t have gotten aboard.”

Leviticus hesitated.

“Come on, man,” Gage said after the moment dragged out. “I may be looking for a world where all the other versions of me are gone, but I was only hoping to outlive you. I certainly wouldn’t deliberately hurt you or leave you in cryostasis for all eternity.”

Leviticus squealed unpleasantly. “I hadn’t even thought of the idea of you leaving me in cryostasis!”

“You can set the timer yourself if you’re so damn concerned,” Gage offered, whacking the heel of his boot with his thumb impatiently.

“Fine. Show me the way,” Leviticus agreed, getting to his feet.

Iona got up too. “This ship has other rooms? Call me naive, but I thought it only had your room and my room, the two cargo bays, the cockpit, and the infirmary.”

Gage led her out of the cockpit. "Okay. So, there are six doors leading out of this portal. The cockpit, my room, the infirmary, your room, the hatch rooms, and the engine room. Cargo room A is downstairs and it's for models. In case you were ever curious, Iona, I can trade which models are in the main guest room by shuffling cryochambers in cargo room A. If you've ever thought that you were never put in the storage room, let me put your mind to rest."

"You've put me in the storage room for flights?" she said, scrunching up her nose uncomfortably.

"Nah. Just kidding. I put the other models in the cargo hold. You stay in the bedroom. You are my favorite."

"Really?"

He nodded. "You've been in the cargo room during shuffling, but I never leave you in there. It's bad to say, but the models in the cargo hold aren't as safe as the one in the bedroom. And since no one is around here telling me how to do my job, you go in the bedroom. Cargo room B is for other supplies."

"That's really sweet," she said with a sweet smile of her own.

"He says that just in time to tell me which cryochamber I'll get in cargo room A. He doesn't want me thinking I'm getting better treatment than you," Leviticus grumbled.

"If you want, there's a spare cryochamber in my room I can let you use," Gage informed him with a grim look. "I can't offer it to models because I can't shuffle that one with the ones in the cargo bay so I won't be able to do an outer space transfer of your pod in an emergency. If you take it, you'll be trapped in this ship the same way I am trapped in this ship. In it until it breaks open."

"Yuck." Leviticus stuck his tongue out. "You're comfortable with that arrangement?"

"I am. I've been a deep space pilot for over forty years. I've had ships crumble. I've pointed models at Saturn and ejected them while I put myself to sleep and waited for rescue."

"Why not toward Mars? There are more people that way."

Gage shook his head. "They won't make it through the asteroid belt. That is actually what I've spent most of my awake time doing, navigating the asteroid belt. Escape pods without pilots don't make it through the asteroid belt very often. You need expensive AI or you need a cheap pilot."

"We are really in the sticks," Leviticus groaned as he flicked open the door to the hatch rooms and took the one closest to the doors.

"Come to the infirmary once you're clean," Gage called after him.

Iona grabbed his hand. "Can we talk?"

"Can we do that once I get Leviticus to sleep?" Gage asked, allowing her hand to settle in his. "I'm sure you want to get cleaned up." He brought her knuckles to his lips and kissed them.

Iona's eyes went wide.

"What?" he asked.

She swallowed. "After everything my hands have been through, you went ahead and kissed one."

"Oh, yeah," he said. "Not to worry. I'll give myself a shot of antibiotics and I'll be right as rain. Lock your door. Kay? I'll let you know when I'm ready for you in the infirmary."

He moved to walk away, but she held onto his hand. "Could you give me one of those shots too?" She grabbed his yellow and blue vest and pulled him toward her.

She kissed him without his permission and he was quite swept away.

Chapter Sixteen

Gage lied to Leviticus at least ten times from the time he started his quarter physical to the point when he got him to sleep inside a locked cryochamber. With any luck, his clone buddy would never know he'd been lied to.

Gage didn't blame Leviticus for being leery of him or being afraid of what could happen to him on board Gage's ship. The buyer who had bought him and Leviticus together had been the type of weirdo who liked watching two identical boys fight each other. That said, Gage had fought Leviticus more than any other human being. They had exactly the same physical prowess and minds that had initially had the same functionality. When they fought, it was like playing yourself at chess. Leviticus always did what Gage thought he would do and vice versa. It was also hard for Gage to keep his focus. He didn't want to hurt someone who was so thoroughly himself. It was surreal to hit Leviticus and not feel the burn of the punch himself. Sometimes he thought he felt it anyway.

Their master didn't want to sell them when he did. He loved watching them tumble and often brought them out to perform for guests because watching two identical boys rip each other apart was the best entertainment that could be had.

Living there and fighting Leviticus had been a better life than the one Gage had been given in exchange. That was when he had been sold to Olivine's father. Mr. Bouvant had decided that Gage was the better of the two because when they had been handed over, Leviticus had been wearing a frayed vest and cut-off jeans and Gage had been wearing a suit with no shirt under the jacket. As he was, he looked like a better gift for his daughter than Leviticus. Gage was dressed that way because he was being loaned out as a prom date. He was chosen for that honor by lottery.

That day, Leviticus had been shipped off to Olivine's cousin, Raylynn, and Gage had been sent to live as Olivine's pet. That was why Leviticus didn't like sharing abuse stories. He was abused by Raylynn, but not in the same cursed, twisted way Gage had been abused by Olivine. Leviticus didn't like having his pain marginalized by someone who had been hurt so much deeper, which was why he didn't like comparing abuse stories.

Not only that, but Leviticus didn't run the risk of running into Raylynn anywhere. She had died in a helocarrier accident just one year after all ten of them were rescued by police.

Leviticus really had all the luck, except for Iona.

Gage had been working himself up to it. If he didn't sleep with Iona before they landed on Io, he might not get another chance. Could he do that without messing himself up even more?

He returned to the infirmary and gave himself the quarter physical. Then, feeling that it hadn't been enough to make sure he was healthy, he proceeded to give himself the half physical, with a urine sample and a throat swab. He shot himself up with the antibiotics as he waited for the tests to come back. Unable to wait, he went ahead and took blood from his arm and put that in for testing along with the other samples.

"What are you doing?" Iona asked from the door. She wasn't in the paper dress she normally wore for the physicals, but she wore a white slip that was probably the closest thing to the paper dress she owned.

"Oh, I am giving myself a physical," he explained feebly.

Radiant as an angel, she took a step forward in her wooden sandals. “You don’t usually take blood.”

“Well, I don’t usually feel like I’m on the verge of a panic attack. But I feel awful. I’m not settling. I’m in outer space. That woman is on Europa. I’ve already set our course and Europa is getting further and further away, but it’s not far enough for me. You know, I really hoped that I’d make it through my whole life without seeing her again. I thought I’d live the rest of my life without her raking her eyes over me, thinking of new ways to make me feel like less than a person.”

Iona placed a hand on the bandage he’d used to stop the blood from where he’d drawn it. “Hmm... Do you want me to swab out your throat?”

He sucked in his breath. “You’re a little late. Get on the table. I’ll do your physical.”

“Is Leviticus asleep?”

“Yeah.”

She got on the table and for once, Gage did not put on his white lab coat. He moved her cascading pink hair out of the way, so he could place his stethoscope over her heart.

“Do you think you’ll be able to trust Sleeping Beauty Inc. in the future?” she asked.

“Uh... I’m trying not to think about it because if I think about it, I’ll break something. I’ll check my bank account before I go to sleep just to see what kind of compensation Madam Damsel had in mind. Oh, I wanted to tell you how great you were in the cargo bay of the tower. You being brave enough to stay with me through all that rattling in the box was really something.” He looked in her eyes and then in her ears, continuing with the physical.

“Did I fall all over you to thank you for what you did at my performance to save me from falling on my face, breaking my nose, and humiliating myself in front of all those people with phones? Even if I don’t get a stellar contract, I’ll at least get one because I still have my pretty face. That’s all thanks to you.”

“Don’t mention it. Hold still.” Gage was having a hard time getting through the rest of the quarter physical. Now that he planned to take her to bed, he was having a hard time being patient. “Are you feeling sick?” he asked, trying to keep his head clear as he went through the checklist.

“Gage, would you ever think of leaving Sleeping Beauty Inc.?”

He looked at her. She was surprised that Madam Damsel had put him in that position with Olivine. He wished he could share the feeling. As it was, he was mostly impressed that they had been able to keep them apart as long as they had.

He parted his lips to explain that he didn’t think there was a single place in the universe where he wouldn’t eventually be betrayed when a light came on behind Iona’s head. It wasn’t the white light that signaled he had a communication link waiting in the cockpit. It was the red light that signaled there was a problem in the engine room.

“We’re about half finished here,” he explained, pointing at the light behind her with his eyes, “but I need to go check on that.” He patted her on the knee. “Stay here.”

It was a quick walk to the engine room, where Gage saw the deep space thrusters sputtering. He turned them off with some heavy exertion on a red lever. Then he marched back to the cockpit and read the error log.

There were more systems struggling than just the deep space thrusters. That was the thing about ships that entered and exited atmospheres. Not that Europa had much atmosphere, but

the tiniest thing could make a solarship unstable. He had taken meticulous care of the Cannonball III as it was his home, but meticulous care didn't mean that it would never break. And what a time to break! Looking at the walls of the cockpit was frightening. As a pilot, he'd seen many rooms inside starships torn apart and the living spaces inside destroyed. He could see a vision of the cockpit of his ship with great holes in it if the tiniest thing went wrong. He felt the armrests of the captain's seat and realized that the danger might be so immediate that once he got out of his chair, he might never sit in it again.

He instantly felt sore guilt over the idea of taking Iona to bed. Everyone on board was safer if they were in cryostasis. He could even control the ship from his pod if there was a sore enough emergency. However, thinking rationally about how to contain the situation didn't ease his remorse over his selfishness. All three of them could die if he was careless and they were his responsibility. He was the pilot.

Putting his analytical brain to work, he ran the trajectory of the Cannonball III two different ways before he was satisfied. They'd make it to Io.

Back in the infirmary, he gave Iona the news. "We have a problem."

She waited with her hands clasped together tightly.

"The deep space thrusters are dead. It might be something I can fix, but it would be better for all of us if I didn't try. I might throw off our trajectory if I ignite the wrong engine. Long story short. We're not going to make it to Io in a month."

"No?"

"No. We're lucky. We've got four things working in our favor right now. First, the thrusters didn't fire in strange ways before the alarm went off. They could have done that and sent us off in a completely different direction. Second, we got good thrust after we left Europa, so we got up to a decent speed that we can continue to take advantage of even after the thrusters quit. Third, Io is coming toward us. We don't have to chase it. And lastly, we're not fighting Jupiter's gravity since Io is closer to Jupiter than Europa. The gravitational pull is strong enough to give us a little extra oomph on our flight path. If I don't touch another control, we'll get there safely just coasting."

"But it will take us longer than a month?"

"Yeah, it's going to take us a little over two months."

"What about our plan to stay awake?" Iona asked anxiously.

"That's not such a good idea anymore," Gage said in hollow tones. "When the thrusters malfunctioned, a few other systems struggled as well. I'm not sure what else could go. These ships tend to be built in such a way that they're not really repairable. When we land on Io, I'm going to need to take it to a shop and there's a good chance they'll say it's unfixable. They're likely to decommission this ship and hand me another one. The thing is that if something else breaks, like life-support, you won't be safe unless you're sleeping in your cryochamber. You need to be in a cryochamber."

Iona looked crushed. "Will all my extra time with you be spent on this ship with both of us asleep? I bought you and the Cannonball III for three months. Those three months will be gone when we arrive on Io."

"It's not fair," he said in a professional tone. "As a representative of Sleeping Beauty Inc., I can put a few of your fears to rest. Space travel can be unpredictable and Sleeping Beauty Inc.

understands that. You paid for a return trip to the moon of your choice after your visit to Io and, though it will most likely not be on the Cannonball III, your return trip will be taken care of.”

“And the time I was supposed to spend with you?” she grumbled in resignation.

He winked at her. “Things might not go very smoothly on Io and we might be stuck there for a long time.”

She smiled.

His wink had been meant to put her at ease and it seemed like it had worked. That was a pilot’s charm, making the passengers feel safe, even though he was counting the seconds on the digital clock over her shoulder worried that he wouldn’t get her into a cryochamber before the ship fell to pieces.

“Let me finish your physical and put you to sleep,” he said with an easy motion.

When he completed the quarter physical, he gave her a clean bill of health and told her that it was nice to see her healthy because she usually wasn’t when he saw her. All smiles, he helped her off the table and led her into the main guest room.

Iona moved to get into the cryochamber wearing the little white dress.

Gage took her hand and spun her in a circle in front of the closet. “Are you sure you wouldn’t like to change into something else?”

“Like what?” she questioned, her eyes wide in surprise.

“May I choose something for you?”

She nodded her delight.

Gage slipped into the closet. He really didn’t want to tell her that there was not only a good chance that they’d crash on the surface of Io, but it was also a completely reasonable supposition that he might have to eject her chamber like an escape pod and she might need to be rescued from the desert volcanoes of Io. She might be alone for some time before being rescued and being dressed in a white slip dress intended to make her look like a sex queen was not at all a good idea.

He found her a pair of jeans, a bra, a tank top, a hoodie, a jacket, socks, and boots. Io had a warmer surface than the other Jovian moons, but he didn’t know where they’d crash. He handed her the bra.

“Start with this,” he said, just a hand sticking out between the closet doors.

“Okay,” she said pleasantly as she took the bra.

“Are you wearing panties?”

“Not as such,” she admitted.

Unhappily, his mouth filled with saliva. He slapped himself across the face.

“Who wears panties to a physical?” she explained on the other side of the closet doors.

“I agree. I’ll find you a pair,” he said as he opened the panty box he had been avoiding. He found the pair that had the biggest butt on them and handed them to her.

“You like these ones?” she asked skeptically. “I want you to know I only wear these when I’m on my period.”

“Yeah,” he said, “but they don’t look like they’ll ride up your bum and I want you to be comfortable.”

“Okay,” she said when she had them on.

He handed her the tank top, then the jeans after an appropriate interval, then the hoodie, the socks, the boots, and the jacket.

He came out when she was zipping up the hoodie. "You look so cute!" he said brightly as he helped her slide into the jacket.

"Is this because you don't want to sleep with me?" she asked with narrowed eyes.

Gage wasn't sure if it was better for her to believe that his clothing choices were because he wasn't attracted to her or because he thought they were likely to crash. "If you get into the cryochamber with no more fuss, I'll give you that tongue kiss you asked for," he said, hoping to distract her.

She hurried to get in.

Gage bent over her and started pressing the buttons to prepare the cryochamber for activation. "Once upon a time, there was a king and a queen that longed for a child," he began.

Iona looked at him funny.

He was being odd and he knew it. If Iona went to any Sleeping Beauty Inc. location without a bidder, she'd be put into cryostasis until someone purchased her contract. She almost always had a bidder, so she hadn't been put to sleep much except for when he put her to sleep on his vessel. The first time he had put her to sleep, he had started telling her one of the Sleeping Beauty Inc. fairy tales that were always told to the girls to help ease them into unconsciousness. He had said as much as, 'Once upon a time' when Iona had told him not to bother.

"I don't need a fairy tale. I'm a grown woman and I need money to feel like a princess, not stories."

Gage had never tried to tell her another story, but this time, he wasn't reciting the story from the Sleeping Beauty Inc. literature.

"After praying to ten magical fairies, their wish was granted and the queen became pregnant. Her pregnancy was hard and painful and when it finally came time to deliver her baby, the midwife was very surprised to realize that the queen was not giving birth to just one child. Every one of the fairies had granted her wish and she had not just one baby in her belly, but ten. Ten boys, all at once. The delivery was disastrous as the queen passed from life after carrying so many infants at once. Later on, the strain of looking after ten babies was too much for the King and all his servants. They could not keep track of all of them and each one of the boys went wild in his own way."

Gage's hands moved around her as he handled her buckles inside the cryochamber.

Softly, he continued the story. "One boy took to the forest and became like wood. One took to the sea and became like the ocean spray. One took to the skies and became like wind. One took to the mountains and became like stone. One took to the volcanos and became like fire. Another joined the lions and became like sound. One took to the books and became like words. One got in the sugar pail and became like sweetness. One took to the armory and became sharp like a sword. And the last one... he took to the stars and became like time." Gage pressed his forehead against Iona's. Their breath mingled momentarily and Gage breathed her in as he said his last line. "And he asked you to join him."

He kissed her, and he felt her breath catch.

She loved him.

No one could kiss someone the way Iona kissed him without being in love. No one had ever been in love with Gage before and he could taste the difference.

A white light went off over the cryochamber and Gage got off Iona and pressed the buttons to close the lid and fill the chamber with sleeping gas. Her hand pressed against the clear lid until they could no longer see each other through the white fog that surrounded her.

She wasn't asleep yet, but there was nothing more to see.

He had a message in the cockpit, but he'd be damned if he'd take it there. He went straight to the pilot's room and got suited up. When he was dressed in his armor, he got inside his cryochamber. The message on the green screen was from the ship detailing more failing systems. He sent a mayday signal to Io and checked the integrity of Iona's cryochamber. He couldn't go to sleep himself until he was certain she was asleep and her chamber was functioning properly.

Chapter Seventeen

Iona didn't normally dream when she was in cryostasis. What usually happened was that Gage walked her to the capsule, and gave her a hand up like he was a footman helping a lady into a carriage. She slid into the seat and he buckled her up inside. She liked it when he buckled her. It was a four-point harness (a five-point if she wore pants instead of a dress into the cryochamber), and his hands around her waist and between her legs gave her a nice buzz before he filled the chamber with gas. The truth, as she saw it, was that she'd rather have Gage touch her before she fell asleep than tell her a dumb scripted story that Sleeping Beauty Inc. used to trick hyper-idealistic types into feeling comfortable before they were gassed.

Though it was true that Iona wanted to be treated like a princess, she found all that cornball stuff to be unnecessary and completely lacking in substance. She liked math and the numbers of the bidding rounds were what really lit her torch. It was a manifestation of her worth in a way that could be calculated and all the cobwebs were pushed aside for a dollar amount that no one could argue with. She was worth an insane amount of money.

And what was a story if not a tool meant to distract someone from where the money was moving? She had done that herself for years. She got the dollar amount the bidder paid assigned to her name. Sleeping Beauty Inc. took their cut, but Iona got the rest of the money. Aside from that, she often convinced her buyer to give her a million little gifts during the time he owned her. When she started taking corporate clients, she got more gifts because then she could scrape the employees of the company she worked for, but also all the clients she served. Iona had three storage spaces on Ganymede that were essentially locked boxes at a bank filled with expensive clothes, jewelry, and gifts.

She hadn't been back to check on them for years and they were the last things on her mind when Gage put her to sleep with his story and his kiss.

For as long as she could remember, she had never dreamed while she was in cryostasis, until this one time.

She dreamt she was on Ganymede. She was wearing her favorite dress that was currently in one of her storage containers. It was a metallic pink halter dress with a huge silver belt around the waist. The skirt was a short pencil skirt with a huge, separate, ruffled train in the back. Whenever she put on that dress, with huge hoop earrings, glitter all over her face, crystals in her hair, and her Cinderella glass slippers on her feet (the one accessory from Sleeping Beauty Inc. she actually liked and the reason she had been willing to be categorized as a Cinderella model), she felt like she had finally become herself.

This was who she really was. On the red carpet with spotlights shining down on her, with camera flashes in her face. Some faceless man was escorting her, but no one cared about him. All eyes were on her!

"Who is she?"

"Why is she worth so much?"

"Can't you see why? There is no one more dazzling than her."

"I want her!"

"I want her!"

"I want to be her!"

Except, Iona couldn't live in that moment because the show always ended. It couldn't last forever and after the show, after the lights, after everything went dark, there was always the moment after the party when she was alone. She was in a hotel suite bathroom with a vision of herself in the mirror that had to be faced. She had to take off her makeup and see what she was without it. She had to take off her dress like it was a skin of hers that had never really belonged to her. How could that dress mean anything about her if she could take it off so easily? She had to take off the Cinderella slippers and face the fact that no prince had come for her.

Even if a man bid on her, the longest contract Iona had ever taken was for 18 months. That wasn't forever. It wasn't happily ever after.

The truth was she wasn't even as loved as the little girls who had fairy tales told to them all tucked up in bed.

For a hideous moment, she was back to being the little girl who had gone to sleep every night in a dead dog's bed.

In her dream, she left the bathroom with bare feet and an oversized T-shirt over her panties. Her grayish-blond hair was knotted into a braid that didn't make sense. She had done it herself and she didn't know how to braid. The air chilled her as she moved on the smudged tile flooring of the kitchen of her childhood. Cracked glass windows, mice in the attic, bats under the floor, grime between her toes, and the light and screams from a horror movie being played by the neighbors across the way. The grayish light of the empty fridge hurt her eyes. She got a glass of water in a paper cup. The water poured from the sink was yellow and ugly compared with the clear water advertised everywhere on flashing screens. The front door creaked and Iona ran to hide. Crunched between the washing machine and the dryer, she threw clothes over herself. If she could stop herself from trembling, if she could quiet her breathing... he might not find her.

She woke up with a start.

Iona was in the cryochamber. The light that shone through the glass above her was indecipherable as the world was always a little upside down whenever she woke up from cryosleep. She wasn't that little girl anymore. She was a modern princess with men throwing their cash at her just to impress her. She coughed. It was fine for her to cough. She didn't need to hide. She could just cough and no one would be bothered by it. It was fine. When she was sick now, she was cared for by a beautiful gentleman named Gage. She was safe and all that old stuff was over. She breathed and opened her eyes wide.

That was the moment when she was awake enough to realize that there was a problem. Gage hadn't woken her with a kiss the way he usually did. What had happened?

Cryochambers used in outer space were fancier than the ones that stayed on the surface of a planet with their sole purpose to keep the models looking young. Iona's could be used as an escape pod in an emergency. She pressed a few buttons on the ceiling above her.

Using the panel, the computer on board informed her that her cryochamber was still aboard the Cannonball III and they were now on Io. She got a message on her little green screen from Gage saying that they had crashed and it would be a few minutes before he could get to her to let her out. He sent her the info pack she needed to release herself if she was in a hurry.

Iona opted to try to go through the procedure that would let her out of the cryochamber. She clicked on the button to start the process on her screen.

"Would you like to disengage the artificial gravity inside your cryochamber? Y/N?"

“Yes,” she clicked. Obviously, she would need to do that if she was going to open the hatch.

Immediately, her whole body slumped to the right and hard against her restraints. Gage said they crashed. He had not said that they crashed on their side. Iona rubbed at the condensation on the glass above her that fogged up the windows. As she thought, the room looked exactly the same as it had when it was right side up, because the whole thing was on its side. She glanced out the glass lid and inspected the room more carefully. The bed had broken the bolts that held it in place and it was now against the wall, but the mattress was in a position where she could jump to it. Even if Gage came to help her, he’d probably just tell her to jump onto the mattress anyway.

She turned to the computer to answer the next question.

“Would you like to depressurize the cabin? Y/N?”

Iona hadn’t been aware that there was any pressure put on the cryochamber, but if the computer said there was, then there probably was.

She clicked yes and immediately her ears popped. There was a hissing sound and the next thing that happened was that she could smell the yellow sands of Io. She’d forgotten how much she hated that smell. It was on everything on Io. It was like sulfur or brimstone because of all the volcanic activity on the moon. The best thing about being on Io was the sight of Jupiter. It was enormous in the sky, filling your view because every human longed for something huge to hang in the sky. That was why she forgot about the smell and decided to come to Io. Who didn’t love Jupiter?

That was what she told herself as she read the next question.

“Is it safe to open the hatch? Y/N?”

It was as safe as it was going to be, so she pressed yes.

The hatch opened slowly and Iona waited for it to open all the way before she undid her harness and positioned herself above the mattress. The mattress looked awfully small on the other side of the room, but Iona was not afraid of heights and leaped. She landed well.

“Good job,” Leviticus clapped for her, poking his head through the remains of the door frame. It had shattered on impact. “Care to walk on the wall to join me?”

Iona had never walked on a wall before as she came toward him. When she got to the door frame, the wall crumbled under her weight, and she ended up falling between the studs onto the opposite wall of the circular hallway.

“These are some rickety ships!” she complained from the place she’d fallen.

Leviticus agreed, helping her to her feet. “Gage says we’ve got to get out of here, but he’s still in his cryochamber making calls and putting out fires. He says you and I should go outside and take a look around. He says we should be able to see the biggest volcano on Io from here. It’s called Loki.”

“I’ve never seen Loki,” Iona said, following Leviticus. “Are you walking on the studs?”

“I would if I knew where they were. As it is, we’ll know not to step somewhere if I put a foot through the wall.”

They made it to the spiral staircase that led to the cargo bays. Turned on its side, it had become a slide that had an upward curve at the end. Iona went first. She had to stand on the smooth surface of the wall, slide, and then heave herself up through the doorway. After that, Iona and Leviticus had to walk down a long hallway. On its side, the orientation didn’t provide a tall enough space for them to stand upright. Iona gave up trying to walk and dropped to her

hands and knees. She wasn't worried about falling through the walls because the walls of the cargo bays were made out of bolted metal since they sometimes had to open to outer space.

At the end of the hallway, there was a staircase that led down to the bottom hatch.

Leviticus opened it with some effort and after a look outside, he turned to Iona and smiled. "Well, that's pretty good."

He hopped out and Iona saw what he was so happy about. It was only a small jump to the sand. They could have crashed in such a way that the exit hatch was twice the scary jump that Iona made when he jumped out of her cryochamber onto her bed.

"That's lucky," she agreed.

"I doubt it's lucky. That guy would have crashed us this way on purpose."

Iona chuckled at Leviticus calling Gage 'that guy'. "Really?" she asked aloud.

"He's not a dick brain. He would have crashed us in the most thoughtful way possible."

"Hey, you said you were sold together with him. What does that mean exactly?"

Leviticus pulled a pair of orange-tinted sunglasses out of his coat pocket and put them on as if the orange lenses could protect him from showing any feeling. "I don't know if it means anything, just that we know each other's moves. I would have crashed us well, so I know he would have. He's an idiot with a brain like mine."

"He's less mouthy," Iona observed.

"Yes, well, I would be a lot less mouthy if I was your slave too. I'd say anything you wanted to hear." Leviticus hesitated. "What is that wretched smell?" He covered his face with the sleeve of his jacket. "I thought it was the smell of the crash when we were inside, but it's not, is it?"

"Welcome to Io," Iona wheezed, thinking of how Gage never said what she wanted to hear. There was no way these two 'brothers' were as identical as Leviticus thought. She told him about the sands and the volcanos and the constant tectonic shifts that kept Io warmer than the other moons of Jupiter.

"I'd rather freeze my ass off than smell this. It's going to seep into my clothes, isn't it?" he whined.

She nodded, realizing why Gage found non-whining people so attractive. "You can either stay inside, once we get somewhere, or you can get air filters put up your nose."

"Can't I do both?"

"I'd get one put in your throat too," Gage advised as he dropped from the hatch, still wearing this armor, except for the helmet.

"Are you okay?" Iona asked, rushing him.

"Of course, I am," he said with an easy smile. "I'm the pilot. I'm supposed to be asking you if you're alright. You look fine, you little acrobat."

"Nobody asked if I was okay?" Leviticus grumbled.

Gage ignored him. "I crashed, and considering the error feeds the Cannonball III was putting out, our crash is classified as a shipwreck. I called the closest wrecking crew. and they're on their way. Iona, they're offering triple retail price for every piece of clothing you brought with you if you're interested in selling. I'd sell if I were you. Since we're shipwrecked, they get wrecker's privilege, meaning that they'll just steal anything you aren't willing to sell to them and claim it was ruined anyway. I told them you'd talk it over with them when they got here. Even if you sell, you might want to hang onto your box of lacy panties."

“There’s no point to those if you’re not willing to rip them apart with your teeth,” Iona said with a smirk.

“That’s one of the things that I could’ve been doing?” Leviticus wondered noisily.

“No!” Iona and Gage said in unison.

“I’m just as good as him!” Leviticus said moodily. “It’s not like it matters who’s banging you if you’re paying for it.”

Iona’s breath caught.

Leviticus didn’t know it, but the words he said casually completely destroyed the system Iona used to value herself.

She gave no sign that the towers she’d built inside herself were falling. She was a professional woman so when her pride came tumbling down, there was no sign on her face. Her pride had many towers. Her beauty? Others were beautiful too. She was calm? Maybe that was because she was numb inside. Her power over men? What power did she have? If they couldn’t have her, they just bought someone else? Dante bought three girls to have at his beck and call. Sherman had more. How could any of their models feel special if they were being used like they were objects? Anyone would do.

And she was one of them.

Leviticus and Gage could see it easier because there was less about them that was unique.

Iona slid downwards and placed her bottom on the yellow sand of Io. The air was chilly and the sky was dark as they were so far away from the sun, but the ground was warm. Io had a beating heart and lava blood that pumped for Jupiter. Much of the moon’s heat and light was due to Jupiter’s awesome power in the sky. He had dominion over little Io and no matter how much she loved him, she could never get any closer to him.

Did anyone get what they wanted?

Iona put her face in the sand. It stank.

Chapter Eighteen

Gage hooked his hand over his ankle as Tuton, the wrecker from Lower Loki, explained what was going to happen to the Cannonball III. The people of Lower Loki had so few luxury items that they were taking everything Gage had aboard his ship. They were paying for it, and as far as they were concerned, they were getting a discount, but Gage was essentially being given a whack of cash and a kick on the bum.

Tuton was lending him a Helocarrier to pilot as long as he was on Io, but he could not sell Gage a new spaceship because they were only a wrecking outfit, not a spaceship dealer or manufacturer. In space, Gage had believed that there was going to be somewhere on Io where he could get a new ship, but it turned out that a lot of things got wrecked on Io, but not a lot of things turned around and left Io. In short, no one sold spaceships on Io. There had once been a dealership on Io, but like many things, the whole outfit had been swallowed when the moon was squeezed like a grape by Jupiter's gravity and the tectonic plates moved like the tides of Earth's oceans. The dealership had gone under and no one thought it was worthwhile to rebuild.

Doing a little math in his head, Gage realized they were more stranded on Io than he had previously thought they would be. The use of the helocarrier was a generous gift from the wreckers and Gage was expected to inform them where they could pick it up when he left Io.

Tuton believed that Gage would have no problems leaving Io when he wanted to go. What he had to do was simple from Tuton's perspective. All he needed to do was get on a recycling ship that was on its way to any of the other major moons. Once Gage was on Ganymede or Callisto, he could buy another ship with the whack of cash he'd been given (primarily for Iona's clothes, which were worth a lot more to the people of Io than the Cannonball III).

Before leaving the wreckers', Gage spent quite a bit of time with Tuton learning more about the helocarrier. It wasn't that he needed more instruction to pilot it. He could do that blindfolded and juggling. The problem was that there were vast distances between settlements on Io and if he crashed or had technical difficulty, it might spell death for Iona, Leviticus, and himself. He was learning how to maintain the engine and the rupter inside.

"If you've ever been to Callisto," Tuton was saying, "that is the home of the helocarrier business. Harrison Fox is there designing helocarriers. He's a pioneer. He's never been afraid to go somewhere remote to start a business."

Iona heard that name and came forward. "I know him."

"No, you don't," Tuton said, pushing his shaggy ponytail over his shoulder. "He lives on Callisto and designs the finest helocarriers in the universe."

Iona stamped her foot, annoyed at being discarded. "I said, I know him. I worked at Excalibur Helocarriers last year in his elite showroom. He wasn't my boss, but he was my boss's boss's boss and I've met him a number of times. It was always a huge deal when he was inspecting the showroom. He's the whole reason why I was hired."

"What?" Gage wondered.

"The story is legendary. He bought a model at Sleeping Beauty Inc. He fell in love with her, set her free, and married her. His company buys the contracts of Sleeping Beauty Inc. models to give them an opportunity to improve their resume so they can get jobs working..." Iona

slowed down, almost stopping herself in mid-sentence, “in the real world without selling themselves anymore.”

Gage stood up and tapped a wrench against his thigh. “They were trying to get you to quit being a model?”

Iona nodded.

“How many times did they buy you?”

“Over and over. I’m sorry. I’m just now remembering that Harrison said something about getting me a different job in the company. That, if I was interested in something like that, I should message him when my contract was over.”

“Iona, what can I pay you to get you to take that offer?” Gage said desperately.

She turned the entire effect of her honey eyes on him. Her anger was bubbling up and making her eyes seem yellower than the warm brown. “You can’t afford me,” she said hotly before she stormed out of the shop.

Gage watched her go but didn’t follow her. If she wanted to be outside in all that stink, that was her business.

“Those were her panties?” Tuton said, sticking a thumb out after her. “I’m going to sleep with a pair of them on my face tonight.”

“Don’t tell me stuff like that,” Gage said, as he turned his attention back to the engine of the helocarrier.

“I’ll still be able to sell them afterward,” the old nut chuckled.

The helocarrier Gage received from the wreckers had the words Danger Zone on the side of the nose. Gage loaded Leviticus, Iona, and himself with no luggage on the helocarrier and made a dumb joke about how they were flying in the danger zone, but neither of them laughed.

“Okay,” he said, securing his aviator shades on his face. “We’re going to start by flying to Volund. There’s a Sleeping Beauty Inc. location there. We need to report the loss of the Cannonball III and see if they have transports available for us and what kind. I also need to bank with them and you probably need to as well, Iona.”

“Yeah,” she said quietly from the back, having refused to sit in the front with Gage.

“Lucky for you,” Gage said, now speaking to Leviticus and giving him a flick on the arm. “We’re going in the same direction as Benediction’s Tranquility Mansion. If you can wait for us to get our crap together in Volund I can take you or you can go on your own if you’re proactive enough to get your own ride.”

“Is it just me, or does this seem like the kind of place where you could be chloroformed and have your organs harvested just for walking around alone?” Leviticus wondered.

“You didn’t get that vibe on Europa?” Gage asked sardonically.

“Europa is not a safe place, but it’s dangerous in a different way. I saw Olivine there. Just a glimpse of her as she went into the VIP viewing room. I didn’t want to tell you I saw her, but I think it’s better that you know.”

“Why do you think we left Europa in such a hurry and there were guards making sure I didn’t board?”

“So you saw her... or rather she saw you,” Leviticus said, barely loud enough for Gage to hear. Gage couldn’t see Leviticus’ face as he was piloting the carrier, but he suddenly shot out a hand and touched Gage’s hand on the steering column. “I’ll call you brother from now on,” he said before taking his hand back.

Gage huffed. In truth, Gage only had a vague idea of what would have happened to him if he had eaten the food and passed out. If Leviticus had been seen as an acceptable replacement for Gage and had been caught by Olivine, Gage had a very good idea of what would have happened to him. The thoughts made his teeth ache because that was the feeling that rippled through your body long after you were electrocuted. However, even knowing what he knew, if Leviticus had not been waiting outside his ship when Gage had been ready to leave Europa, Gage would not have stayed to make sure Leviticus was okay. He would have hoped that Leviticus was smart enough to avoid Olivine and smart enough to get himself to safety.

“You don’t have to be so grateful that I saved you,” Gage said. “If you weren’t there when I was leaving, I wouldn’t have come to find you.”

“Don’t be stupid,” Leviticus said, staring out the window. “I know that. But you could have refused to take me with you when it was time to go. Instead, you offered me a ride. You could have left me on Europa with those beat-up guards.”

“You would have sidestepped them and gotten away,” Gage offered.

“I don’t know how far I would have gotten if her guards woke up and told her there were two of us. She knows me because I was given to Raylynn, but she also knows there are supposed to be ten of us. I heard a rumor once that she was trying to collect us. That she liked you so much, she wanted the whole set.”

“Do you know where Vangelis is right now?” Gage asked.

“He’s the concubine of Silver Ashley in Nimbus City on Venus.”

“That was the last I’d heard of him too, but that might change at any moment. How old is Silver Ashley anyway?”

“Old. We should look up information on her when we get to Benediction’s mansion.”

“Do you think he’ll welcome us?” Gage asked skeptically.

“Yeah. He needs to hear about Apostate and now I think he needs to hear about Olivine.”

“Don’t you think there’s a big chance he won’t want to see us at all because of his whole black skin and green hair to hide who he really is and us showing up will reveal exactly who he is? We should send him a message from Sleeping Beauty Inc. before we head on out there. It could be that we only need to tell him those two facts and he’ll be happy to see us go. We shouldn’t screw up his cover.”

“Okay,” Leviticus agreed.

“Let’s go over the locations of the rest of us and see if either of us knows anything more than the other,” Gage suggested.

In that fashion, they went over the last known locations of the last three: Ziggurat, Invocation, and Omega.

“Does that girl know your name is Theology?” Leviticus wondered.

“Honestly, I’ve gone by Gage since the moment I was set free. I know I told you one sweaty night when we were teens I was going to change my name as soon as I was free. The thing that’s the most astonishing is that the rest of you haven’t adopted a slew of other aliases. As if you’re still going by Leviticus!”

“I’m not,” he said emotionlessly. “I’ve done exactly what you’ve said and changed my name a thousand times. I don’t do it to hide because I’m afraid of my past coming back to bite me. I do it because sometimes I can’t stand myself and giving myself a new name feels like being born again.”

“Maybe I should try that,” Gage said, giving his face a scratch.

“If Olivine saw you then she’s not going to rest until she has a cuff around you. You were her favorite toy. She’s probably never found anyone she enjoys torturing as much as you since you were the first one she tortured. The first cut is the deepest, and all that.”

Gage glanced back to check on Iona. She had flopped on her side on the backseat of the helocarrier, having discarded one of her shoulder restraints. Tears had pooled on her nose bridge and her eyes looked dead ahead of her until they closed painfully.

Gage worried for her. What demons was she facing?

Chapter Nineteen

"This is a dump," Leviticus commented as they stood on the dusty street outside Sleeping Beauty Inc. Io Division.

"It used to look a little more glamorous," Gage agreed, aware that all the buildings that managed to stay intact on Io soon started looking like crap. "Okay," Gage said, pulling the three of them together. "Here's what we're going to do. I'm going to give Leviticus my bracelet and he can go sign in with you, Iona. Once you're signed in and you have a room, take the bracelet off him and bring it down to me. Then I can come upstairs and join you."

"Why do we need to go through all that?" Leviticus wondered noisily.

"Because they won't let you come up with us unless you have a Sleeping Beauty Inc. bracelet on you," Gage said, removing his bracelet.

"I don't have a bracelet right now," Iona said with a tilt of her head.

"It's okay. Right now, you're a buyer. Your information is in my bracelet, and even if you aren't considered an owner right now because of all the time we spent in space, a tiny conversation with the front desk would show that you have multiple men bidding on you right now. You're famous and they are expecting you."

Gage handed his bracelet to Leviticus, who promptly tried to put it around his own wrist.

"What the frick are you doing?" Gage asked before he got it fastened.

"Putting the bracelet on like you told me to?" Leviticus said slowly.

"Do not ever put a Sleeping Beauty Inc. bracelet around your wrist, moron," Gage said harshly. "It comes off me because of an uncoupling device I inserted under the skin in my wrist."

"What?" Iona and Leviticus wondered together.

"Look, I don't care what contract I signed. I'll keep my end of the bargain as long as they keep theirs, but I am no one's slave. Put the bracelet in your pocket, keep your hand in your pocket, and let them scan it in the doorway arch through your pants." He pushed the two of them toward the front doors.

Iona turned back. "You should have been wearing one the whole time, shouldn't you? You were lying to me when you said all that stuff about the Cannonball III being your wristband, weren't you?"

"Yes," he said frostily, despite the sweaty wind that tossed his hair.

"What else have you lied about?"

He pulled her close for a second. "I lied when I said I didn't want to go to bed with you. I just can't be a slave when I do it. It has to be free. Do you understand? I've never been free and I can't be myself if I'm under contract."

"Our contract is over now, isn't it?" Iona whispered back.

"Go inside and find out," Gage encouraged gently. "Put my bracelet in your pocket when you come to get me and see if there's a back door you can use."

She kissed him briefly and let him go. She took Leviticus by the hand and they went into the building together.

Gage leaned against the wall and waited. He looked around for cameras, but he didn't see anything.

Five minutes later, Iona came back.

"Turns out there was no need for any of that hoopla. There's no one there."

“What do you mean?”

“We can go in with your wristband, just like you said, but there’s no one there. The place is empty. There are instructions for buyers and there are instructions for returned models. The models can go inside, pick a room and make themselves at home. The whole thing is like a giant vending machine. Except, we only have one wristband so we can only get one room. The one we got has one bed, one computer station, one shower, one sink, one toothbrush, one everything. There’s a vending machine for frozen dinners, a vending machine for a change of clothes, a vending machine for toiletries, a vending machine for wristbands, and even one for desserts.”

Gage took the wristband and put it on. “Let’s go inside.”

Once they were in the lobby, he really got the feeling Iona had described. He also found out very quickly that he was going to have to pay for anything they got out of a vending machine, except they were all starving, so he called over Leviticus and they chose from the menu of frozen food.

“These all look like we’ll be eating ass,” Leviticus complained.

“You haven’t spent much time in space, have you?” Gage shot back.

“Okay, I haven’t. Is this a step up from what you’re used to eating?”

“No. It’s very similar to what I’m used to eating. I’m going to get the pineapple chicken because even though it is fake chicken, it’s real pineapple, and that’s good enough for me.” He pressed the buttons to order it.

“What about you, princess?” Leviticus asked.

“Oh, I’m going to get the french onion soup. It has real onions in it and like Gage, I agree you can really tell when they use a fake nutritional meal to make things. The chicken tastes like the beef which tastes like the pork and they all taste like a nutritional meal. At least with the soup, they’re not trying to fool you. It is a bowl of salty brown onions.”

“Aren’t you used to eating like a queen?”

“Yeah, but I wasn’t always a queen and from what I can remember from before I was crowned, this soup was my favorite.” She prompted Gage to order it for her.

He pressed the buttons. “And what for you, your majesty?”

“Oh, just order me what you’re having. I’m sure it must be the best one if you’re still willing to eat it.”

Gage ordered a second pineapple chicken and the three of them waited like idiots as their meals heated up.

“What’s the bedroom like?” Gage asked.

“The bed is pretty big. We can sleep on it like three pigs in a blanket. Iona can sleep in the middle and later she can tell the story of how she slept between two identical men.”

Iona stared at them. “You don’t look the same.”

“What?”

“We definitely do.”

“No, really,” she defended. “I thought you did at first because I mistook you for Gage during the Sleeping Beauty Inc. model show, but now that I’ve seen you more closely and together, you don’t look alike.”

“Explain in more detail.”

“You’re fatter,” she said, pointing to Leviticus.

“Ouch,” Gage said in mock pain.

“I am not!”

“You’re not fat, but you definitely have more flesh around your jawline than Gage. The red hair is an easy clue, but you do different things with your face than Gage does. He looks curious, alert, like his ears are perked up and he’s listening for something. You smile way more than he does. Your vocabularies and the way you two talk are completely different. Yet, you’re rubbing off on each other and becoming more alike the more time you spend together.”

Leviticus frowned. “I want to hear more physical markers.”

“You mean other than that you’re wearing different clothes? Your hair is cut similarly but not exactly the same? Gage has a few chips in his bottom teeth that you don’t have.”

“Yuck. They didn’t always use a teeth guard on you, did they?” Leviticus asked, turning to Gage.

“I didn’t see one again after we were separated,” Gage admitted. “You got one?”

“I didn’t need one with Raylynn. She wasn’t that kind of psychopath.”

“What did she want?”

“Just a lot of sex. It was pretty easy.”

“Lucky,” Gage said with a pouty stretch as he checked on their food. “Almost done. Notice any other differences? So far, all that you’ve mentioned is in line with what the scientists who worked on us achieved. We were exactly identical when we came out of our tubes at birth, but stuff can happen to us that makes us different as we go along. It’s that whole nature versus nurture thing. It’s too bad they didn’t get to learn all the different things they hoped to learn from their experiment.”

“What happened to them? Are they still around making sets of identical boys?”

“Oh, they were all gunned down and their lab burned to the ground,” Leviticus said sullenly.

“Why?”

“Because a very twisted rich man saw us. He’d never seen boys that beautiful before and ten of them meant something different to him than it meant to the scientists, who were... what would you call them, Gage?”

“Not physically abusive, but merely psychologically,” Gage replied.

“Do you ever think about it?”

“I try not to,” Gage responded. “I try not to think of any of this old stuff and we’re going to need to stop talking about it, or I won’t be able to eat. Let’s just leave this conversation with the idea that Iona doesn’t see us as the same and I, for one, am happy about it because I don’t like being seen as a set. Do you?” he asked Leviticus.

“No. Let’s finish up and get the hell away from each other.”

As if on cue, the heater inside the vending machine went off and their food was ready.

“Gage, please tell me you’ll buy me dessert,” Iona begged as she saw the actual size of her soup. It was small.

The vending machine prices were more than reasonable. Sleeping Beauty Inc. did not want anyone dying on lo. He wondered if he could have bought the building, bones and all.

“Here? I’ll buy you anything you want.”

Chapter Twenty

In the room, Gage and Iona did their banking from the computer station. They divided the money they got from the wreckers for Iona's clothes and the Cannonball III. Gage transferred his share to an account with Sleeping Beauty Inc. since the ship was their property. Then he checked how much money Madam Damsel had sent him to compensate him for all the trouble he'd had with Olivine. It was more than he expected, but he never knew exactly what currency was worth at any given moment when he spent all his time in cryostasis.

Gage had a moment where he faced a serious dilemma staring at the computer screen. Looking at flights on and off Io, he saw that the next Sleeping Beauty Inc. ship that was coming to Io wouldn't be there for five months. If he put himself to sleep for that time, waiting for the ship would be over in the blink of an eye. Normally, that is what he would have done. Except for one thing. If he put himself to sleep and that information was logged into the Sleeping Beauty Inc. system, he knew now that Olivine could just fly to Io and pick him up without any hassle at all. She wouldn't even have to get off her ship. He had done that himself enough times, coming to Io, picking up a rack of Sleeping Beauty Inc. models, and leaving without taking a single breath of sulfur.

He also checked his ownership status with Iona. She still owned him, but there was a note attached to their contract stating that Sleeping Beauty Inc. was waiting for information on their status.

All that meant that he could not put himself to sleep.

If he had to wait awake for the Sleeping Beauty Inc. ship to retrieve them, he would have his twenty-ninth birthday on Io. By the pickup date, he would only have nine months left on his contract with them. Well, that was not his fault.

Having come to the conclusion that he had to stay awake on Io, he got up. "I'm going to buy some nose filters and a throat filter. If either of you is interested in such things, you have to come with me, so the machine can measure you to get the perfect fit."

Iona got to her feet. "I'll get some."

"Me too," Leviticus said. "I'll just follow along in a second. I want to send that message to Benediction."

"You're just going to tell him about Apostate and Olivine?"

"Yeah," Leviticus nodded.

Gage stopped. "Actually, I'll watch you prepare it. It's going to be sent from my account because I can't help that with the system Sleeping Beauty Inc. has set up, so show me what you're going to send before you send it."

"Is it really necessary to watch him?" Iona wondered, sidling up next to Gage.

"Yup," Gage said, crossing his arms and leaning against the wall.

He did just that. The message was sent exactly the way both of them had agreed it would be sent, Gage logged off, and then they went to get fitted for nose filters.

"That is much better," Iona said as Gage finished installing the one in her throat. Her voice had a slight rasp to it afterward because the filter stopped her from swallowing particles she breathed in while still allowing her room to breathe. "It's so great you're a doctor."

"I am not a doctor. I have a medic ticket which means that I'm better than a kid with a lollipop and sticky hands, but that's about it."

“The pamphlet says that if you stay on Io for a full twelve months, with no filters and breath in the sulfur, it will stop smelling terrible to you. The filters are for visitors,” Leviticus said.

“I’m not staying on Io,” both Iona and Gage said together.

“Benediction found a place to hide out and that man is like fire,” Gage said, “but we can’t encroach on his territory. He deserves to be here alone. You sent him your warning. We’re done with him. In the morning, I’m going to fly to a collection of recycling collectors and ask them if they have any ships leaving Io that we could catch a ride on that weren’t listed in the flight plans. Does any of that sound interesting to you?”

Leviticus looked up at the ceiling playfully. “Sure. Sure, it does. I had been thinking of begging Benediction to let me stay here with him where I’m sure his followers will protect him from Apostate and Olivine, but now that I’ve smelled the area, I don’t think that will do for me after all.”

“I can drop you off there if you want to talk it out with him?” Gage offered.

“I’ll think about it. Now I think I can get those nose filters up myself without your help,” he said, taking the ones that were for him. They were exactly the same size as Gage’s. He pushed one up his nose and groaned. “Okay, I’d like the kid with the sticky hands to help me now.”

Gage frowned and went over.

For a minute, it felt like Gage and Iona were alone in the hotel room. As soon as the smell was downplayed, it was easier for the whole situation to feel better. In the room, Leviticus turned on the television, which was nothing but a service that let you choose what you wanted to watch. He turned on a bland action film with a hero that was chasing from location to location.

Gage took Iona by the fingertips and led her to the lobby. There were several pink velvet sofas there and it was quieter than listening to the ultra-fast heartbeat of the soundtrack of the film Leviticus was watching.

He settled her into the corner of one of the couches and reached for her foot.

“What are you doing?” she asked.

“I thought that if I undid your shoe, took off your sock, and gave your foot a little rub, you might tell me what’s bothering you. Are you still mad at me for suggesting that you don’t take another contract with Sleeping Beauty Inc.?”

Her shoulder fell. “I was never mad at you. I just failed to realize that when Excalibur Helocarriers bid on me they were viewing me as a pity project, like a pitiful dog that needs to be sponsored before it can get adopted.”

“I’m sure they thought you were worth it,” he said, running his thumb in a circle on the sole of her foot. “They have profit margins and they wouldn’t pay for you if you didn’t pay for yourself.”

Iona sighed. “It was easy to forget that that was how the company viewed me because the customers that came into the helocarrier showroom do not have the same mentality. They viewed me as a really expensive piece of ass and there’s nothing Excalibur Helocarriers can do to stop their clients from pinching the salesgirls’ asses or ‘accidentally’ bumping into them so they can rub their junk up against a beautiful woman. Whatever happens, they have to hire a

woman who is part whore for that role. It's because the people who have the money to purchase helocarriers have so much money, they don't understand that some things are not for sale no matter how much money you have in the bank. They think it gives them a free pass. I've been thinking it over and Excalibur Helocarriers has a list of clients who make orders and they never come into the showroom, but of the ones who come in to 'test' out the carriers, the big orders are always made by the filthy men who want their inappropriate behavior to be overlooked. And because I sell myself, I'm part of the system that allows this to continue."

"But what was going on in your life before you sold yourself the first time?" Gage asked.

"I was on Ganymede. I lived in a hole in the wall. I had run away from home a few times with nowhere to go, so I always ended up back where I started. It probably seems like nothing compared to you and what you've gone through, but when I signed myself over at sixteen, I had been beaten so many times that Sleeping Beauty Inc. had to hospitalize me for two months before they could put me up for sale. I have always felt that Sleeping Beauty Inc. was a safe place because I have had better treatment from the clients they got me than I received from my own family. I was so proud of what I became working there. I'm elegant. I'm calm. I can do what I'm asked to do and I make a lot of money. I felt like I finally deserved to be proud of myself." Her voice cracked.

Gage nodded as he understood. "Until I saw Olivine on Europa, I thought Sleeping Beauty Inc. was a good place too. I mean, I didn't expect that to last forever, but I hoped it would last long enough for me to outlive—" he trailed off and pointed toward their room with his eyes.

"You can't have meant to outlive him," Iona said in disbelief.

"Oh, yes, I can. Though it is not Leviticus personally I wish to escape. The story he told about Apostate killing Heretic and Testament really rang true for me because I don't know what Apostate suffered. Depending on what he went through, a plan to kill everyone he knows might make more sense to him than merely sleeping in cryostasis to outlive them. He might feel like what he wants to kill is the experiment itself, so that no one repeats it. The idea of someone trying to collect us also rings true. That was part of the reason I wanted to stay in cryostasis, so I could stay asleep long enough for everyone to forget about us. The cat's out of the bag now. I can't go back into cryostasis until I'm convinced I'm safe. That's going to be tough."

"You're not worried about getting more valuable as more of your brothers disappear?" she asked.

Gage didn't answer. He wasn't concerned. He merely reached for her other foot. Suddenly, he felt like confiding in her. He felt like telling her the story. If she couldn't stand to hear it, he needed to know that because he was about two seconds from putting Leviticus on a ship to Ganymede and putting himself and Iona on a ship to the Saturn system. If Iona couldn't hear his story, then there was no future for them.

"Have you ever been to Mars?" he said slowly.

She nodded. "I went there with one of my owners once."

"The canals of Mars are wide and deep and the architects build even deeper. All the buildings and all the rooms are supposed to be mapped out, but there are places there that haven't been reported. That was where I was taken after the lab where I was born on Earth was destroyed. I was sold alongside Testament, but that time isn't important because Testament is gone, so there's no point in reliving any of that. When I was ten, I was bought by the same owner as Leviticus. Testament was not entertaining. He cried a lot. I didn't cry and apparently,

neither did Leviticus so we were seen as a good match and bought by the same buyer for a higher price than some of the others. At first, it was okay to be in that underground mansion. In that household, I boxed Leviticus every day and acted as a bodyguard for the younger members of the house. The master liked to watch us fight. Both Leviticus and I had our brains rattled every day because of blows to the head, but... it wasn't hell. It was hell's younger brother and it had its benefits. I learned how to fight, how to dance, and when I was older, I was a ready-to-wear date for the daughters who didn't have dates of their own."

"It sounds strange," Iona said.

"It was actually a lot better than it was going to be. Our master owed a lot of money and he was told that the debt would be forgiven if he gave up his favorite slaves... me and Leviticus. He wasn't in a position to say no, so he gave us to Mr. Bouvant. Leviticus was wrapped in a bow and given to a teenage girl named Raylynn."

"He said it was a lot of sex," Iona remembered.

"I'm sure it was," Gage agreed. "I was given to Olivine, who was... not very much what she's like now. She had a problem. I'm not sure if I have ever understood what it was. Something about her didn't work."

"Like what?"

"I don't know. Something in her brain. Maybe something in her body. I don't know. She was a person who should be pitied. She was very busy at school when I was first there. I walked her to her classes and she stuck her nose in the air like it didn't matter to her if I was there or not. The only thing that made sense to me at that time was that she was uncomfortable and what pleased her more than anything else was making someone else as uncomfortable as she was. It was her thing to make me hit people at school who annoyed her. If I refused to hit them, I'd be punished at home. If I hit them, I'd be punished by the school. However, the school punishment was less than the home punishment so I hit, tripped, splashed, kicked, and slapped anyone who she asked me to."

Iona gritted her teeth and refused to comment.

"What happened then is the single worst event that has ever happened to me. The entrance to the crevice of Olivine's mansion caved in. We were trapped. I don't mean we were trapped for a little while. We were trapped for almost three years. Nothing life-threatening was happening. We still had food and water, air, and shelter. It was just that no one could go out or in. Things were shipped in an underground railroad and it was not possible for a human to take that road."

"Why not?"

"The temperatures were too extreme along the transport route. It was supposed to be used in transporting drugs and the drugs could be moved in thermal air-tight containers, but they weren't large enough for a person. Not even Olivine's father could get out and trust me, if he could have got out, he would have."

"So then Olivine started wanting you to screw her?"

"No," Gage said with a sad head wag. "As I said, something was wrong with her. I never saw her undressed. As far as I know, she never slept with anyone. She liked making people more uncomfortable than she was, so she put me and the servants in the most uncomfortable positions she could think of. She began by getting me to drop my pants in front of the maids, shocking me with my wristband when I didn't comply. It's a miracle my hand still works for how

many times she had to shock me. What that all means is that I performed a long list of atrocities that still horrify me.”

Iona took her foot out from between Gage’s hands and moved forward, taking his hands in hers in compassion.

Gage frowned in pain and his voice cracked in the pink light of the lobby. “There was nowhere to go. There was nothing to do. Olivine was very bored and she had all the power. I can’t tell you all that I did or all that was done to me. I can’t say how many times I was drugged or what I did when I was drugged. Three of the maids and one of the valets died while we were trapped in the crevice.”

“How did you get out?” Iona asked, urging him to skip to the end.

“Olivine’s mother had been kept in cryostasis all the time that I’d been there. When I first got there and Olivine was still in school, I was told her mother was on vacation. When the entrance caved in, I was told she was in cryostasis because she was waiting for her husband’s secret hooligans to dig us out. The truth of that matter was that the master’s hooligans loved him being absent and they were not digging us out. Some of us worked on it from time to time, but it was obvious that the problem could not be solved from underneath. One time, I was in the room where she was kept. It was actually the same room that had the entrance to the underground railway. I was unloading the food supplies in place of the valet we lost when I realized that the cryochamber wasn’t keeping her alive. She was already dead. I decided that she was probably dead when I arrived and that was another of the reasons behind Olivine’s morbidity.”

“You...? Did you?” Iona prompted.

“Yeah, I turned off the machine. I opened it up and unbuckled her. I carried her dead body to the end of the railway tunnel, which was where we were putting our other dead bodies. Then I put the cryochamber on the transport boxes, buckled it down, and got ready.”

“Weren’t you scared to touch a dead body?” she asked, getting the shivers.

Gage turned off the part of his brain that would have answered that question in more detail and gave an automated answer like a robot. “I had handled the other bodies we stacked at the end of the tunnel. They were behind a brick wall. I had bricked the wall up myself, but I didn’t bother to brick it up after Olivine’s mother.”

“You didn’t wait and try to perfect your plan?”

“No. I didn’t. I got in and pressed the mayday buttons meant to be used if it crashed on the surface of the planet because it wasn’t the type of cryochamber that Sleeping Beauty Inc. uses for surface models. It was one from outer space. If anything could handle the extremes in temperature, that cryochamber could. It was my only chance. I pulled the lever intended to send the railcar to where it would get restocked and hopped in while it was still moving. I closed the lid and I couldn’t stop it from filling with the gas that puts people to sleep, but I got my mayday call out. I can only imagine that the police were there to greet me when I got to the other side of the track. I didn’t see where I ended up. I was awakened in a police station where I told them my story and more than one operation was sacked. I busted a drug ring and a human trafficking ring.”

“So, you’re a hero?”

“Perhaps,” he said through dry lips, feeling strange about having told his story. “I really didn’t know what to do with myself once I was free besides my big plan to change my name.”

“That’s when Sleeping Beauty Inc. approached you, isn’t it?”

“Yeah. They framed it so beautifully, saying how brave I was to have put myself to sleep in a cryochamber without any experience doing so. They said I would have the courage to protect the girls I transported when other pilots would look the other way. It wasn’t that I believed them exactly. It was that what they offered was exactly what I wanted. I wanted to be away from Mars. They were offering me a job on the other side of the asteroid belt. They offered solitude and I wanted to be alone, badly. Lastly, at the end of the long sleep they offered, there would be a life where I could do whatever I wanted without the people of my past haunting me. I am very disappointed that my future with them has come to an end before Olivine died.”

“You must hate her.”

“I don’t know that I do,” he said slowly. “If I hated her, I could kill her. I think I just care too much about my own life to let her have any say in how the rest of it is going to play out. If I hurt her, there’s no happy ending for me. She’s still super rich, even after everything the police did to cripple her family. I thought about breaking her face against the glass at your show, but I didn’t do it. I must just want to leave her behind. There’s nothing more I can do or want to do to right the wrongs that happened on Mars. I just want to go.”

Iona kissed his fingers. “We don’t ever have to talk about this again.”

“I’d like that.”

Chapter Twenty One

Iona went to sleep between Gage and Leviticus on the bed. It turned out that all of them were so on edge that going to sleep independently had been impossible. They started out with Gage and Leviticus on the sofas in the lobby, when Iona came out and got on the couch with Gage. There wasn't enough room for them on the couch, so they moved it to the bedroom, but it had been lonely and scary for Leviticus to be alone in the lobby with the yellow sandblasting the doors in heavy gusts. He had opted for the floor in the bedroom since Gage and Iona had left the door to the room wide open. Iona told him not to be an idiot and to get on the bed since she was sleeping on Gage's chest and there was enough room for a gazelle on the bed next to her. Surely, he could sleep there if he didn't move around too much.

Actually, Iona wasn't feeling excellent as she lay between them. She tried to act like cuddling up to Gage was all she ever wanted, but her brain was like an ant farm. What was she going to do? She got up and went to the bathroom. Then she sat down at the computer and sent Harrison Fox a message saying that she'd be interested in particulars if he had a job for her. The message would not be instantaneously in his inbox as it had to go all the way to Callisto, but it would undoubtedly beat her to Callisto. She went to the bidder page in her portal, which she had been avoiding, and stared at the numbers.

Dante had offered less money for her than he had during the previous round of bidding. It was obvious that her going to visit him, in particular, had had the opposite effect of the one she was hoping for. He thought she was desperate, so he thought he could get her for less.

Sherman had made an offer for her as well, but it was much less than he had offered for Jessica. He was willing to give Iona a try, but he wasn't willing to shell out as much as was needed to bring Iona up in the ranks by even one spot. If she took his offer, she would still be the ninth most valuable model in the Jovian region.

Looking at the Sleeping Beauty Inc. main page, Cinni had been the one to snag the biggest bid at the show. Iona hadn't known she was eighth in the Jovian Region. Now the little redhead was third.

Iona recognized she should have felt burned by the news, but instead, she felt numb.

There was an offer for her from Olivine, as Gage had warned her. It was less than Sherman, but more than Dante. No one was rich enough to outbid Sherman even when he only threw chump change at her.

There were other bids from individuals that were for smaller amounts and another bid from Excalibur Helocarriers. Harrison Fox had not made that bid. It had been her boss from the last term. It was for the same amount of money as last time, which meant that if she took it, she would fall in the rankings to the twelfth spot since the other models were getting paid more.

She logged out and turned off the computer. Who decided what someone was worth anyway?

She got back into bed between Gage and Leviticus.

Iona was between them for a whole three minutes before she felt the barrel of a gun between her eyebrows.

"You guys are really quiet," Iona praised. "What do you want?"

She opened her eyes slowly and saw the room was filled with men so dark that they melted into the blackness of the room. Standing at the foot of the bed was Benediction. Iona would

know him anywhere. What Gage said about him was a thousand percent right. Now that she had seen Gage, she couldn't be fooled by their different skin and hair color. Their shapes matched.

Gage kicked at one of the men next to the bed and was immediately restrained by a collection of dark hands coming from everywhere. Within the next second, Leviticus was similarly restrained, even though he hadn't made a move. Iona was left alone in the middle of the bed.

She brought her legs under her. "So, what's cooking?" she said, trying to get them to answer just one question.

"Take her," Benediction said. He sounded so exactly like Gage that Iona wouldn't have believed it was Benediction who spoke if she hadn't seen his mouth move and his white teeth flash.

Hands grabbed Iona on the bed from all directions and she was gagged and bound.

"Listen, boys... brothers," Benediction said to Gage and Leviticus while Iona's face was ground into the carpet. "I have no gripe with either of you, but slave owners are not welcome here on Io. We've recently passed laws forbidding slavery in all forms. She's an owner."

"But she only owns me," Gage brought up.

"I'm not interested in the details of how you came to be owned by her, Theology. Our king and cross are one on Io, meaning our religion is also our governance. All slave owners will be punished."

"But I signed the contract!" Gage protested. "She's not really a slave owner if it's voluntary slavery."

"Here on Io, we do not distinguish between the two. There is no such thing as consent."

Gage hung his head. He knew exactly why Benediction made those laws and why he thought it was the right thing.

"You can't sign away your rights on Io," Benediction said proudly, his chest heaving with emotion. "Iona Stirling will be taken from this place to the sands of father Loki where she will be placed in the disturbance zone. She will be staked to the breastplate of the great volcano and if she lives for twenty-four hours there, she will be released and you will be proclaimed legally free, Theology. But you will be free whether she lives or dies!"

Gage struggled under the hands of Benediction's followers. "This is crazy. She's a model herself. She bought me for three months to help her get a better contract or a husband."

"Right now, she's owned by no one," Benediction reminded him sternly. "If you'd like to spit in her face before we take her, I'll allow that."

"I'm not going to spit on her. I love her!" Gage shouted.

Iona heard him and her heart swelled within her. As the restraints tightened at her wrists and ankles, she didn't think he would be able to save her. Considering how she was feeling, she wasn't particularly concerned. It was fine. Everything was fine. That was her strength--calmness when the whole world went to hell around her.

Benediction paused. "Ah, foolish Theology," he said in gentle tones. "You have softened. You weren't like this the last time we met. Though my affection for you is nonexistent, I will still rid you of this viper. Take her!"

She was carried out to a helocarrier that was parked next to the Danger Zone. Iona saw that the front of Gage's borrowed helocarrier was open and parts of the engine were in the sand.

She was put in the very back seat of Benediction's helocarrier, but she wasn't blindfolded and she saw the hands that had grabbed her and the others split into people who were loaded up after her. She saw the pilot get in and Benediction come after him. Benediction really was every bit as handsome in person as he had been in the pictures she saw. She wished she were angry at him, but he was right. Any kind of slavery was wrong.

She sat quietly even when Leviticus was brought aboard with no restraints. Gage didn't get on board after him even though there was space for him in the bus-like helocarrier. Leviticus kept his eyes forward and Iona only saw the back of his head.

Not that she cared what was going on. She heard what they were going to do to her and she had a lot of thoughts on the subject.

The helocarrier flew up in the air and Iona watched the yellow sand dunes under them as they returned to the Loki region. The volcano was huge in the distance. It was the largest volcano on Io and the sight of it was stuff for tourist photo ops. She wished she cared about any of that as they sped toward the breastplate.

Once there, she was manhandled off the craft and dropped onto the sand. She didn't even have time to right herself before her arms and legs were spread in an X shape and piles of metal equipment were unloaded from the helocarrier next to her.

She glanced up and saw three men surrounding Leviticus in the carrier with guns pointed to his head. One of them was motioning for him to stay silent with a finger to their lips.

"Take her hoodie off her," Benediction said, standing over her.

Iona was used to having unfamiliar hands all over her and having her hoodie unzipped, taken off her limbs, and thrown aside was nothing new to her.

"Should we take off her shirt, her pants?" one of the followers asked as he licked his lips.

Benediction shook his head in the negative.

"Why? We usually leave them in their underwear?" the man growled.

"Not this one. I can't have her tempting any of us with the abhorrent perfection of her body. She's an expensive slut. Do you think she became one because she looks bad with her clothes off? She'll destroy all of us with her sellable parts." Benediction moved toward the piles of equipment and got his men to fasten bracelets and chains around her wrists and ankles.

Iona stayed still while they affixed them.

Benediction placed the mechanical stakes in four points to circle her. "Iona, you have been so cooperative that I've decided to reward you by allowing you to choose whether you'd rather be ripped apart horizontally or vertically. They will remove your gag and let you state your preference."

Her gag was removed. She looked up at Benediction with zero pleading in her eyes or voice. "I'll go with horizontal."

He scoffed. "You're more likely to live through a vertical tearing. It doesn't seem that way, but it's because of the way we tie you."

"Yeah, maybe, but I still want to go for the horizontal one."

"Why?"

She smiled. "I'm not going to lie to you. I'm pretty into this."

"You're what?" the head of the church of Voynich gaped.

"This patch of rock you're staking me to is pretty likely to move enough to pull me in half, isn't it? This part of the ground goes this way? That part of the ground goes that way? I'm tied

down and I get pulled apart? How often is there a shift in these plates that's large enough to rip a person in half?"

"It changes throughout the year," Benediction said slowly. "You've landed on a part of the year where your odds of living are about fifty-fifty."

"I like this," she said again.

"You're not worried about dying?" he asked, his face screwed up in a frown. "Theology won't be able to save you. His helocarrier was disabled and Leviticus is a coward."

"I don't want to be saved," she said with a smile that was almost gushing. "I want to do this. Come on, stake me."

The guys who had been holding her had slacked and were looking at her with wonder and surprise. Iona saw that they were no longer holding her down and she relaxed, resting her head on the sand.

"Is this a trick?" one of the others asked.

"It's not a trick!" Iona called joyfully. "This is perfect. I love this. Get started."

"Wait," Benediction said, putting a hand to his forehead like he was trying to understand it. "Did we pick up a girl with a death wish?"

"No. I just want a sign."

"A sign?" Benediction repeated.

Iona felt the sand in her hair and against her skin. It was warmish and now that she had the filters in her nose and throat, she really only tasted the sand if she inhaled through her mouth heavily. "I have questions about whether or not I can change. I don't want to be a slave or an owner. I want to be free and this is the perfect place to test whether or not I deserve to be. That's what I want. You're religious boys, aren't you? You believe that if I die, it's because I'm a filthy person with no hope of redemption or change? But if I live, your god believes that I can have a different life, be a different person and overcome what made me a slave. Stake me down! I want your god to judge me."

Inside herself, she wanted proof she was worthy of Gage's love. He said he loved her, but was she good enough to hold onto it?

Benediction had an interval where he looked like he wasn't sure if he believed Iona or not. After a moment of silence, he stood up straighter and shouted. "Get her staked!"

The men with them stood up and got to work immediately. Iona's hands and feet were pulled back to the X position and each of the mechanical stakes was nailed into the ground through the brute strength of Benediction and his followers. Benediction himself did the one on her left foot and Iona felt it as the tall stake hit stone. He looked beautiful as he did it and the sight gave Iona the encouragement she needed.

When he was finished, his followers heaved themselves back onto the Helocarrier while Benediction dawdled. Lacing and unlacing his fingers he stammered, "Normally, I spit on the unrighteous slave owner at this point, so I'm going to, but I wanted to tell you that I hope you live. Not many people are willing to be punished for the sin of enslavement."

"Spit away," she said, remembering all the times she'd been spit on before. She could be spat on one more time, maybe endless times if she could be convinced that she wasn't a mistake and that she had a future.

Benediction spat a spray of spit that fanned out around Iona's middle. "See you in twenty-four hours," he said, trying to sound tough, but failing.

He got back on board his helocarrier and Iona watched as it disappeared over a sand dune. Iona tilted her head back and breathed in through her nose. She had to remember to breathe in through her nose. Hopefully, it wouldn't get clogged by sand before things were settled one way or another.

Jupiter was full above her and Iona watched the lines of clouds swirling. This was her big chance. If she lived through this, she'd take whatever job Harrison offered her. She'd ask Gage if he wanted to join her on Callisto. Maybe there was a chance he could get a job working for Excalibur Helocarriers. Maybe they could find some way to live together. She thought about what the fairy tale family was like in her mind and she knew she had once lost faith in that idea. She told herself she had to take things slowly. Start with the first thing... she had to live for twenty-four hours. That meant keeping her mouth shut and allowing herself to be completely entranced by Jupiter. The planet was full, instead of in the first quarter or the third quarter. It filled the sky. It was something she had to feel within herself.

Full.

Watch for storms above her and all around her.

Full.

Chapter Twenty Two

Gage saw Leviticus get on board the helocarrier taking Iona away. Gage had guns pointed at him from inside the carrier until it lifted off. Once he was out of range, those guns turned on Leviticus. Gage guessed they didn't want him trying anything.

Back in the room, Gage had been less than surprised when Leviticus had said he was happy to go with them. Benediction said they had disabled the Danger Zone and it was obvious Leviticus did not want to be stuck with Gage at Sleeping Beauty Inc. headquarters on Io. The Voynich choir boys were happy to have Leviticus, but they did warn him that he would have guns trained on his head in case he tried to rescue Iona.

Gage watched the helocarrier fly away and reflected on how little Leviticus' defection hurt him. He knew he could never trust anyone who looked like him.

Not only that, but Gage was optimistic when he saw the parts of the Danger Zone that were sitting in the sand. Benediction's choir boys had opened the hood and ripped out whatever came out easiest. The piles would have discouraged someone with less know-how than Gage. He was not bothered. He cracked his neck, went to the boot of the helocarrier, and retrieved the toolbox.

He put Iona out of his mind and rebuilt the engine and the cooling systems. He replaced the rupter with a fresh one from the back and stowed the one they'd pulled out. Maybe it had a little juice left in it, but Gage wasn't interested in testing it and was happy to put in a new one.

When he was finished, he got in the pilot's seat and programmed his watch to alert him if there was any seismic activity surrounding Loki. Then he triangulated the best route for him and then the route Benediction would take from the volcano to the Tranquility Mansion after he and his boys had finished with Iona. If he was lucky, they wouldn't see him approach as they would be moving in a different direction through the mountains and dunes. Of all the things he needed, he did not need them shooting at him. His helocarrier wasn't armed and even if theirs wasn't either, the men inside were armed to the teeth.

Out over the sand, he saw Jupiter glowing. It was a magnificent sight, so beautiful and so enormous. The gas giant always reminded him of how small he was. What did it matter what he did with his life if he was so insignificant?

He slapped himself.

He wasn't insignificant if he saved Iona.

His systems checking for tremors were silent as he sped along the yellow sands. He had almost circled Loki before he saw her. She was tiny, a little figure stretched over the seam between two tectonic plates. He rushed to her, hovered above her, and dropped down near her.

"How are you doing?" he asked from his perch above her as the helocarrier blades above him stilled.

"I'm good!" she shouted.

He slid down and arrived beside her.

Aside from the sand, she kept spitting, she actually did seem fine. She smiled at him. "Could you scratch my nose and if you have something I could swish my mouth out with, that would be beautiful."

"Uh, yeah. Sorry for blowing all that sand in your face when I landed. I even buried one of your stakes. You're really okay?"

"I'm great," she said with a yawn. "The water, Gage?"

"Yeah." He hurried up the dune and retrieved a water bottle that had come with the carrier. He slid back to her, unscrewed the top, and held it for her while she swished.

"It's so nice of you to come and sit with me," she said with a dreamy smile.

"Come to sit with you?" Gage asked in confusion. "I came to rescue you. There's a shovel in the back. I'm going to dig out your stakes."

"Ah. You don't need to do that," she said in a huff. "I want to see where this goes."

"You're interested to see if Jupiter's gravity tears you in half along with the moon under you?" he asked incredulously.

"Yes. I want to know if I deserve a second chance," she explained, sounding a little drunk.

"Forget that. You want to know if Jupiter can rip you in half? Yes, Jupiter can rip you in half. You see that red spot on the surface? There's a storm raging there with winds raging at four hundred and fifty kilometers per hour. Nothing about Jupiter is safe. You can't land there. It is a death zone. Why does a hostile planet get to judge you?"

"I want to know if I deserve a second chance," she hollered at him, but her voice trembled a bit at the end of her statement.

Gage stared at her. What was going on inside her head that this trial by gravity made sense? He got his shovel and started digging next to the stake that held her right hand.

"Stop it, Gage. I don't want to be saved. There are probably satellites watching us and I don't want The Church of Voynich to think I was cheating during their trial.

"Is that because you saw Benediction and you suddenly decided he's better than me? Scratch that. You always thought he was better than me," Gage said through set teeth. "That's what this whole trip was about. Getting you a husband? Do you think he'll be interested in marrying you if you survive this test? You'll be purified and he'll want to crown you with the cross of the church? Is that what you think?" Gage was getting hysterical. The tone of his voice was belying his panic.

"This has nothing to do with Benediction!" Iona defended. "It's just that I feel... unworthy."

"Unworthy?" he repeated, digging harder. "You think there's something that can happen to you that corrupts your innate worth? You wanna tell *me* about the abuse *you've* suffered? You think I will look down on you because you feel broken? Your feelings are not facts, they're squirts of chemicals in your head. You don't have to listen to them! That's why I always liked you more than the other girls!"

"What?"

"You didn't complain! You didn't whine or cry. I thought you'd overcome whatever snot your brain was producing and bypassed the part of your brain that makes you panic. I admired you, but that wasn't true, was it? Instead, you just didn't feel like fighting for yourself. Well, Iona, I feel like fighting for you."

"You have to stop!" she cried.

"Yeah, I'm not freaking listening to you anymore," he said, suddenly kicking the spike that had staked her to the stand. It fell. "Our contract is over. You're not my boss any more." Gage pulled the massive spike free and rolled it over to her right foot without worrying that her chains were still attached to her wrist. "If the fissure tears, you'll be torn in half in the middle, is that right?"

"Yeah, but... you..."

"Stop talking," he said firmly. "I have work to do."

The ground started to heave under him. Tiny motions, but enough to make Gage hurry to her left arm and start digging.

“You have twenty hours left according to this clock in this spike. Do you have any idea what twenty hours of exposed sand against the skin on your face will do? It isn’t like the sand on Earth or the sand on Mars. Prolonged exposure to this sand will burn you like acid. This isn’t just about whether or not you live through the ordeal. It’s also about torturing you as you wait for your death sentence or your release.”

“I don’t care... probably.”

“I care,” he said crankily as he dug up her second pole.

She was crying by the time he pulled the second pole free and allowed it to roll to her left foot.

Having finished the most urgent work, he stopped and had a water break by the Danger Zone. If the crack opened, it was unlikely to kill anyone, unless the cut in the moon’s surface was large enough to swallow her, him, and the helocarrier.

He mopped his forehead with the front of his shirt and got to work on the foot spikes. Gage hadn’t been working on the third one for very long before he stopped. He dropped his shovel, took a few steps back, and kicked the stake.

“What’s the matter?” Iona asked.

“It’s in rock. They drove it into the rock!”

The ground under them heaved harder. There were three huge rocking movements before what had merely been a line on the ground under her was now a gap where the rocks had been ripped asunder. The side that had originally had her arms staked to it was lifted two meters in the air. The half with Gage and Iona on it heaved and the ground tilted.

Gage rushed to Iona, but he wasn’t fast enough to stop both the spikes he had released from rolling toward the gap and pulling Iona’s arms with them.

Iona screamed.

He watched in horror as the spikes fell together inside the crack. He rushed to the edge. She was on her back and lacked the leverage she needed to pull something that heavy up. He grabbed the chain connected to her right arm and pulled hard. The spike weighed too much. It was intended to be handled by two men, but Gage lifted it feeling tiny tears in his arms and chest as he did so.

The ground kept bucking, but Gage got to Iona’s other side and pulled the second spike up. He pushed it toward the spikes that still secured her feet.

The rock under him heaved one last time and on the slick sand, Gage fell.

Iona called after him, but he slipped between the rocks and, without a sound, he slid out of sight.

Chapter Twenty Three

When Benediction and his followers arrived back at the Breastplate of Loki, Iona had been there for twenty-four hours. Gage had not exaggerated and her exposed skin was raw with chemical burns.

When the clocks on the stakes expired, the cuffs holding down her arms and legs released and she immediately brought her knees to her chest.

Benediction crouched in front of her. "Theology was here?"

She nodded, the tears she'd shed had long since dried up and now she didn't know what to do. She turned onto her knees and crawled toward the crack. Hesitantly, she put her head over the hole and looked down.

"He fell down there?" Benediction asked, focusing his gaze down the fissure.

Iona adjusted herself so her feet were falling over the edge of the chasm. She put her weight on her palms and lifted her bottom in preparation for lowering herself down.

Benediction jumped on her and pulled her onto her back. "What are you doing?"

"You guys were so into me dying a few hours ago!" She tried to holler, but her throat was too dry so she sounded like a garbage monster.

"Look," Benediction said. His blue eyes flashed exactly like Gage's. "If he fell down there, he's dead."

Iona started crying again. Her dry lips split and bled as she contorted her mouth in pain.

"Hardly anyone lives on the surface of Io. No one lives underground on Io. He's been crushed and there is no point trying for any kind of rescue mission."

Iona screamed and, this time, she managed it.

Cool-headed, Benediction grabbed her by the crooks of both her elbows. "Let's get you out of here."

Instead of the gag and braces that had been used to transport her to the foot of the volcano, Benediction asked for something else and in the next moment, Iona was tied into a straight jacket that was made of fur. Fluff?

"What is this?" she croaked.

None of them listened to her as they bundled her off onto the helocarrier. The last time she rode on it, she had been put on the back bench. This time she was in the second row and she overheard Benediction's conversation with the pilot.

"Did you find any clues in the helocarrier?" Benediction asked, sounding exactly like Gage.

"The shovel is missing from the survival kit. Someone got into two bottles of water," the pilot replied.

"What about under the hood?"

"Gage rebuilt the engine. It was sound. Does that mean you want me to tow it back to the Tranquility Mansion?"

Benediction shook his head. "No. Let's leave it here. Is it set to hover if there's any more seismic activity?"

The pilot shook his head in the negative.

"Turn on the setting and we'll go."

Iona watched as the pilot left the cockpit of their helocarrier and held his arm up over his face against the blowing sand. He opened the Danger Zone and did as he was told.

“Why are you leaving Gage’s helocarrier here?” Iona asked Benediction.

“Because taking it would be theft. It doesn’t belong to Theology. It belongs to whoever rented it to him. People here are declared dead after seven days. If it’s still here in six days, I’ll have it towed. There’s nothing wrong with leaving it there. There’s a lot of free parking on Io.”

“Yeah, that’s because it’s likely to be swallowed whole,” Iona said skeptically.

“Not if it flies,” Benediction said wistfully, not at all tainted by her pessimism.

The Tranquility Mansion was made out of old tires, but that didn’t mean that it looked like a tire fire. It did not. The tires had been recycled, broken into bits, poured into molds, and the bases of each building had been fitted with thousands of magnets that corresponded with magnets on the ground. That meant that the Tranquility Mansion hung just a little above the sand. Most of the buildings that made up the grounds were huge and a single person stepping on them did not upset their balance, but there were loads of tiny buildings floating here and there that moved slightly under the weight of their owners.

Iona had been stunned by the roman styled columns made out of black that created a sharp contrast against the yellow sand.

Once inside, Benediction unbuckled Iona’s straight jacket himself and invited her, most cordially to his personal rooms in the mansion.

“Where’s Leviticus?” she asked gloomily.

“He’s being questioned. You can see him through the mirror if you’d like, but you can’t speak to him until he’s answered all our questions.”

Iona nodded and Benediction led her down a dark hallway lit only by glass lanterns that floated over Benediction’s head. The rubber under Iona’s feet helped her to keep walking after her ordeal on Loki’s breastplate, but she refrained from fainting until she had seen Leviticus.

Just as Benediction said, he was behind a dark-tinted mirror with one of the followers of Voynich who had her green hair done up in a french braid.

She asked him a question.

He answered with frustration.

She asked him another question.

He slammed his fists against the table.

“Seen enough?” Benediction asked.

Iona mused quietly. “He’s been here answering questions since you took us both from Sleeping Beauty Inc., hasn’t he?”

“He would have been asleep in bed hours ago if his story made sense. He’s lying, about a collection of things. We have to find out the truth and we can’t let him collect himself, be left alone to come up with a new story that makes sense, or use any of his implants to turn the tables on us. It is looking more and more like he is a spy and a threat.”

“If he’s a spy, who do you think sent him?” Iona wondered.

“That’s yet to be seen,” Benediction said with a hard smile.

“So, when do I get interrogated?”

“We can start right now if you’d like,” he said as he turned and led Iona away from the interrogation room.

“What do you want to ask me?” Iona mumbled, her voice grating.

He tilted his head. “I suppose we can start with the most obvious question. How long have you and Theology been lovers?”

Iona stopped moving. Normally, if she were asked a question like that, she would refuse to answer it. More than that, she’d refuse to give the tiniest hint as to the answer in her demeanor. However, the man asking her was a copy of Gage and his dark skin did not change how familiar he felt. His voice was the same, his eyes were the same blue, like the god of the sky, and Iona fidgeted, but then gave her answer. “We weren’t lovers. He was my handler until I bought him to help me campaign for a higher-paying contract.”

Benediction searched her face for signs she was lying, but rather than coming to a conclusion he suspended disbelief and continued to lead Iona down the hall. “Leviticus says that you and Theology picked him up on Europa after Theology had a run-in with Olivine. Is that true?”

“Yes.”

“Where did Leviticus come from before that?” Benediction continued.

“I’m not sure. Maybe from out beyond the asteroid belt. I don’t know much about him. Leviticus wasn’t part of my plan or my contract with Gage. He was just tagging along with us. I don’t know him very well.” She paused and coughed. “Where are you taking me?” she asked, stumbling after him, exhausted and weak.

He took her hand as he seemed to realize how fragile she was. “I’m taking you to my quarters. There’s a nutrient bath ready for you there. Don’t be alarmed, but the water will be pitch black.”

“Is that what you do to turn someone’s skin black?”

“No. It’s just a healing bath to help ease your sore skin. The process for turning skin black is more complex than a bath.”

From that point on, he didn’t ask her any more questions. He had her hop up from one mansion to another twice before they arrived at his quarters. They were grander than the others, but only in the sense that the columns that made up the building were taller. She was led to a corner where the floor opened to a black bath.

“I’ll leave you alone to get in the water,” he said as he stepped away from her.

Iona was about to ask him how he intended to leave her alone when mirrors fanned out from inside the columns that surrounded the bathtub, appearing to create a privacy shield. Iona smirked. The first thing Benediction had shown her in the Tranquility Mansion was a two-way mirror.

She didn’t trust him.

She also didn’t care.

Her clothes were ruined. The white tank top was stained from the yellow sands and almost looked as though it was tie-dyed by a toddler who didn’t quite understand how the dying process was supposed to work and botched it. Her jeans were mangled. Holes had been burnt in a few places where the wind blew something particularly foul at her. She had taken a few of those hits to the arms. She pulled off the bra and the granny panties Gage had handed her through the gap in her closet doors.

She scoffed.

In all the times he had transported her, it hadn't mattered what she wore when she went to sleep in the cryochamber, except that one time. Gage had foreseen the trouble and dressed her appropriately. She had a moment where she imagined herself on the sands of Io in that tiny slip dress with sand blowing up her skirt with her hands and ankles bound. She reminded herself that it wouldn't have worked out that way as she could have picked up clothes at a few stops along their route, but it didn't matter. She was charmed that he had looked after her.

She slid into the water, putting a blistered toe in first.

The water soothed her body so immediately that she was aware that the water had to be laced with a collection of drugs in order to be so effective. That idea made her want to get out of the water, but another part of her... that part was the skin on her face which was not in the water, reminded her of the grave discomfort she'd feel if she got out. Surely, it was okay to enjoy it a little more.

She remembered Gage telling her about his choice to take the sedatives and it suddenly became very clear to her that she had to find a place to hide in the Tranquility Mansion because that was the only way she could sleep soundly.

She reached for a towel.

The mirrors opened. Benediction entered. He had a servant with him. The servant had a tray with various bottles on it and when they knelt on the floor, placing the tray next to the bath, Iona could see them.

Benediction pointed to the different bottles. "The blue one will stop you from feeling pain. The green one will prevent infection. The white one will give you a false layer of skin that will help protect you until you're healed."

"Are you a doctor?" Iona asked suspiciously. "Gage wasn't a doctor, but he was very good at treating sick people."

"Really? I didn't know that. I actually didn't know Theology very well. Maybe you could tell me a bit more about him." He stuck out his finger and hanging from it was a black bikini top. The straps dangled in the water. "It's for when you get out. All the good that can happen in this water will be accomplished in the next ten minutes. If I leave you in the water much longer, I'm worried you'll lose a significant amount of skin. When you're still in the water, I need you to put on this bathing suit so that we can move on to the next phase of your treatment. But if you're more comfortable naked, I can..." He hesitated to finish.

Iona slid the top out from between his fingers and let it fall in the water. "Bottoms please," she said without emotion.

He dropped them in the water in front of her and changed the subject. "Can you open your mouth for me?"

"Why would I need to do that?"

"Your throat filter has expired."

"How do you know that?" she asked.

"Even if you put it in when we dropped you off, it would be expired by now. They're not endless. Normally, you'd need to change it approximately once a week. Since you did more breathing outside in the last twenty-four hours than most people do in a week, it's expired. Open your mouth and I'll replace it."

Iona didn't want to, but she did not want an excess of sulfur and guck in her throat. She didn't trust him, but in some ways, she was also past the point of fear. She opened her mouth and true to his word, he pulled out the filter with a pair of extra long, extra thin, tweezers.

"Mind if I take the ones out of your nose too?"

She gave her consent and he removed the ones in her nostrils.

She took a deep breath. "The air in here smells nice. How is that possible? There aren't any walls here. There are only columns."

"The walls are not actually open. They only look like they are. It's a little trick because it's cheaper to build the building predominantly out of glass. There's a lot of sand on Io and so we build glass houses. The buildings may fall, the glass may break, but this is Io and there's so much sand we can't number it. Glass is very easy to recycle."

"Isn't it dangerous to live in glass houses? Glass is heavy and if it breaks, someone could get hurt," she asked, her voice still garbled.

"Ah, I forgot about your throat. Vych, please go fetch a tonic from the medicinal fridge. I earmarked one with a pink label. Bring a small meal as well. My lady is undoubtedly hungry after her experience."

The servant left them. As soon as she was out of sight, Benediction dipped a glass jug in the water.

"What are you doing?" Iona asked in alarm.

"Calm yourself. Our glass rarely breaks when it falls on our rubber surfaces. I'm going to wash your hair. Normally, it wouldn't be wise to do such a thing and never in front of one of my followers." He scooped up a full jug of black water and gently started pouring it over Iona's scalp.

"Why do you want to wash my hair?" she asked tentatively, looking at their shared reflection in a mirror.

He was slow to answer as he finished wetting her hair and began to work a dollop of soap into it. "I... I have left maybe a dozen people on Loki's Breastplate. Half of them have been torn apart. The other half of them were messed up from exposure. Half of the ones who lived through the trial died anyway. I prepared all these treatments for you in the twenty-four hours you were out there. Of all the people I've strapped to the rock, you were the only one who saw the experience as a worthy test. I... had strange feelings while I looked at you... when we cuffed you... the look on your face, the gleam in your eyes, the words that came from your lips."

Iona couldn't see him well as he said those words. She could only hear the words floating down to her ears and hovering in the air with their exact meaning concealed from her.

"Many of the followers of Voynich love tests like that one. They want to see others tested. They don't want to be tested themselves. You are the only person I have ever seen submit herself to the test." His voice was like his heartbeat, steady and warm. The hands that touched her were careful and caressing.

What was he saying? What was he confessing?

Iona cleared her throat. "I thought the test wasn't valid because Gage pulled two of my stakes free."

"I had a mathematician work on it. If your stakes had not been moved, you wouldn't have died. The chains would have given you enough leeway that you wouldn't have been killed. What is most likely to have happened was that the force of the fissure would have broken a

humerus in each arm, but you wouldn't have died. What Theology did merely stopped you from breaking your arms."

"They're sore," she admitted, not daring to remember what happened the moment that her upper arms had been pulled the wrong way. "Does that mean that the test was valid and I'm cleared?"

"Yes," he said softly.

At that moment, his servant Vych returned. She had a second tray in her hands with dishes and the bottle of tonic Benediction had sent her to retrieve. The tray rattled as she saw Benediction washing Iona's hair. Her eyes were wide with disbelief.

"What?" he said softly, almost like he was happy now that he had got his hands soapy. "Put the tray down."

"Sir, can I take over for you?" the servant asked, barely hiding her horror.

"You cannot. You can unscrew that tonic and give it to Lady Iona."

"Her name is Iona?" the girl gasped.

Benediction laughed a deep throaty laugh. "Seems like it was always meant to be, doesn't it?"

The rest of the time passed in a daze as Iona slipped on the bathing suit under the water. Benediction helped her out of the bath and placed her on a padded medical table covered in white towels. He had Vych light candles around them, claiming that if there was only a little warmth in one candle, many of them would keep Iona warm as they waited for her to air dry.

Her hands were sore, so Benediction himself held a drink to her lips and brought food to her mouth.

Eventually, he helped her lay on the table where the concoctions in the bottles were sprayed on her, allowed to set, and new sprays were applied.

"Do I look a mess?" she whispered.

"You look more beautiful than any woman has ever looked... to me."

During all of this, Iona did not think about Gage. She couldn't bear to think about him. Iona had put plenty of unpleasant things out of her mind and what happened to Gage was something she couldn't do anything to rectify. She didn't know the first thing about hunting for people underground and if her mind approached the threshold of how Gage would feel falling between the cracks of an alien world, the panic she experienced went all the way to the roots of her hair. Gage would hate dying underground. There was nothing he would hate more. He needed to be in space. He needed to be where the stars burned, where the comets soared, where time disappeared, and where he could finally be free, even when he was a slave.

The idea tormented her as she fell asleep.

Chapter Twenty Four

Gage opened his eyes. He was confused. He was used to waking up in the dark, but he was also used to waking up with a control screen in front of him that displayed his to-do list. When was the last time he'd slept somewhere other than the inside of a cryochamber? He ran a hand over his face painfully. Where did it hurt? Where was he?

One good inhale reminded him he was on Io. The nose and throat plugs didn't block that much of the sulfur smell. He was on the yellow sands of Io. He had several scrapes up his arms and the acidic sand in his wounds was causing them to burn.

There was a crack of light over him. Gauging the distance to the opening above him, it was too far and the sides of the fissure were too steep for him to climb up.

He tapped his bracelet. It woke up and the pink light from the screen burned his eyes. Looking around, he didn't see Iona. If she was still above, then the chances that things had worked out for her were good. For him though, things could have gone better.

Using his watch, he could send a distress call, but who did he send it to? He scanned his contacts from Io. There was only one. Tuton from the wreckers. Gage sent a message.

Signal blocked.

Using the light from his watch, he brushed the sand off his arms and shook it from his hair.

He was going to have to find his own way out.

Looking around him, he saw that the cave above him was actually quite large. There was more than enough room to stand up. There were also no bats or other creepy crawlers hanging from stalactites. There weren't stalactites. The ceiling of the cave was smooth and only visible if Gage used a magnifier on the area. It was a relief that Io only had life that humans brought with them. Most things died on Io.

He was about to become one of them.

He stood up and as he did, he saw something that surprised him. Ahead of him, there was a tunnel with lights hung periodically from the wall.

Did someone live under the surface on Io? Such a thing seemed impossible. The surface of Io was in constant upheaval as the gravity of Jupiter crushed and stretched the moon. The volcanoes erupted constantly and they were in the foothills of the largest volcano on Io, Loki. No one would look for a secret base of any kind here. It was the last place anyone would look.

Gage's mouth filled with sick saliva. He covered his mouth and swallowed until the feeling passed.

He sighed and wiped his mouth.

It had been many years since he had escaped his underground prison. How the hell had he managed to find another one?

It didn't matter who they were. It didn't matter what they were doing. If he walked down that tunnel and was met by a person, they might kill him just for being there—in the wrong place at the wrong time—or they might have other plans for someone who just 'happened' along. The population of a place like that didn't go up. It only went down.

He looked up again at the crack above him. It was changing shape. The rocks above were thrashing. Even if he could get back up, he might not be able to get through the cracks. The opening could close with a cave-in. The opening could widen by enough that he could run up

and leap out of the crack. Would his helocarrier still be there? Would he be able to send a signal to Tuton from there?

He glanced back at the tunnel. Okay, it mattered who was down there. It mattered what they were doing. He would never be able to sleep again if he turned away from the mouth of hell. The place would haunt his waking nightmares if he didn't explore it and expose what was happening.

He moved toward the tunnel. He would have loved to hide. He would have loved to be able to use something as cover. As it was, he walked directly under the line of lights believing that if there were cameras, they would be incorporated into the lights to create a simpler design and to save resources. If he walked there, he might escape being seen.

Gage felt his heart hammering in his chest as he slowly covered the distance between lights. Maybe it went nowhere.

Maybe the tunnel collapsed further down. A thousand scenarios ran through his head.

For a moment, his brain flashed with scenes from when he had been Olivine's slave. He saw a maid dead on the floor in front of him. Her lifeless eyes stared at him. The expression was so blank that his brain turned the nothing in her eyes into blame. He saw his hand black from the electric shocks. There were times when he couldn't make a fist and other times when he held on so tightly that he couldn't let go.

His head burned. He couldn't think about those old memories anymore. His pace was slacking and making him move oddly. He would put an elbow in the line of sight of a camera because he was walking like a moron.

When the end of the tunnel came into view, all Gage saw was black. He wasn't sure if there was a room beyond, or if there was a dropoff, or what could be waiting for him, but he walked to the end.

There was a corner. He would have to turn it if he wanted to see what was hidden in the foothills of Loki.

What he saw when he came around the corner took the wind out of him.

It was the same! It was exactly the same! The cave-in, the crevice that had filled with rocks. He was in Io, not Mars, but there was the door into Olivine's underground mansion that he had escaped forty years before. What did it mean?

Did it mean that the cave-in on Mars that trapped him had been no accident? Gage had always believed that the Bouvant mansion had gone unregistered in order to hide their drug smuggling operation, but what if that was only part of the equation? What if all of it was put together so that Olivine and her father could trick their slaves and servants? Were they not really trapped, but the Bouvants decided to leave their lives above ground to play the sick, bored game they played with their servants? Shocking them? Twisting them? Breaking them? Making them do anything with no hope of escape?

Gage swallowed the vomit a second time. He had to investigate the place, but no matter what, he couldn't leave evidence that he had been there.

The doors in front of him did not lead all the way to the top of the cavern. They didn't build all the way to the ceiling on Mars either and there was room to climb over the front doors.

He took his watch off and put it in his pocket.

Then, with more strength than his scraped forearms wanted, he heaved himself onto the blue clay roof that had been placed on the entrance to hell.

He moved slowly across the tiles until he realized that they weren't made of clay. They were made of glass and only mottled to look like clay. He took off his boots and tied them together by the laces and hung them around his neck. He needed to find out if anyone was there and if they knew of another way out.

On the other side, there was a courtyard with a pond. He slid down and felt grass beneath his feet. Grass? On lo? That seemed impossible, but it was slightly damp and a little cold.

That was when he saw a figure on the bridge between a gazebo and the courtyard. He'd recognize himself anywhere.

"Gage, is that you? I already know you fell through the crack. There's no point in being this secretive about your arrival."

Gage scoffed and stepped forward. He couldn't act like a baby in front of Testament. It made him sick. Even after everything he suffered under the hands of Olivine, Testament had suffered more.

"Leviticus said you were dead," Gage called back.

"Yeah, well, Leviticus is a dick," Testament spat back. The other version of Gage came into the light and he showed his current look. His head was shaved up one side and the other side of his hair was so long that the ends skimmed his collarbone. It was also white. It was the white of someone who had endured a tremendous amount of pain.

Gage stepped forward. He could stand many things, but the idea of Testament being hurt any further was one that bothered him immensely. "Are you hurt? Have you been tortured?"

Testament regarded Gage with the air of a monk, serene and composed. "Are you here to save me, Gage? You've been trapped yourself."

"Is this place what I think it is?" Gage asked.

Testament rubbed the stubble on his chin. "Probably... it isn't that yet. That will come later."

"What's going on here? You're talking to me so I assume you know what's happening here and you're going to tell me?"

"I'm not your spirit guide," Testament chuckled. He adjusted his robe, which at first Gage mistook for priests' robes. Close up, he saw that he was wearing a white satin robe cut very similarly to the one Iona owned. "I'm also trapped here. Heretic is somewhere around as well."

"You're not sure where?"

"No. He's really annoying. If you'd like me to explain what I know, I will, but first, answer a question for me. Have you ever been possessed by the feeling that you'd like to kill all of us and be the only one left?"

Gage didn't attempt to hide his feelings. "I have wanted to kill Leviticus quite a few times."

"That's natural," Testament said with a nod. "What about the rest of us?"

"I saw Benediction on the surface. It was just for a moment, but I did kind of want to kill him. If I'm honest, the only one of us I haven't wanted to kill is probably you."

"You did try to kill anyone who placed a hand on me, which was why you were sold off as a form of martial entertainment. When you left, I saw that you were sold with Leviticus and that they were going to make you fight him. I didn't like to place bets, but I thought he might kill you, but only because," Testament put up a finger to ask Gage to wait until he explained why. "You might mistake him for you. I never felt in danger when I was with you, neither the urge to kill nor the feeling that you might kill me. But... I don't have the same relationship with Heretic."

"What's going on?"

“At the moment, we’ve segregated ourselves. He has to stay in mansion C while I stay in mansion B. Otherwise, I think we might be quite serious about killing each other.”

“How did you get here?” Gage asked, the desperation raw in his voice.

“Oh, same old, same old. I was working as a model. No runway work, you understand, but as an example of the perfect body ratio for hire. I can’t tell you how many times my face and body have been scanned, or how many times I’ve posed naked.”

“You got used to it?”

Testament gave him an odd look. “Everyone has to give something away. You give away your time.”

“You know about me?” Gage asked in suspicion.

“Of course, I know about you. You’ve been falling asleep in the arms of the stars. I wondered why, so I did some reading. You’re not exactly famous, except to people who are interested in true crime. Your old owner, Olivine, can’t show her face on the inner side of the asteroid belt. She can’t escape the looks, the fear, the hatred, and everything else that comes from being a minor when you commit atrocities. They put her father in a gas chamber for what he did to you and the others. Her, they let off.” Testament turned to Gage. “What’s with that look?”

Gage willed his blood to return to his face as Testament had obviously noticed how pale he had suddenly become. “I didn’t know that her father had been executed.”

“You didn’t?”

“I just wanted to get away. I didn’t know what happened to Olivine either except that she was still around.”

“I owe you an apology,” Testament said with a downward gaze. “I don’t know if Leviticus would have been able to find you if I hadn’t told him you were going by the name Gage. You always told me you were going to change your name and I fell for Leviticus’ act so hard.”

Gage shrugged. “Don’t sweat it. It wasn’t new information. I told him that I was going to change my name too. How did he get you? Did you get poisoned? Drugs in the food?”

“Yeah. He acted so friendly and I... felt lonely, wanted home, wanted a home that never existed, wanted you, missed you, spoke about you and I’m so sorry. We’re both trapped now.” Testament wiped the remorse out of his eyes. “Did you fall for the poison too?”

Gage placed a hand on Testament’s shoulder. “Nah. I thought he was going to be picked up by Olivine’s bodyguards that were waiting outside my ship. I thought that if I left him there, Olivine would find him, buy him, do what she did to me to him, and I invited him aboard. But I’m not down here because I followed him down a rabbit hole.”

“No?”

“No. I was trying to rescue a beautiful woman who was enduring a gravity trial administered by the Church of Voynich on the Breastplate of Loki. It’s just above here. It was because she owned me,” Gage explained.

“That explains why you were at odds with Benediction. They’re against slavery, aren’t they? They may be our only hope of rescue from this place.”

Gage shook his head. “I don’t think that’s our only hope. The crack I fell through may widen under the influence of his holiness.”

“Jupiter?”

Gage nodded. "This whole place could get ripped to shreds by the tectonic tides. Or we could have a lava bath."

"I don't know about either of those things," Testament confessed. "I'm neither a scientist nor a religious enthusiast. What I know is about the ten of us and how we feel about each other. None of us like what was done to us, how we were made, or that we're all identical. We all want to distinguish ourselves from each other. Leviticus has red hair. Benediction has black skin and green hair. Heretic has tattoos on his whole body, all the way to his jawline. I am almost in mint condition because I haven't done much to my body, but my hair went white on its own. You changed your name. I don't know what everyone else has done, but we all want to be given our individuality. Except, I think it goes a step further than that. Something inside us knows this is wrong: the way we were born, the way we were kept identical for so long, the annoyance of someone with your face and body acting in a way we never would, and more. We all want to kill each other."

"Leviticus said Apostate was the one who was responsible for you and Heretic. He told me Apostate killed you both."

Testament laughed. "Okay, I was wrong. What I just said about us all wanting to kill each other. That was wrong because Apostate would never want to kill anyone. He was as gentle as a goldfish swimming between your fingers. Though I would rate myself as the next least threatening. What do you think is going to happen here? Leviticus trapped us. Is he going to kill us all after he's gathered us? Sell us again? Make us fight for sport? Something worse?"

Gage crossed his arms. "Why does he have to choose? Surely, he can think of a solution that hits all those bases."

"Is this place very much like the place you were trapped in on Mars?"

"It is exactly like it," Gage admitted. "Obviously, it was built by the same wacko."

Now it was Testament's turn to go pale. "He's going to sell us to Olivine and she's going to relive everything she did with you, except with all the rest of us."

"Not that it is much comfort, but Leviticus won't be going free. She'll find a way to trap him too. Who knows why he's doing all this? He may have a reason that makes sense to him."

"That's very generous of you."

"It isn't," Gage said sternly.

He had done things that took away his ability to condemn Leviticus without simultaneously condemning himself. He didn't know what knife was at Leviticus' throat.

Gage clapped his hands together. "Let's go meet Heretic and then I'll show you both the hole I fell down. Perhaps the three of us can think of a way to get out if we can keep from killing each other."

Chapter Twenty Five

Iona's skin felt raw. Benediction told her that it would. He said the treatments he'd administered to her the night before wouldn't be enough and when she woke up the next morning, she would be sore. He assured her that if she pressed the call button by the bed, he'd race to her to repeat the treatments.

Except Iona had been sitting up in her bed for an hour and she hadn't moved to press the call button. She had been leaning against the glass that made up the wall next to her bed and dreaming.

Well, what she was doing wasn't exactly dreaming. She was running a simulation in her head.

Benediction was head over heels in love with her.

Was his love something she wanted?

Would he stay head over heels in love with her if he got to know her? Iona had her doubts about whether he could. After being strapped to two moving tectonic plates, she realized she didn't know enough about the Church of Voynich. Her previous research hadn't told her enough. She didn't know they performed gravity trials on people for being slave owners. She also didn't know that they were the governing body on Io.

She also felt like a fool, like she had missed her big chance at happiness. She should have grabbed onto Gage tighter. The campaigning to find a better buyer or a husband had all been stupid. She was trying to have it all, except she already knew from her work as a slave that you didn't get to 'have it all'. Not even the rich men who hired her 'had it all'. Instead, they had sacrificed all they had for just one thing. For all those men, it had been their image. They gave away everything so they could look like they had everything.

She should have given it all away to get Gage. In hindsight, the way she should have done it was easy to see. He had said that he would be willing to try a more in-depth contract with her if she was in love with him and that was the only way for them to try to have a relationship. She should have given away her pride, given away her safety zone, and told him that she was in love with him.

Why had she been so hesitant?

Now the chance had gone. Gage was dead and if he wasn't, no one was willing to look for him.

She scratched at her skin.

What was the difference between Gage, Benediction, and Leviticus? They looked the same so why weren't they the same?

Iona rolled it around in her head. She wasn't going to press the call button for Benediction to replenish her treatments until she knew what she was going to do.

When the answer bloomed inside her heart, it felt pointed like a compass and pricked her. Her path forward would be an unpleasant one.

She pressed the button.

Benediction must have been close by because he entered the room almost instantaneously. Before, he had been dressed in an almost military outfit. The camouflage of Io was like a grainy yellow hologram. He wore a black top under his uniform before. Now, as he approached her,

he wore a white doctor's coat over black clothes. He looked a little like Gage in the way he moved and in his doctor mannerisms.

"How are you feeling this morning?" he asked, reaching to help her move her bottom closer to him on the bed.

She took his hand and let him lead her.

"I hurt," she confessed. "How long will it hurt?"

"I don't know," he said, taking her fingers in his and examining the back of her hand. "You'll probably be raw for weeks."

She nodded. "We have to have a conversation about what my treatment costs."

Benediction looked taken aback. "What do you mean?"

"Those sprays and creams that you're using on me can't be free. The food you've given me isn't free either." She touched the neckline of the robe she was wearing. "This garment is obviously going to be ruined after absorbing the sprays and creams. I have to pay you back for your kindness."

He looked aghast. "This isn't a hospital. There isn't a price list on the door."

"I know, but we need to come up with a reasonable starting amount so that I can have it transferred to you. Bank transfers are slow between moons and my bank is on Ganymede, so it might take weeks for the amount to be wired to you. We have to start the process now so I can display my intention to pay."

He scoffed. "When you discover a wounded animal, like an owl or a fox, you care for it knowing that it cannot repay you with anything other than its recovery. There are no wounded animals on Io. There is only you. I don't want your money."

"Is that because my money was earned as a slave?" she asked quietly.

His eyes went wide, but he calmed himself before he said the wrong thing. Instead, he said patiently, "You're not a slave anymore. You're not part of that system anymore. Jupiter freed you."

"You're right," she said slowly as she touched the raw skin on her face. "May I see myself in a mirror? I sort of saw a reflection in the glass last night and it made sense. It looked like the same burnt skin that is on my arms is also on my face, but I'd like to see it for myself."

Benediction hesitated. "I think you should wait a few more days."

"I'm likely to be horrified?"

"You're likely to judge that the situation with your face is more serious than it is. You are burnt. I'm not going to try to hide the truth of that from you, but this is Io and I've seen a lot of these types of burns recover. If you see it, you might be less hopeful and that attitude will hurt your recovery. You need to have faith that you will be beautiful again if you'll only wait."

"The time it will take for me to recover is why I want to send you a payment. Otherwise, I fear very strongly that you will tire of caring for me. I was also hoping that I could take over performing my treatments so that I would be less of a burden on you. You are the head of the church. You don't have time to care for me."

He smiled a beautiful smile that filled his face with sunshine. "Iona, if there was ever anything that I wanted to do with my life, it's caring for you now. This talk of payment is blocking your immediate relief. Stop talking. Please take off your robe and let me see your shoulders. It will be most convenient if I care for you in the chair," he said, pointing.

Fighting Benediction now seemed stupid. Her skin was burning and a remission of the pain was only a few sprays away.

She stood and removed the robe as he requested. Under it, she wore a black strapless dress made of T-shirt fabric. It had a zipper in the back but was held tight by a series of ties that were incorporated into the bodice by some very clever smocking. The truth was that it was one of the most interesting garments she'd ever worn as it could be tightened and loosened to create different styles.

"Where did this dress come from?" Iona asked as she sat on the chair he offered. "This isn't a hospital, so it's not like it was just lying around."

"It was," he said as he sanitized his hands before getting started. "Here on Io, there are a number of different industries. We have to make money move here, so I have to spend the money that becomes mine and not hoard it. If I hoard my money, others will too, so I have to show my generosity by buying things. I filled all my needs ages ago, buying from our community, so I got this idea to buy things for an imaginary wife. I have a whole room filled with things I've purchased for her. Everything I have used on you has been something stored in that room."

Iona swallowed. "Oh, I see," she whispered as the first mist rained down on her bare skin.

"I suppose you're wondering why I haven't married if I'm so interested in spoiling a woman of my own?"

She allowed the smallest affirmative sound to escape her lips.

"I haven't found anyone because I have wanted to be inspired. The women here are very devoted to Voynich. They're very devoted to me. I'm not inspired by them because I feel that they are telling me what I want to hear, saying the words I've said from the pulpit back to me in their own way. I don't hate it, but it doesn't move me. I want to be moved."

Iona felt her blood hesitate in her veins.

His voice was clear and deep as he said in unmistakable tones, "You move me."

Her breath caught and she wondered if she were on the verge of a panic attack. "You don't know me. I've been a slave. You don't know what I've done, what my masters have asked me to do, what I've done with my hands or my lips... You don't know."

He grabbed a chair and placed it in front of Iona. Sitting in it, he placed his face in front of her. His jaw was set and his eyes were clear. "I was a slave," he said. "I was sold as a slave repeatedly and my sales were not voluntary like yours were, I was not protected by a contract that would end. You could make a fresh decision each time you were sold. I could not. Tell me, would you like to exchange stories with me to see which of us is dirtier?"

Iona looked away.

"You being a slave doesn't disgust me," he continued. "I don't need to know why you sold yourself. I don't need to know what you did when you were on contract with an electric shocking device around your wrist. I don't need to know more about why you bought Gage or what happened with him. That's all over. It was all over the moment I picked you up after your trial. You are clean and I wish I was as clean as you."

She glanced at him, worried and tentative. "Do you really mean that?"

"I do. For now, it is my greatest desire to heal your wounds and lead you to me." He stood up and continued the treatment.

She flicked her head toward him as he walked behind her. “What does that mean? Lead me to you?”

“It means that I plan to use this time that we’re together as a courting period. Every day that I care for you, I’m going to show you love on a level you’ve never felt before and when your skin has healed, I will ask you to marry me.”

She swallowed again. “It will be hard for you to do that. I was in love with Gage. His disappearing down that hole has only made me love him more. I don’t know if I can give you what you want.”

“You’re wrong. It will be easier for you to fall in love with me because you were in love with Theology. I’m not him, but we share many attributes. I’m not expecting this to be immediate, but I have been praying for something like this to change my life for some time.” He came back into view with a familiar smile on his face. “Above all, you should know that I’m not disgusted that you loved him. For some reason, the idea that you were in love with him makes you even more desirable. You only need to come a few steps further to fall in love with me.”

He moved out of view.

“What about Leviticus?” she asked, suddenly remembering the other variant.

“Don’t worry about him.”

“Is he still with the interrogators?”

“He is. He’s making less sense than before, which is bad for him. He needs to connect a few ideas before they’ll let him sleep.”

“Is that on your orders?”

Benediction huffed. “It’s not on my orders as much as it is the law here. You have to have a story that makes sense to be on Io. Nothing Leviticus says makes sense.”

“But I already told you how he ended up here. We brought him here with us because we were fleeing Europa.”

“Um... I see I need to explain more to you.” Benediction sat in the chair again. “I assume you know all about me and my ‘brothers’?”

“A bit,” she conceded.

“At the least, you’ve heard Leviticus’ story about how Apostate killed Heretic and Testament.” Iona nodded.

“Well, Apostate didn’t kill them. It’s a ridiculous story. Questioned more closely, Leviticus says that Apostate strangled Heretic and suffocated Testament. Both those ideas are ridiculous.”

“Why?”

“Because Apostate lives life as a sea cow in the oceans of Europa.”

“He what?” Iona exclaimed.

“He opted out of the human experience and he has been living inside a machine that tricks the sea cows into believing he’s one of them. It’s a submarine-type device that lets him endure the cold of the sea and the pressure of the ocean. I ping him every month and he pings back with a picture of how long his beard has grown. All of which makes for a pretty solid alibi. I’m inclined to believe that Leviticus did something to Heretic and Testament himself. He’s trying to blame Apostate for whatever he did because he couldn’t account for him and thought he was a reasonable choice to use as a fall guy. That’s what I think.”

“If he did kill Heretic and Testament, what will happen to him?”

“So far, there’s no evidence to suggest that he killed either of them. My interrogator asked Leviticus where he heard that they had died and he said he read it in the news outlet. We can’t find those reports. It doesn’t add up. It worries me that he tagged along with you and Theology and that he contacted me. The only thing that makes sense is he’s trying to collect us for a buyer.”

Iona squirmed. “I feel sick. He was so nice to me. I didn’t suspect a thing.”

Benediction shrugged. “It may not be as bad as it seems, but it does look very bad when he won’t say anything that makes sense. My interrogator wants to do a gravity trial on him, like the one that was done on you. I’m thinking about it. He might have to think he’s going to die before he’s willing to admit what’s going on. Whatever happens, you’re unlikely to see him again.”

Chapter Twenty Six

Gage, Testament, and Heretic stood under the crack that had opened enough to swallow Gage.

“That’s an awfully small hole,” Heretic said in low disbelieving tones. “It’s going to have to open a lot more if any of us are going to fit through it.”

Just as Testament said, Heretic had tattoos all the way to his jawline. The backs of his hands were tattooed as well, leaving only his face and his palms clear. The collar of his shirt ended the view, but unless Gage was completely crazy, it was only one tattoo that covered his whole body. It was koi fish on a swirling water background. Their fins curled around knives, flowers, stones, and floating lily pads. It was mostly black with the occasional dash of royal blue and scarlet.

It was kind of surreal to see what your own body would look like if you tattooed it.

“The hole could widen with the tides,” Gage said reasonably.

“You mean more sand could fall down. Rocks could come down too, blocking the entrance with thousands of tons of sand and rock,” Heretic replied pessimistically.

“Do shut up,” Testament said coldly. “This is what he’s been like the whole time.”

“I was here for months before they dropped you in with me,” Heretic retorted, suddenly sounding more reasonable than before.

“Leviticus picked you up too?” Gage asked, trying to pump him for information rather than let the group of them squabble.

“I didn’t see him. I was in cryostasis on board a ship bound for the Jovian system and I woke up here. My cryochamber malfunctioned and I woke up. Apparently, I was asleep for close to four years. I was here alone for months before Testicles showed up,” Heretic explained.

Gage rolled his eyes while Testament looked like he’d break something over Heretic’s head if there was anything to break.

“The only thing I knew,” Heretic continued, “was that being here was wrong. I figured out I was on Io after breathing in. I explored the mansions and found their stash of nose and throat plugs that were clearly marked as important survival gear for Io. Honestly, they don’t advertise how much this place stinks.”

“What happened when Testament was delivered?” Gage asked.

“I was in the library reading and I didn’t notice the room filling with gas until there was enough of it for me to see it. I blacked out ten seconds later. When I woke up, he was in bed with a bucket, still throwing up whatever they poisoned him with. I didn’t see who brought him or how they got in or out.”

“There’s a hallway here. Do you think it was this hole?” Gage asked.

“Not to be too negative, Gage, but there are several hallways that look just like this one.”

“Is this like a parking garage then? Is there a false door for people to hide their spaceships underground?”

“I think it’s safe to say that if anything like that existed in this wing of the building, it was crushed by seismic activity,” Testament said sourly.

“It could still be our way out,” Gage said, looking up and trying to get a signal on his watch for a second time.

"You're so dumb," Heretic mumbled as he facepalmed himself. "I mean I always knew you were dumb. All of you are dumb. There's no way you'll be able to get out of here that easily. Please put your arm down. You and your little Barbie watch are not going to get us out of here."

Gage didn't put his arm down. "You don't have to look at me if I'm annoying you. You can go back to your... that thing you do when you're down here. Whatever that is."

"Gage! Is that you?" a voice called down from above the hole.

Gage stared up in wild disbelief. "Hi! Is that you, Tuton?"

"Yeah. Hang on! We'll get you out of there!" the wrecker called from above.

A minute later a metal frame was slid between the cracks in the fissure and an electric press pushed the rocks apart and created a larger hole. Now there was more than enough room for a man to fit through.

The rope ladder from a helocarrier was lowered down and Gage put Testament on it.

"I'll hold it steady for you," he said, patting the other man on the shoulder.

Testament put one hand over another and though he was shaky on the fluctuating ladder, he got to the top.

"You next," Gage said to Heretic.

Heretic's face was so astonished. His brain had obviously broken and he didn't know what to say as he grabbed hold of the ladder and scurried up as sure-footed as a goat. He wasn't going to look like a novice next to Testament.

Gage went up last and was welcomed by quite the sight on the surface. There were three helocarriers on Loki's Breastplate. Tuton had brought quite a lot of help.

"What's all this?" Gage asked. "Did you guys come to rescue me?"

"Uh, no," Tuton said, his face as bewildered as Gage's.

He was staring at Testament who was wearing a white satin robe that was as clean as if it had just come out of the package. His eyes went to Heretic, who was wearing a white shirt and black corduroy trousers. Everything on Io that was white was eventually stained yellow like the sands. White clothes were unheard of and Tuton was confused.

Tuton cleared his throat. "Uh, The Danger Zone was set to hover here and uh... it's not a waste of fuel because it's powered by a rupter, but it's not a safe way to leave expensive equipment. It belongs to me, so I thought I'd come out and see what the deal was. I brought the other helocarrier in case we needed to tow it."

"So, you didn't hear that I'd fallen down the crack?" Gage asked.

"No, I heard. I just thought you were dead. This was the fastest I could get out here. On Io, we have very flexible laws about possession and ownership. If my carrier was left here and someone came along who needed it, it would be very reasonable for them to take it. Theft is only bad for rich people, which is why Lord Benediction didn't take it with him when he came to get Lady Iona."

Gage's eyes went wide. At first, he was relieved to hear that she was okay and then his brain noticed another part of the sentence Tuton said. "Lady Iona? When did she become a lady?"

"She endured the gravity test," Tuton pointed out. "And she impressed Lord Benediction. Everyone is talking about her. She's the biggest news on Io."

"Where is she?" Gage asked, getting agitated.

"She's at the Tranquility Mansion. She's suffering from exposure and healing there."

"Which way is that?" Gage asked, rushing toward the Danger Zone.

Tuton pointed. "Wait, Gage. I have to ask. Normally when we pull people out of holes they don't look like this. It's unusual to pull a live person out of a hole in the first place, but..?" He turned to Heretic and Testament.

"You mean because they look like me?" Gage asked.

"Uh... there's that," Tuton conceded as he scratched behind his ear. "But that's not what I'm talking about. You guys are obviously part of some weird genetic experiment where some scientist thought it was a good idea to make a bunch of copies of the same hot guy. There was that other dude, Leviticus, that you were with earlier too. No, I was talking about the way you're all dressed. Especially these two guys. You guys do not look like I just pulled you out of a hole. You look more like passengers from a luxury Jovian tour that decided to spend one day on Io. Why are you guys so clean? You should be dusted yellow from head to foot."

"Oh, yeah," Gage stopped and turned back to Tuton. "There's a hedonistic pleasure mansion underground."

"There are more people underground?" Tuton exclaimed.

"No. There isn't. There's just a mansion built underground."

Heretic stepped forward. "It's a terrarium of sorts. It's a hiding place for rich people to entertain themselves."

"Why were you there?" Tuton wanted to know.

"Someone was trying to collect all of us to use for entertainment. But they haven't gathered us all yet. It was against our will," Testament pointed out angrily.

"So no one is down there?" Tuton asked with wide eyes.

The identical men nodded.

Tuton grabbed a communication device on his collar and spoke to the tower. "Heather, do a search and find out who we'll piss off if we dig up close to Loki's Breastplate. Thanks." He turned back to Gage and the others. "What all is down there? Clothes? Food? Braces?"

They nodded.

"There are freezers full of frozen food," Heretic said.

"There are closets full of clothes," Testament affirmed.

"What are braces?" Gage asked.

Tuton's mouth was watering. "They are buttresses like this one," Tuton said as he pointed to the brace he used to expand the hole Gage had fallen through.

"There are over a thousand," Heretic answered.

"You're sure?"

"There are fourteen hundred and sixteen exposed buttresses against the cave walls," Heretic offered. He looked around at the shocked looks on their faces. "What? I was there for months with nothing happening. I counted them. Y'all wanna know how many windows there were?"

"No. Look around you. There's nothing but sand. We have glass coming out of our ears. What we don't have is buttresses, pretty fabric, clean clothes, fancy food, and luxury items. All kinds of space debris crash on Io, but a lot of it is just scrap metal. You're talking about luxury items and if someone really powerful hasn't registered this dwelling as a legitimate holding, then it's considered a wreck and we can dismantle it and distribute the parts throughout our community."

"There are sixteen buildings," Heretic continued. "There is a coliseum-type theater. There are seven kitchens, fifty-five bathrooms (because there is a bathroom for every bedroom),

twenty-five bathtubs, six hot tubs, and three pools. There is a water recycling system down there that turns piss into sparkling soda water.”

“Really?”

“And so much more. I haven’t even scratched the surface of the carpets, the chandeliers, the art, the sculpture, the dishes...”

Heretic didn’t get to finish before Tuton was back on the communicator with Heather.

They didn’t hear her side of the conversation.

Tuton confirmed, “The only person I need to inform is Lord Benediction because this is a holy site?”

Gage, Testament, and Heretic stared at each other. “Is it suspicious that this place was built on holy land?”

“Very.”

“We should jump worlds.”

“Where should we go?”

“Frigging don’t say here,” Gage said. “The only way off-world is to get a ride with a metal recycler.”

“I don’t have any money.”

“Me neither.”

“Money might be useless in a situation like this,” Gage scoffed. “If you have money and pay for things with your bank numbers, powerful people can trace you.”

They looked at each other and tried to communicate their thoughts through their eyes. The communication wasn’t perfect, but it was solid enough that all three of them were eying the Danger Zone, which was not yet tethered for towing.

Gage approached Tuton. “May I take the Danger Zone to the Tranquility Mansion? I need to go there and back to Sleeping Beauty Inc. headquarters. I’m not sure which first.”

Tuton nodded as another helocarrier arrived. It was the size of a bus and a dozen guys hit the sand next to it.

“That’s our wrecking team,” Tuton explained. “They’re here to scout the area for our report to Lord Benediction before we rip it apart.”

Gage shook Tuton’s hand as a sentimental tear formed in his eye. “I just have to say how much I admire your work.”

Chapter Twenty Seven

Iona gazed out the window. It was dark on Io and there was nothing to see except Jupiter hanging in the air. So close, she felt like she could touch it.

Her skin didn't hurt. Benediction was right in that he had been doing a very good job caring for her. He was patient, kind, and attentive.

She sighed.

Didn't he have something else to do? It felt like he should have something else to do. Years ago, when Iona had been rented out to individual clients, either they carted her along with them everywhere they went and slammed a workload onto her that would make a rented mule shudder, or they left her alone for so long she forgot what they looked like. What was happening with Benediction was neither of those things. He was so attentive that it was the first time she had been alone all day.

She looked out onto the sand. The light of Jupiter mirrored over the yellow dunes like moonlight. It was planet light, but those words sounded stupid.

She felt stupid.

She felt very stupid.

Over the course of the day, she'd decided on a few things. First thing was that she was not going to join the Church of Voynich. If she joined them she would have to have the pigment removed from her eyes and that was not okay with her. The black skin and the green hair were easier to fathom because Benediction looked so good it made women weep. It was the potential loss of her eye color that really bothered her. She also noticed that Benediction had not had to make that sacrifice as his eyes had no pigment in them to begin with. He also didn't need to mourn the loss of what he had looked like all his life because how he looked wasn't special. There were nine other men who looked like him. It wasn't a parallel act of self-sacrifice they had to perform to join the church.

If she lost her honey-brown eyes, she felt like she wouldn't be herself anymore. Eyes were the windows to the soul, a trick of light reflecting in and out, like seeing the inside and the outside of a person at once. No, she could not give up her brown eyes.

Benediction would try to persuade her. He'd work on her and given time, she'd wear down like a stone under moving water, change shape and become what he wanted her to be.

Iona was the ninth most expensive model in the Jovian region, which meant she was oozing with charisma, but Benediction had converted a whole generation of followers to the Church of Voynich. Those two things were not on the same level. She was good but not as good as him. She was also half his age as if her lack of experience justified her losing to him. He didn't look sixty. None of them looked sixty.

Surveying her skin, every inch that had been exposed to the sands of Io was pink, hard, crinkled, and shiny like the skin under a scab. She knew that she could not accept any of the bids that had been offered on her. Her looks were gone, if only temporarily, and she could not even think of entertaining offers from clients until she was healed. She needed to get to the computer at Sleeping Beauty Inc. headquarters and refuse all offers on her. Harrison Fox would not have seen her message yet and it would be at least a week before the cancellation of all bids went public.

If everything went perfectly, she needed to go back to Ganymede to rest and heal. The only thing stopping her was that Benediction was so set on nursing her back to health. She needed to consult a travel agency and make arrangements to leave which was another reason she needed to use the computer at Sleeping Beauty Inc. headquarters.

Yes, Benediction was nice.

Yes, Benediction was handsome.

Yes, he was what she said she wanted before.

There was another side to that coin that she had seen a glimpse of when he had her face slammed into the carpet and when he left her to die. It wasn't that she minded so much for herself, but what about the people who had owned her and who had treated her well? Did they deserve a gravity trail? Did everyone who loved them deserve to be thrown into the chaos Gage experienced when she was taken?

In her mind, she saw Gage disappear into the crack and she couldn't stand it.

She shook her head angrily, desperately. Gage said he loved her and he had died to prove it. She couldn't give herself to another man.

Iona was a whole new person since the gravity trial. The person who hired Gage to find a husband was gone. She didn't want any of that old stuff anymore.

Without Gage, she was like a little homesick orphan. She wanted to go back to Ganymede and take a room at a boarding complex she liked. There was a great chain of boarding houses where someone could go for a day or forever. She'd stayed in one a few times when she was a child and on the run. It was the closest thing to home and it was where she wanted to go. The rooms were tiny and the walls were padded in teddy bear material. Going inside one made her feel like she had been swallowed by the big bad wolf and that the unhappy ending wasn't all that bad. It was quiet and the dark was comfortable. There was unlimited free reading material, though movies cost extra, so she hunkered down and read. When she got hungry, there was a buffet packed with food like pancakes, soup, and toast smeared with salty butter. It was a shameful haven for people who were sick at heart. Hopefully, no one would recognize her if she went there as an adult with an extremely red face.

Once her skin was all better, she'd contact Harrison Fox again and tell him that she was available for hire if he had a job for her.

That was the best she could do for herself.

Since Benediction couldn't leave her alone, not even when she was in the black bath water, it was only a few minutes before he returned and caught her musing.

"I need to go to Sleeping Beauty Inc. headquarters," she told him.

"Whatever for?" he asked breezily.

"I have some loose work ends to tie up and there's a computer there I can use. Can you take me?"

"In the morning," Benediction said, giving her a possessive grin.

Iona had seen that expression on many men's faces. Sometimes the look was directed at her and sometimes at another model. Whenever a man made that face, she took an immediate dislike to him. The churning in her stomach was a surprise to her as well because Benediction looked like Gage.

However, Gage never looked at her like he owned her. Even when he was her handler and truthfully had an incredible amount of power over her during her transport, he treated her with a kind of courtesy that made her melt.

Benediction was botching it.

"If it's at all possible," Iona said softly. "I'd like to go tonight."

"Why the rush? It's not like any message you send will be read sooner than a week from now?" he asked, leaning against the table he used to display her medicines.

"That's exactly why I need to go," she said. "You may as well know what I'm doing since I think you'll be interested in what work I need to do there."

He waited, ears open.

"I need to refuse all the bids that have been made for my contract."

"Oh!" he said, startled. "Of course, you need to do that, and the sooner the better. You could have told me that was what you wanted. I'll get a few guards and we'll head over." He stepped out of the room but made the crucial mistake of leaving the door open when he left. He didn't get three steps away from the room when his communication device pinged. He tried to ignore it, but the ringing changed from the normal ring Iona was used to hearing when people tried to get in touch with him and became an incessant buzzing.

Iona rushed to the door and seeing his back, she heard his side of the conversation as he took the call.

"Tuton's wrecking crew found what?" he said in dazed surprise. "Where? That's not possible. What? Oh, I bet I know what this is about. I was supposed to do something else right now, but I clearly have to get there right away. Yes, I'll bring Leviticus. I bet he knows a lot about what's going on."

Benediction moved to turn around and Iona rushed back to the bed to resume her previous position when he returned to the bedroom.

"Listen," Benediction said, poking his head into the room. "Something urgent came up. I'll send Vych with you to go to Sleeping Beauty Inc. so you can take care of your loose ends right away. I'll get her to administer your evening treatments after you return and I'll pop back to see you when I'm finished dealing with a problem that has come up."

"What happened?"

He hesitated. "I'm not sure about the details, so it's better for me to wait before I say anything. It might be pretty big. It's fine. I'll take care of it. Go with Vych. I'll give her my instructions and then you can be off."

Iona followed him out to the main hall of his personal mansion and watched him don a massive black cloak that shook with yellow sand like glitter.

"Cuff Leviticus," he said crossly through his communication link which was merely a button at his throat. "Arms, legs, gag him. The whole works. I've had it with his lies. Tell me again. Where did Theology bugger off to?"

Iona's heart leaped higher than the top of the top ring on a stage. He was alive?

Benediction continued, "He left? Why? Huh? Who did he have with him? Get Tuton to send him a message to bring the helocarrier back to Loki's Breastplate with the other two. We need to sort this out now. This is the kind of madness I never wanted to happen on Io. I'll lash that traitor to the rocks myself."

Benediction was clearly unaware that Iona had followed him because he had not wanted to share the fact that Gage had lived. She wanted to run to Gage and if Benediction was going to meet him, she wanted to go with him, but she shook her head and retreated into the shadows as Benediction strode out of his mansion.

She knew what Gage would want her to do. He'd want her to use this opportunity when Benediction was not watching her to escape.

She returned to her room and dressed as carefully as when Gage had last dressed her aboard the Cannonball III.

When Vych knocked on Iona's bedroom door, the servant was surprised at Iona's clothes and preparedness.

"You look properly dressed for the sands of Io, Iona," Vych said in disheartened shock. Then she facepalmed herself since she heard herself double up on the word. "Please refrain from doing things that make you look like the goddess of Io. It's disheartening for those of us who want that title more than you."

"I'm glad we understand each other," Iona said. "Let's go. Do we need more bodyguards or are you all we need?"

"I'm the only one that could be spared. Everyone else is busy," she said, trying to hide whatever news had come to light about Gage on Loki's Breastplate. "They left us a small helocarrier. It will be bumpier to get there than the other transports you've used. Please don't throw up."

Iona nodded and walked with Vych to the hangar where the aerial transports were stored. Once aboard, Vych strapped herself in and treated Iona to a lengthy explanation of the straps that Iona thought was completely hilarious because she had personally sold over a thousand models of the helocarrier they were riding in, though most of them went to Mars.

"So, you take this strap and click it into place between your legs," Vych explained. "If you had tried to come out in a dress, I would have made you change."

"Well, I didn't know that we were going to be riding in a VX model 9800-52, nicknamed the Desert Asp. It is a little like a dirt bike or like a shoe with a thin sole so you can really feel the ground under your feet. It has eighteen cylinders, three cooling units, runs on two conjoined raptors, and was the first model designed with a battery used only for starting the engine and no alternator. Yet, even with those feats in engineering, the thing that is really remarkable is the plastic used to make the windshield. It is coated in white sapphire to stop the wind and stones from marking the windshield. This model was sold three years ago and look at how clean that windshield is. How many kilometers does it have on it?"

Vych glared at Iona. "You are the most detestable person I have ever met! Who the hell are you that you know all that?"

Iona looked out the windshield. "I'm just a little more ruthless than the average."

"Can you fly it?"

Iona nodded. "I'd do better flying it if I was on Callisto. I know my way around there and the sand doesn't kick up as much there. As it stands, I've not spent much time on Io. I don't know how to get where we're going, but if I was left alone with your instruments for a few minutes, I'd be able to figure it out. These babies practically pilot themselves. Let's get going."

Vych ground her teeth together as she threw the Desert Asp into gear and lifted them off the ground.

As they sped over the dunes, Iona sensed that Vych wanted to ask her a long list of questions about Benediction. Vych was in love with him, like every other female follower, but she had little chance of getting together with him.

“So, how do people leave the Church of Voynich when they’ve had enough?” Iona asked.

“No one leaves the church. Once their body is changed, they take the church with them wherever they go, whatever they do. You only need to be converted to the truth once.”

“Then what is the deal with this base? If you take the church with you everywhere, why are you all together here?”

Vych tightened her lips, but she answered, “There are those of us who seek to live collectively so we can live our religion more completely. That’s why we’re here on Io. No one wants Io. It’s a mass of toxic sand, intense gravity, and volcanic eruptions. Here, where no one wants to be, we are free.”

“So in theory, you could leave?” Iona asked.

“I wouldn’t want to!” she shrieked over the sound of the propellers.

“I’d leave if I were you,” Iona advised.

“Why? I love it here. I love the mansions. I love the people.”

Iona noticed that the woman was refraining from saying that she loved Benediction. Iona picked up on it for her. “That’s all fine, but if you’re staying because you think Benediction is going to fall in love with you and crown you with the cross of Voynich, you’re going to be waiting until you have your brain pulled out through your nose.”

“We only mummify our dead on Io because that is the most convenient thing with all this sand.”

Iona stifled a laugh. “I wasn’t criticizing it. On Europa, they dump dead people into the water hoping to move nutrients around. You have to have a lot of money on Europa to get a non-sea burial. On Callisto, they bury you under a carpet of mushrooms and what is left after they have finished eating you is so horrifying that no one who goes to your funeral is allowed on that spot of land again. On Ganymede, they burn you to a crisp and churn your ashes in the soil with the hope that one day it will be fertile enough for the entire moon to bloom. All places are trying to feed back.”

“Nothing gets fed on Io,” Vych said sourly. “A body won’t even decompose here. It is just preserved in the sands.”

“Exactly, and so will you, just be preserved in the sands. You’re being preserved now and you’re not even dead yet. Will there even be a difference when you die? You should leave. If Benediction wants you, he’ll chase you.”

“Not if he has you,” Vych barked.

Iona replied sternly. “He only fell in love with me because I wasn’t a baby about the gravity trial. It could have been you if you allowed yourself to be strapped across the crack.”

Vych didn’t reply and Iona wondered what thoughts were being filtered through the other woman’s mind.

Iona thought it unnecessary to say anything more to Vych as they flew.

At Sleeping Beauty Inc.’s Io division, the lock on the front door was broken since the last time she had been there. She imagined Benediction and his army thugs did that when they captured her. Inside, the lobby was empty as Iona opened the front door and went in. She got on the computer behind the reception desk and sent a collection of messages to the head office in

Ganymede explaining her medical condition and that she would be unable to accept any bids until her skin had healed. She didn't plan to accept another contract with Sleeping Beauty Inc., but it didn't do any good to spit in their corporate face, especially since she still needed them.

She sent a second message to Harrison Fox explaining her situation and putting forth her intention to take employment with him when she was healed.

Then, she really got to work. She sent messages to travel agencies on Io, recycling vessels, and pretty much anyone else she could think of asking for transportation off Io. She found one that was leaving in thirty-two hours from the Dahlcroft recycling plant. It was thirty-eight kilometers from the Sleeping Beauty Inc. headquarters. If she could get her banking information, she could buy a cryochamber aboard it for a trip to Ganymede, which was exactly where she wanted to go. She unlocked her banking info, but she didn't have a Sleeping Beauty Inc. bracelet to store it on.

There was a vending machine nearby that dispensed bracelets, and actually, Vych was leaning against the pink glowing cabinet.

Iona got up. "Step aside," she said with a little hand wave.

"What are you doing?"

"Selling myself into slavery... clearly."

"You can't do that!" the girl shouted.

"I can. I can actually do whatever I want. What kind of bracelet should I get? Which one do you think is the prettiest?"

"Benediction would forbid it!" Vych said, trying to stand like a wall between Iona and the cabinet.

"Please relax. He hasn't offered me a communication link or a personal computer. It's almost like he's trying to cut me off from the outside world. That's all I'm getting from the vending machine, a personal communication device. That's what these are. They're Sleeping Beauty Inc. brand because that's what I can get my hands on, but I don't have a buyer, so they're not connected to anyone. I was just teasing you. I kept my promise and refused all the bids that were placed on me." Iona waited for the woman to move and when she didn't, Iona began tapping her toe. "It feels like you're trying to turn me into a prisoner. This isn't a sale contract. It's a communication device. Please move."

Vych slowly stepped aside.

"Thank you. Which one should I get?" she asked, looking at the pink display.

There were two distinct kinds. The kind that wrapped a pink and white screen all the way around a model's wrist and projected images on a wall when a larger screen was needed. The second kind had a square screen that could manage a few functions and store information. They were more convenient to use, but the ones that were left in the vending machine were the ugliest versions of the Sleeping Beauty Inc. bracelet.

"Go big or go home, huh?" She picked the ugliest one and punched in her Sleeping Beauty Inc. ID number.

The one she selected fell to the bottom and she reached to pull it from the slot.

Vych interrupted her with a question. "Just because I'm curious. How much money was your highest bid for?"

Iona paused. "That is incredibly private information."

"Okay, can you give me a ballpark number?" Vych asked in a little voice.

“Hmm... imagine a high-powered career woman and her salary.”

“Okay,” Vych said.

“Now imagine the paycheck of a high-level whore, or a porn star, or an expensive stripper.”

“I don’t know how much they get paid.”

“More than the career woman,” Iona said with a resigned sigh.

“Are you saying you accepted the paycheck of the stripper?” Vych asked in barely concealed disgust.

“No,” Iona said briefly. “I’m saying that when I sell myself, I get all their paychecks.”

Vych whistled.

“Plus, I get so many bonuses, it’s insane. I get jewelry, clothes, perfume, and so many presents from clients and coworkers.”

“Why do they do all that?” Vych asked, her disgust more obvious.

“When I’m working, I’m very popular. If you think it’s surprising that Benediction fell in love with me, it’s not. I have a gift for making men fall in love with me. I would not have been able to be a successful model otherwise.” Iona moved the bracelet in her fingers from one hand to the other. “It’s okay if you hate me more for having heard all that.”

Vych nodded, suddenly realizing that Iona came from a world where so many women already hated her that one more woman’s dislike was meaningless.

Stepping away, Iona took her bracelet over to the computer and synced them, so all her model information and banking information was on the watch. She turned off the computer and came around the reception desk. She was about to pull the bracelet over her wrist when Gage suddenly appeared in the security arch of the front door.

Chapter Twenty Eight

If the possessive look that had been on Benediction's face had made Iona uncomfortable, the look on Gage's face at that moment made her feel transformed. He dropped what he was holding and rushed to her. He took her hands in his and turned them over in his so he could see her palms and then her knuckles.

"You survived the gravity test," he said proudly.

"You survived falling into the fissure," she said, opening her arms so he could come inside them.

They held each other in their own world.

"What's going on?" Vych asked in horror. "Why do all of you look like Lord Benediction?"

"He's not as one-of-a-kind as he'd have you believe," one of the men with Gage said grouchily.

"Oh, Gage," Iona said, pulling away from him. "I just canceled all my bids and took myself off the market. I can't be sold like this. I'm so pink!"

He laughed, his blue eyes reflecting the pink light that lit the lobby. "You were always pink." He flicked her hair.

"I changed my mind about wanting a contract in the first place, but this is pinker than I can take," she mourned, gingerly touching her cheeks with her fingertips.

"No. It's weird, but I think you look even prettier."

Iona was sincerely moved by his saying that. No one had seen her look prettier than Gage because he was the last person from Sleeping Beauty Inc. to see her before she was handed off to new clients. If he thought she looked prettier now then she had never been more in love.

She didn't wait for him to kiss her. He probably thought that he couldn't because of her raw skin and, yes, her lips were sore, but she didn't care. She reached up and kissed him full on the mouth.

He kissed her back.

"Thank goodness we think alike," he said as he bent toward her and kissed her more.

"You two are the worst!" one of the guys at the entryway hollered. "Get a room!"

"There are plenty down that hallway," the other guy said, voicing his discomfort with Gage and Iona's PDA.

Gage didn't answer and just kissed Iona more, which she loved. She wrapped her arms around him and pulled him close, feeling the heat from his breath on her burns. It should have been intolerable, but she had waited so long for Gage to see her, to touch her, and she wasn't backing off because of a little stinging.

"Can you believe we have to watch this? There are a ton of rooms down the hall!" one of the men bellyached.

"Who are those guys?" Iona asked as she moved down Gage's neck and started fumbling with the buttons at his collar.

"Heretic and Testament," Gage introduced, pointing at each of them. "This is Iona."

"No wonder you wanted her back," Heretic said with a suggestive eyebrow wag.

"I thought they were dead," Iona said, sliding her fingers around Gage's middle and untucking his shirt.

“Iona! You’re being courted by Lord Benediction. Stop this at once!” Vych’s horror could not be concealed.

“There are rooms down the hall. Go fool around in one of those,” Testament encouraged.

“N-no,” Vych said like she didn’t know what she was supposed to root for. “Iona is supposed to be pure when she marries Lord Benediction and if she soils herself with that man, she’ll be unworthy.”

“You want her to marry Lord Benediction?” Testament chuckled. “I thought all his lady followers kept pictures of him under their pillows.”

“She probably has a picture of him printed on her pillow,” Heretic teased. “No. I know! It’s tattooed on her chest.”

Vych turned her back to Gage and Iona to show her disapproval and in that second, Gage grabbed Iona’s hand and pulled her down the hallway. Iona expected to be drawn into one of the bedrooms, but Gage pulled her onward and in the next second, she was in a utility closet with the door shut tight behind them.

“I didn’t know you were into doing it against a wall, but I guess,” Iona said, pulling off her outer coat.

He shook his head. “We’re not here to fool around. There are huge packing bags in here and I’m going to sneak you out inside one and let your new handler have a hell of a time picking the locks to figure out which room you’re in when you’ll be in none of them. Take off your boots.”

Iona snorted, letting her head loll back against the wall. “I can’t fit in one of those backpacks. Besides, I have been making arrangements to leave Io on a recycling ship going to Ganymede in two days. The recycling depot is in Dahlcroft and that is a little over thirty kilometers from here. I was just going to give Vych the slip and walk there.”

“And how were you planning on giving your little bodyguard the slip? She may not want you to marry Benediction, but you can bet she doesn’t want to be blamed for your disappearance. If you get in this bag, I’ll carry you out of here, you little contortionist, and it will be hours before anyone can figure out how you left.”

She had decided to try to get in the bag, just to appease him, but before that, she moved to put on her new Sleeping Beauty Inc. bracelet.

He slapped it out of her hand. “What are you doing? I told you. You never put one of those on voluntarily. You can use it without it being affixed to your wrist. Just put it in your pocket, it will work fine that way.”

“Okay,” she said, going to obey him.

He reached for her wrist. “Put it on silent mode first.”

She did as she was told and pouted, “I feel a little cheated. I was gonna get lucky.”

“No, you weren’t. I formulated that plan from outside and asked the boys to tease us about needing a room so I could get you in here. I’m trying to ruin your sudden and very public relationship with Benediction and get you off Io.”

“I’d rather you got me off in here,” she complained, putting a toe in the oversized backpack.

He stopped her. “But seriously, if you’d rather stay here and marry Benediction than run off to the stars with me, I can let you go back to your new handler. Is that what you want?”

“Shut up, Gage. You’re so annoying when you talk sometimes. I’m going along with your plan. You can carry me off in a backpack if you want. Put me in a cardboard box. Do whatever. I’ll stay with you.”

“Then get in. I’ll magic you away.”

Iona did not expect to fit in the bag. She didn’t expect it when he zipped it most of the way shut.

“Better than the cardboard box?” he asked cheerfully.

She rolled her eyes. “It smells better.”

“On Io? That’s really saying something.” He was about to zip it shut. He was about to close her in darkness but before that, he got down on the ground and whispered to her what happened to him when he fell into the crack and what he discovered.

“It was on church land?” she asked.

He nodded. “I don’t know who’s responsible. All signs point to Leviticus and Benediction working together, but it’s also not completely crazy that Heretic and Testament know more than they are saying. It’s a dangerous world. Are you sure you want to come with me?”

“Yeah. Let’s go together. Do your brothers know you’re packing me away in a suitcase?”

“No. They think I’m here to have sex with you and to get supplies. I don’t know if I’ll be able to keep it from them once we’ve left. I’ve been getting a thousand messages from Benediction and the wrecker who saved me, Tuton. You remember him?”

Iona nodded.

“They want me to go back to the crack in Loki’s Breastplate and have it out with Leviticus. I want to go but I’m worried about what will happen if we do. I’m concerned there’s no way off Io if Benediction is involved with this scheme to trap us. If he’s in on it, neither you nor I will be able to lift off. Doubtless, he has grounding authority.”

“We could hide somewhere together,” she said, taking his hand.

“And what would we do?” he asked softly.

“We could get married,” she suggested. It was a possibility now that she had decided to give up everything.

He smiled. “I’m still Sleeping Beauty Inc. property. I can’t get married without a contract that trumps my contract with them before my contract expires. You can’t become my owner again here on Io. I don’t know if you’ve noticed, but they’re really against slavery here,” he said with a crooked grin, “I’m surprised they believe in marriage.”

Iona smiled back at him. “Maybe it would be legal because we’re on Io. If I’m not an owner, maybe you aren’t a slave. What I mean to say is that maybe they’ve canceled your contract with Sleeping Beauty Inc.”

His eyebrows shot up. “If we have to stay here, we can look into it. Quiet now. I’m going to zip you up.” He kissed her, gave her one last look of encouragement, and then zipped the backpack shut.

Iona felt him heft her onto his back and leave the utility closet. His pace was easy as he walked, as if he didn’t have a hundred and twenty-seven pounds of pure woman on his back. He turned and Iona knew he had entered the lobby.

“Where’s Iona?” Vych asked in alarm.

“She’s still in the room enjoying the afterglow. She might be a while. I left her with a pack of cigarettes. I think she was planning on smoking them all.”

Iona heard Vych hurry down the hallway.

“Let’s go back, guys,” Gage said, speaking to Heretic and Testament.

“I do hope that was worth it,” a voice like Gage’s said.

“It looked like it was worth it to me. Who was she again?”

“She was my last owner,” Gage explained.

“If slavery was always like that, it wouldn’t have been a bad way to live.”

The voice trailed off as Gage removed the backpack from his shoulders and placed it gently in the back of the Danger Zone. He snagged a finger on the zipper to give her more space to breathe and shut the door.

As soon as it was closed, Iona pulled more of the zipper open and figured out a way to close it when they landed. She was essentially in the helocarrier’s trunk, but it was a side cabinet intended for cargo because the back propeller was in the way of a storage area. She stuck a leg out and let herself breathe.

She was going to be in a lot of pain in a few hours once Benediction’s treatments wore off.

Chapter Twenty Nine

“You tell that bastard that if he doesn’t come to Loki’s Breastplate, I’ll ground him so that anyone who transports him will not just be prosecuted, but fined and punished. He has to get here now!”

Gage heard Benediction screaming on the other end of Tuton’s communication link.

“As you can hear, his lordship is quite desperate for your return, Gage,” Tuton said, adopting a more formal pattern of speech for the head of the Church of Voynich.

“Huh. Yeah, I hear that. Let me just talk it over with my compatriots,” Gage replied before turning off his comm device.

“I hate that guy, even more than this guy,” Heretic said flatly while pointing a thumb at Testament.

“I’m inclined to face it,” Gage said. “I hate this, all of this, but I don’t want to spend the rest of my damn life on Io. I’d rather have it out with him. What do you nut jobs think?”

“I think Benediction is at the heart of all this. If we go back, we’ll learn that, and we’ll end up back in that underground hell hole. They’ll gas us or something and we’ll all wake up on the carpet with sore heads,” Heretic voiced. “So I’d rather you dropped me off here and I wandered the sands of Io until my face becomes as pink as that girl’s and no one wants me anymore.”

“Testament?” Gage asked, waiting for another opinion.

“I think Leviticus is trying to collect Benediction as well as us. We need to partner up with him and gang up on Leviticus. If we leave, we’ll miss the sweet moment when old Levi gets his just desserts. We should go back,” Testament said smoothly.

“I don’t want to risk getting grounded, so I’m with Testament. I am willing to drop you off here if you want,” Gage offered Heretic, who was in the front passenger seat while Testament squished himself between the seats to make himself heard. “For my own part, I want all this to be over and if I can’t leave Io, it can’t be over. Mummify yourself for all I care.”

Heretic cursed. “Just fly. Let’s just go and see what the hell is wrong with all of us.”

Gage lifted the Danger Zone into the air and they rode in silence until a barrage of speculation escaped their lips. A hundred theories came out, each one more far-fetched than the last, but sound credible on the alien moon.

When they finally reached Loki’s Breastplate, Gage opened the side hatch as quietly as he could. He did not want Iona trapped inside if anything should happen to them. “Can you hear me?” he whispered to Iona.

“Yes.”

“Then make sure to listen to what is said so you know when we’re close to leaving.” Gage stepped away from the Danger Zone and stood in a line with Heretic and Testament.

Benediction had Leviticus stretched across the fissure in exactly the same manner Iona had been, except this time, the crack was wide open and only his head and his ankles were on the rocks. The rest of him hung over open space. It was even funnier because they were bracing the crack open and wreckers were going in and out of the space beside Leviticus. He put his feet on the ledge and pushed his head up higher.

“Okay,” Benediction said, bending over the hanging Leviticus. “Now let me try asking you a few questions.”

Leviticus looked horrible. The bags under his eyes were the size of waterskins, his face was gray and his eyes were bloodshot.

Benediction started his questioning. "Why did you say that Apostate killed Testament and Heretic? They are both here and Apostate has a perfect alibi. Explain!"

"I was told that was what happened," he refuted, his voice hoarse.

"By whom?" Benediction continued.

When Leviticus didn't reply, Benediction kicked him. "Wanna try that again?"

"Raylynn," he rasped, and the moment he did an electric shock buzzed through his body starting at his ankles.

"He's wearing a slave anklet," Gage observed dryly. "We need to cut it off him."

Benediction snapped his fingers and a few of his soldiers leaped into action pulling up Leviticus' pant legs and untying his boots only to find no such anklet on either side.

"If it's not an anklet, it's the size of a coin under his skin. You're going to have to dig it out," Gage observed dryly.

Benediction was on the other side of the crack from Gage and the others. He leaned over Leviticus and said harshly. "Theology and I both have licenses to help you get your electric plug out. Would you rather have me cut it out or him?"

"Gage!" Leviticus screamed. "Don't cut it out. It'll trigger a reaction. I'll lose my foot and it will blow up in your face." He received another shock that made his skin steam.

"Then you will have to answer our questions while receiving the shocks," Benediction said heartlessly. "If you answer well, I will see that you are released from slavery. We don't do that here on Io."

"Don't ask me any more questions!" Leviticus screamed with tears streaming down his face. "I might lose my foot anyway."

Gage bent over and pulled off Leviticus' sock the rest of the way. His entire foot was much blacker than Gage's hand had ever been. How many electric shocks had he taken over how many years?

"Wait a second," Gage said, feeling in Leviticus' ankles. "He has four, two in each ankle."

"Two?" Benediction barked, disbelievingly. "In worlds where slavery is legal, only one shock bracelet with one shocking device is allowed."

"Yeah, he shouldn't have four. Tuton?" Gage called, looking around for the wrecker.

He came up quickly. "Do you have a utility knife on your belt?"

"Yeah."

"Give it to me."

"You can't do that!" Benediction hollered. "He'll get an infection."

"He'll get an infection," Gage mimicked meanly, taking the knife from Tuton. "Don't strap people to rocks on a volcano that are likely to be ripped apart and then cry about an abundance of white blood cells. It's stupid."

Benediction looked down at Gage like he could kill him, but said nothing.

Gage continued. "I have a device under the skin in my wrists that scrambles the circuit boards on these kinds of battery packs. My hands close to his ankles should help me remove the devices without the risk that they'll explode and take off his feet. Relax."

"I'm stretched over a hole. How do you expect me to relax? How do you even expect me to stay still?" Leviticus whined.

Benediction seemed to grab a brain and ordered a stretcher placed under Leviticus to help him stay steady as Gage ran a lighter under the blade of the utility knife.

He caught Leviticus' eye and looked at him pointedly. "This is what I'm going to do. I'm going to make a single cut over each device and then I'm going to pull it out. And you," he said to Tuton. "Halt your boys from going back and forth for a minute. The things may explode once they lose proximity to the devices in my wrists."

Tuton made the order and everyone backed off, except for the boys holding the stretcher in place. Benediction ordered the man at Leviticus' head to clear off and he took his place.

"Do you know very much about lo?" Gage asked Leviticus softly.

He shook his head.

"Slavery is illegal here. Once I cut these out, you will be free." He made the first incision.

Leviticus stayed still, obviously because he was used to extreme amounts of pain in his ankles and what Gage was doing to him was nothing new.

Gage pinched the skin and the silver coin-shaped device slid out like Gage had popped the nastiest zit in the world. He held it in his blood-coated fingers for a moment as he tried to think of what he ought to do with it. His first inclination was to throw it into the sand, but it might be linked to the other three. He knelt there stupidly for a second until Testament came up and ripped a pocket out from inside his white satin housecoat.

"Put it in there," Testament said, handing him the pocket and pulling the belt of his robe free from the loops. When it was loose he tied it around Leviticus' calf, just above the ankle to help reduce the bleeding.

"Thank you," Gage said as he slid the device into the pocket that he now held in his hand.

"Talk to him," Gage advised Benediction as he turned over Leviticus' ankle, so he could see the other side.

A quick cut there and the second device was out. Testament had already ripped the shoulder off his robe and was lashing the fabric around Leviticus' bleeding ankle as a bandage.

A minute later, all of them had been removed. Testament blotted the blood on the second ankle with his other sleeve and Gage used a loose thread to coil around the opening in the pocket. When it was secure, he threw it as far as he could into the desert.

It exploded.

"Are there any more devices in you?" Gage asked seriously.

"There are filters in my nose and throat," he winced.

"Obviously. I put them in," Gage replied, standing and wiping his bloody hands on his clothes. Gage motioned for Benediction to follow him as he moved closer to the Danger Zone. "You should unbind him and take him back to your mansion where you can give him antibiotics, stitch him, and bandage him properly. He should be a lot easier for you to question now. As for me, Benediction, there's no story here for me. You know my story. I came here with Iona. We crashed. I went to Sleeping Beauty Inc. to try to find a way off-world, you took her for a gravity trial and I fell in the crack. I found those guys and Tuton fished us out. I went to Sleeping Beauty Inc. for something I had left here. It's in a backpack on the Danger Zone. I want to leave. If you'll let me leave with my backpack, I'll be more than grateful."

"What about Iona?" Benediction asked, chasing after Gage, who was still walking away from him.

"What about her?" Gage asked back, his voice innocent.

“You’re just going to leave? I thought you said you loved her. How can you just leave if you love her?”

“Who said anything about leaving her? She’s at your place, right? She can travel with me if she likes. If she wants to stay here and be the queen of Io, or the goddess of Io, or the queen of Voynich, or you... I forget which, she’s welcome to. I would never stand between her and what she wants.”

“Her face is messed up,” Benediction said. “I don’t think she’ll want to see you until she’s better.”

Gage laughed. “The Iona I know is so open about how badly she wants down my pants that I don’t think a chemical burn will keep her from what she wants. I wouldn’t sleep with her when I was her slave. Thanks for paving the way, buddy.”

Benediction went quiet.

Gage waited with bated breath while Benediction thought over what Gage said. The words Gage said to Benediction were planned. They were perfect for gauging his true intent.

Finally, the other man smiled and said, “Can you stay until after Leviticus has been questioned? I may need you to fill in some blanks.”

“Fine. There’s a recycling ship I was going to get on the day after tomorrow. If we can finish up before then, I can’t see any problem with that.”

“Great.”

Gage shook hands with Benediction and left a bloody smear on the other man’s hand.

Benediction looked at the bloody handprint in disgust.

“Sorry, I forgot about that,” Gage said cheerfully.

Chapter Thirty

Iona was inside the bag. She had let herself stretch while she was stored in the cargo compartment of the Danger Zone, but got back in once she heard Gage outside the helocarrier talking about flight plans with Benediction. Quick as a whip, she got inside the bag and zipped it up, only for Gage to close the door on the compartment and round up Testament and Heretic for the flight to the Tranquility Mansion. She unzipped herself and let herself lounge until they landed. Then, she got back in the bag and zipped it up.

Gage carried her inside on his back and then into an interrogation room like the one she'd seen when she first got to the Tranquility Mansion herself. She was placed under a table because Gage was sweet enough to say helpful things loudly.

"Do you mind if I put my bag under the table?" he asked.

"No," the interrogator said. Iona wondered if it was the same woman she had seen with Leviticus with the green french braid.

Gage sat down and put a finger in the zipper to open it up a bit. "We're being questioned separately?" he asked the interrogator.

"Yeah," she said absently.

"What's your name?" Gage asked.

"Nichi. This interview will be recorded and used as your testimony in the courts of Io whether you stay on the surface or not. This is a legal transcription and is being video recorded by three independent third parties. Do you agree?"

"Yes."

"Delightful. Let's begin. Tell me about your relationship with Olivine Bouvant."

"No," he said shortly.

"No?"

"No. All of that stuff is on public record. I'm not willing to review it all for this incident." With that, Gage gave Nichi a play-by-play of the events from when he saw Olivine at the Sleeping Beauty Inc. model show on Europa to that moment, leaving out that he had picked up Iona and she was now under the table.

"Can I ask you a few questions about Iona?"

"No. She's not part of this."

Iona could hear the impatience in Nichi's voice as she said, "Please listen to what my stupid questions are before you refuse to answer them. Why did Iona want to come to Io? There aren't a lot of rich men or big industries here. It seems a poor place to scout an owner."

"She wasn't looking for an owner," Gage replied.

"Was she looking for a husband?" Nichi countered.

"Yes."

"Who did she have in mind? No one comes to the most active volcanic rock in the solar system without a higher goal."

"Benediction," Gage admitted.

Iona's ears perked up as Nichi clicked her tongue. "Did she know how many women she would have to beat out in order to get him to propose?"

Iona suddenly felt sick. She really hadn't thought that through at all. The women of Io would hate her guts if she ran off with Benediction.

“Don’t know. Don’t care,” Gage replied easily. “She changed her mind about the plan before we got here, but I had already promised to help Leviticus tell Benediction about the untimely deaths of Heretic and Testament. It was a lie, but I didn’t know that at the time and we’d already scheduled to come here.”

It sounded like Nichi wasn’t even listening to Gage because the next thing to come out of her mouth was, “Are you aware of how much you look like Lord Benediction?”

“I’ve been told that,” he said dryly.

“Do you know how many women would like to spend time with you here on Io?”

Gage laughed. “Shit! That’s it! It’s for you!”

“What’s for me?” she asked, her tone confused.

“That’s what the pleasure mansion underground was for. It was for women like you who are butt over tea kettle in love with Benediction. Olivine and her cousin, Raylynn, made the mansion and were planning to fill it with the other nine of us. The plan was to turn us into an attraction because if all of you fanatic fans of Benediction could see us, watch us fight each other, and have sex with us, it would be like having sex with him. He would never be so compliant.”

“Shut up!” Nichi shouted.

Gage wouldn’t. “He gets you all stirred up, but all he does is preach to you. He doesn’t do anything to ease that stirring he causes in every woman’s belly, bottom, and mind.”

“I didn’t do anything!” she screamed.

Benediction burst into the room with a bang of the door. “What are you saying, Theology?”

Iona sucked in her breath as she clutched her knees to her chest. She let the zipper out a little more and she could see Gage in his chair. He was leaning back with his feet close to Iona and the chair quite far away from the table. One of his hands hung discarded at his side and the other stroked the stubble on his chin. Iona could see his mouth, but not his nose.

“Did you allow that mansion to be built underground on church property?” Gage demanded of Benediction.

“Certainly not!” Benediction spat.

“But someone in your church did,” Gage continued. “How else could they have got all those foreign materials down there on your land without anyone noticing? I think Olivine is behind the initial construction. The architecture feels the same as what her family built in the cavern on Mars, but how could she have done that without a lot of help? She sure as hell didn’t get it from the wreckers. They were eager to rip the place apart. You must know that your followers have sweaty tongues whenever you walk by. They had access and motivation. You’re a logical man. You know motivation and ability are everything. Without the electric charges under his skin, Leviticus has no motivation and he never did.”

Benediction hesitated before continuing. “Nichi. Get out.” He waited until she had gone and the door closed behind her before he continued. “Yes, I agree that nothing is wrong with Leviticus’ story now. It all makes sense.”

“What does he say?” Gage asked.

“He says that he was offered a new job with Raylynn after all of us were freed and he thought it would be just like his old job with her where all he had to do was screw her, but Olivine was very bored after her family and household were ripped apart and she went to go live with Raylynn and saw him and got a little too happy. Raylynn was poor at standing up to Olivine and

eventually developed a taste for Olivine's kind of fun. They faked Raylynn's death and hid her and Leviticus in a fake tower on Europa."

"How can you have a fake tower on Europa? Everything there is super hard to maintain without the government," Gage wondered.

"Apparently, they used a trick in the architecture where each room is just a little smaller than it is supposed to be, but there was enough room in all those cracks and crannies to treat Leviticus to a life that only you could understand."

"Well, all that makes me sick to my stomach. What will happen to him now?" Gage asked, letting his other arm fall lax.

"I'm going to care for him and get his help pulling this machination apart. I hate the idea that my followers did this, but that is the only thing that makes sense. They probably had no idea of torturing all my clone brothers, but..." Benediction hesitated to finish his thought. "Slavery is torture."

Gage snorted. "It must be strange to have every woman you know be that desperately strung out for you."

"Shut up. Every woman I know is not strung out for me. I've just had word that Iona ducked out on Vych when she took her to Sleeping Beauty Inc. to submit some paperwork," Benediction said grouchily.

"You thought she'd fall for you too?" Gage asked, slumping further down in his chair to check on the backpack Iona was in and giving her a view of his eyes.

"Yeah. I thought it would be easy since all the other women have been easy. Just because I'm curious, what would you do with the women among my followers who orchestrated this if you were me?"

"I'd let them come and confess," Gage said smoothly. "Once you have enough solid evidence, get up in front of all of them and ask them to confess if they were involved. I doubt you'll have much of a witch hunt on your hands. A few of them will probably come forward and then all of them will because there will be too much evidence for them to hide. If you're lucky, you'll get enough evidence against Olivine and Raylynn to save my day as well."

Benediction nodded his agreement. Then after a moment's thought, he asked bitterly, "And what do I do about them all being in love with me?"

"You want my advice? My advice?" Gage asked incredulously.

"Sure."

"I'll only give it to you if you promise to stop calling me Theology. I only let women call me that when we're in bed together and you don't really fit the bill."

Benediction chuckled. "Is that true?"

Gage laughed back. "No. It's been a long time since I did any of that stuff, but I'm starting to warm up to the idea."

"Fine. I won't call you that," Benediction agreed. "What would you do?"

"Excluding the women who were involved in the plot to capture all nine of your brothers, I'd make a schedule and say that any woman who wants a date with you is welcome to apply. Then I'd have a date with a different one every day—"

"Until I found the right woman?"

“No. Don’t ever choose between them, ever. Once they have their date with you, they’re welcome to sign up again. That’s the only way you can give yourself to all of them. This is the price you pay for their love en masse.”

Benediction groaned.

But Gage kept talking. “Also, find some other men to share your pulpit with. Since you’re the only one who preaches, these women fixate on you too much. Prep a bunch of your choir boys and let those women fall in love with someone else for a change.”

“Huh... I’ll think about it, but even though Iona gave me the slip, I can’t help but be worried about her. Io is not a safe place.”

Gage scratched his chin again but didn’t say anything.

“You know where she is!” Benediction accused. “That’s why you aren’t worried!”

Gage put up his hands as if to push off the idea, a motion Iona found to be completely adorable from under the table. “I *might* know where she is, and so I’m not concerned about her. She’s a big girl and I have no doubt that she can figure out Io on her own. As it is, I told her I’d get on the recycling ship bound for Ganymede.”

“She’ll probably meet you there,” Benediction said pensively. “I’m always going to hate that I let her slip through my fingers. I wish you’d seen her, strapped to that rock screaming about how she wanted to be judged by the gods. It was beautiful.”

Gage smiled, but it was a smile that showed how disgusted he was. “Uh... I did see her strapped to that rock and I did hear her screaming about how she wanted to be judged. I just didn’t feel the same way you felt and I dug her out as much as I could while you were the one to tie her down. You’re right, she was beautiful, but... I... I’ve known her for years and the most beautiful she ever looked to me wasn’t at that moment.” He reached under the table and zipped up the backpack. “I’d like to go to the recycling bay now.”

“You don’t want to spend the night?”

“Nah, I want to go where Iona will meet me. Even if she isn’t there waiting for me. I want to be there for her.”

“Hmm... Testament wants to stay and help with the investigation, but Heretic wants to go with you. Will that bother you?”

“It’s not my ship. If he can get a cryochamber, then of course he can ride on the same vessel.” Gage heaved the backpack onto his shoulders.

“That looks pretty heavy,” Iona heard Benediction say. “What’s in it?”

“My merchandise,” Gage replied.

Chapter Thirty One

Gage said goodbye to Testament and Leviticus before he got on the Danger Zone to fly it to the Dahlcroft recycling plant. Tuton was going to pick up the helocarrier from there.

His goodbye from Leviticus was one where they shook hands and Gage said slowly. "I did see you a few times in the forty years that I was flying for Sleeping Beauty Inc. When we spoke, you hated talking about the abuse we suffered. I always thought it was because I suffered more than you and you didn't want to be told you had suffered less. It turns out I was exactly wrong. You suffered more. I'm sorry."

"Don't worry about it," Leviticus said huskily, staring at the ceiling from his place in his recovery bed.

"I'm sorry I didn't figure out something was wrong and rescue you sooner," Gage admitted.

Leviticus made an awkward half-smile. "What's in your wrists that lets you scramble the circuits in those things? I'll forgive you anything if you tell me."

Gage leaned in and whispered conspiratorially, "On my ship, the Cannonball III, I had a gun that I could use to remove any Sleeping Beauty Inc. bracelet. It was because I was a handler. Quite often, I was alone on my ship waiting for models to be returned, waiting for flight instructions, or just waiting. I was sent a new gun, so I took the old one apart and found that most of the gun was nothing but a convenient design for holding a scrambler, which was about the size of a diamond. It also worked all the time without the need to pull the trigger on the gun."

"And you put that under your skin?" Leviticus questioned, already looking less gray and less bloodshot.

"Yeah. I actually reported to Sleeping Beauty Inc. that the new gun broke and got them to send me another one. When it arrived, I pulled the other one apart, got the scrambler, and put it in my other wrist."

"You didn't get an infection? My ankle ones gave me lots of infections," he coughed.

"I'm sure they did if you had a less competent doctor insert them. The way the scramblers behave under skin is very much like breast implants and I have sometimes had to remove or replace those for models. The flesh around the implant gets hard, as it is in my wrist."

"I thought Sleeping Beauty Inc. policy was that if you were going to see up a model's skirt, you were going to pay for it?" Leviticus laughed. "But you got to see them bare-chested?"

Gage looked bored. "It's not as thrilling as you imagine. They have infections."

Leviticus calmed down. "Oh. I see."

"I just don't want to be caught again," Gage explained. "Ever. So I found a way to ensure that I wouldn't be. I don't mind dealing with the inconvenience of a few implants."

"Do you think you could do that for me? Steal me some scramblers and help me put them in?"

"I don't know if I'll have access. I'm not planning on working for Sleeping Beauty Inc. anymore."

"Makes sense," Leviticus coughed again. "All the same, keep an eye out. For the time being, I'm just going to stay here. At least if I'm here, I won't be a slave again and the chicks around here seem to dig Benediction. Maybe they'll dig me too."

Gage thought that Benediction hadn't explained what they had discussed in the interrogation room with Leviticus. Gage wanted to let it go, but instead, he sat down and explained the whole thing.

"So, the women here are nut jobs? That is so my luck!" he fumed.

"Just don't pick up any women until the investigation is over."

"Or dudes. They're probably just as obsessed," Testament said, coming forward. He shook Gage's hand and patted it between his two before he let it go. He was still wearing the white satin robe with the sleeves missing and a hole where a pocket once was with no sash to keep it closed. "The next time something goes terribly wrong, Gage, I'm going to call you since you can't stop rescuing people."

"Uh, I didn't do that much. It was mostly just good luck," Gage said, trying not to look flustered.

"Perhaps," Testament replied, "but, I'm not talking about saving us from the mansion. I'm talking about all those times you beat people to get them off me. Thank you. I wouldn't be alive today if it wasn't for you."

He hugged him and Leviticus pulled on the pocket flap of Gage's cargo pants. "What? Only he gets a hug?"

So they helped Leviticus sit up and they all had an awkward hug that lasted only a few seconds.

"Get a room!" Heretic barked as he walked by.

After saying goodbye to Testament and Leviticus, Gage popped into a bathroom and after a quick check looking for cameras, he opened his backpack.

Iona unfolded herself with a few creaks and aches from inside. "So, this is what a magician's assistant feels like," she said, keeping her voice low.

"You're performing our trick quite nicely. No second thoughts now?"

"About Benediction? Of course not." She turned the tap on, put her face under the stream, and started gulping down the water like it was a fountain.

"Do you need to pee?"

"Yes. Do you?"

"Yes."

Iona laughed. "When I was a little girl, I used to ask my older sister if I could stay in the bathroom with her when she peed. She said I could if I kept my nose in the corner and covered my ears. Shall we do that?"

Gage smiled back. "I'll keep my nose in the corner. I've had a lot of practice turning my back on someone to give them privacy, but I'm not plugging my ears. I'm not twelve." He moved to the corner and put his hands on his hips.

Iona dropped her pants and did her business with cheeks that were pink because of her acid burns, but somehow even pinker because of her embarrassment. "One would think something like this wouldn't be a big deal after all I've been through," she said as she finished up and closed the zipper on her pants.

She exchanged places with Gage in the corner.

“Are you going to cover your ears?” he asked slyly, a slight sound of mockery in his voice.

Iona was about to answer when she heard footsteps outside the bathroom door. She said nothing and realized abruptly that if they wanted to keep their secret, she shouldn't have been talking at all. Instead, she used the time to stretch and prepare to get back into the backpack.

Gage caught onto her thoughts and beckoned her over so they could wash their hands together in the sink. He pointed to the bottles as if to ask which of the soaps would be best for her sore skin.

Iona's eyes went wide and she furiously started reading bottles. She grabbed three, set them in a line, and started peeling off her top. Under her sweater-jacket, she was wearing a corset-like top with no sleeves and no straps.

Gage saw her skin and immediately washed his hands and got to work being her doctor all over again.

Iona stood there and received the same treatment she had received from Benediction from Gage. He spritzed her with the antiseptic, helped it to settle by fanning her, and gave her a coat of the pain reliever. He noticed her burnt bare feet and gave them a round of each treatment before giving her a layer of the top coat that was supposed to protect her.

Iona settled into the great feeling of her burns being eased by Gage, whose familiar doctor role soothed her.

A harsh knock came at the door. “Gage! Are you giving birth in there? You're taking forever! My last wife could push out a baby faster than you can pee.”

It was Heretic.

“I'm checking my merchandise,” Gage yelled back.

“Are you counting your diamonds? Is that what you're doing? Counting gold bricks? How much did you get from the wreckers for your ship?”

“Don't be stupid. They wired me the money. Go away. I'll be out in a minute.”

“Are you smuggling rush? I heard there was a ton of it on your ship.”

Gage whipped a glare at Iona. “How much rush were you carting?” he mouthed angrily.

She put up eight fingers, four on each hand, and then turned those hands into zeros by making open circles with her fists.

“Eight hundred doses? Shit. I don't know how these people feel about drug smuggling. We've got to get off Io.”

Iona put her sweater back on, got back into the backpack, and Gage zipped it shut. Heaving her onto his back with more effort than the other times, he opened the door and came face to face with Heretic.

“I wasn't smuggling it. My ship was possessing it. That's totally different.”

“Except you sold the wreckage,” Heretic goaded with an exceptionally pleased look on his face.

“Yeah,” Gage said casually. “But if I hadn't, they would have taken it anyway. It wasn't mine.”

“Do shut up,” Benediction said, interrupting them. “Rush isn't illegal on Io. This place is a bit of a nightmare and if people don't have something fun to lick, they'll go crazy.”

“So you are a nice guy!” Gage exclaimed.

“I am *not* a nice guy,” Benediction said, fixing his high collar. “I'm just not the type to fight a losing battle. Besides, if I'm fighting for anything, it's anti-slavery.”

“You’re a powerhouse,” Heretic said as he patted Benediction’s back. The way he said it made it sound insulting.

“Can you please take this one away?” Benediction said caustically. “Testament was right and I’ve had quite enough of him.”

“Yup, I’ve got to get back to my kids,” Heretic said and for the first time, it sounded like he wasn’t joking.

“You have kids? How many?”

“Twenty-three,” he said. “That I know about.”

Gage and Benediction gawked. “You can’t be serious,” both of them said at once.

“Yeah and I gotta say, our slave masters were right about one thing,” he laughed.

“What?”

“Watching identical boys beat each other is very entertaining. I had eight sets of twin boys,” he said proudly.

Gage and Benediction looked at him with deep distaste.

“Take him away, Gage,” Benediction said like he was issuing an order as he walked away with an authoritative stride.

But Gage thought it was an adequate farewell as he had remembered not to call him Theology.

“What’s in your pack? Do you want me to carry it for you?” Heretic offered as they started off toward the flight deck.

“Not on your life. I still can’t believe anyone was willing to sleep with you enough times for you to father that many children.”

“Like hell you can’t,” Heretic laughed. “Those scientists designed our bodies to do all the heavy lifting for us.”

“So you didn’t romance anyone? You just showed up?”

“Yup!”

“Please stop talking,” Gage said as they continued down the hall.

Chapter Thirty Two

Gage pulled on his pack back, with Iona inside, and headed into the Dahlcroft recycling plant with Heretic by his side.

“Do you have any money? I don’t have any money,” Heretic said to Gage as they went in the sliding doors.

“You’re expecting me to pay for your transport?” Gage asked with a sick groan.

“Don’t tell me you can’t. I tagged along with you because you got that great payout from the wreckers.”

Gage tightened his fists around the straps of his backpack. “I didn’t own the ship. I transferred the money to Sleeping Beauty Inc. It was their ship. I was just the pilot of it.”

“Do they still own you?”

“I dunno,” Gage said with an odd click of his tongue. “I’m going to claim breach of contract when I get back to civilization. This ship is going to Ganymede. I assume you want to come along. Are your kids there?”

“I don’t know where my kids are. I’ve been away from them for years, but Ganymede is where my banking is, so I have to get to my money,” Heretic explained.

“Does that mean you’ll pay me back for your cryochamber on this ship?”

“Uh…” Heretic stuttered an excuse that was less interesting than the rattling of the machinery in the background.

They approached the front desk and Gage explained why they were there.

The receptionist was a stunning member of the Church of Voynich with her green hair in tiny braids. She wore a name tag with the name Chitta on it. She looked between the two men like it was her lucky day as she explained that the six available cryochambers aboard their ship were available on a first-come-first-serve basis. Gage and Heretic were lucky because no one else had claimed any of the available seats. After all, they only hauled passengers from Io because other kinds of vessels didn’t go to Io often.

“Can I have a cryochamber large enough for two people?” Gage asked Chitta.

“There is one,” she said hesitantly, looking between him and Heretic. “I’m not sure if it will accommodate two men of your size. They’re generally used for a parent and a child or a man and a woman.”

Heretic was huffing something in the background, but Gage was quick to explain. “It’s for me and my backpack. I don’t want to be separated from my backpack.”

Heretic wiped imaginary sweat from his face.

“I’ll pay for the oversized cryochamber for me and a single for him,” Gage said, being friendly.

“We’ll have to scan your backpack before we can allow you to have it in the cryochamber with you.”

“That’s fine,” Gage said, sticking a smile on his face. “I’m happy for you to scan it.” He heaved it up on the counter. “After all, you’re only looking for explosives, right?”

“Sometimes drugs,” she said, grabbing a scanning wand and running it over the backpack.

Gage knew exactly what sort of readings the wand was registering. He used to have a wand exactly like it as part of his equipment detail. There was a little x-ray screen on it, and he saw a glimpse of the receptionist staring weirdly at an outline of Iona’s skull.

She looked at Gage strangely because she absolutely knew that he had a human being in his backpack.

As casually as he could, he put a shushing finger over his lips and pointed his eyes at Heretic. "Would you like to look inside?" he offered.

Heretic was reading a poster. Apparently, he was less interested in Gage's interchange with the receptionist once Gage had said he'd pay for his cryochamber.

The receptionist looked horrified as Gage unzipped the top. Undoubtedly, she was concerned he was trying to transport a dead body. But Gage gave her a winning smile in an attempt to mimic the grin the followers of Benediction found so appealing on their leader and she stepped forward.

Looking down into the backpack. Gage and the receptionist saw Iona with her knees crunched up to her chin. Iona blinked up at them cutely a few times before she silently handed the receptionist her pink Sleeping Beauty Inc. bracelet without raising her hand above the flap.

Happy to have something reasonable to do, the receptionist took the bracelet and scanned it. On the screen in front of her, the name Iona Stirling flashed. A few flicks of Chitta's eyelashes, and Gage knew exactly what she was thinking. Like all the other girls, Chitta was thrilled with the idea of Iona being removed from Io. Gage handed her his bracelet and she scanned it too.

"Take the payment from that bracelet," he said, pleasantly. "Do you need any ID from him?" Gage asked, pointing toward his double.

Heretic came forward. "Benediction wrote me a letter," he said, bringing forward a memory card that looked like a credit card issued by the Church of Voynich.

The receptionist passed back the two Sleeping Beauty Inc. bracelets to Gage with a sleight of hand that hid that there were two before taking Heretic's card. She scanned it. After she pressed a few buttons, she turned back to Gage. "Everything is in order," she said with a pleasant smile. "The ship landed last week and they are almost finished filling it. It is our policy to wait until the scheduled liftoff time before departing unless we fill up early."

"So if all your cryochambers fill up and you finish loading it, you tend to leave early?" Gage affirmed.

"Yes. It also means that you can get put to sleep now or you can wait until just before liftoff," she explained.

"If you could take us on board now, I think we'd appreciate that," he said pleasantly, pulling his backpack back onto his shoulders.

"We have carts for luggage if you'd like one," she offered Gage as she stepped out from behind the counter.

"Is it far?" he asked.

"Yeah. It's all the way down that corridor and then all the way down the next one. Would you like me to show you, or do you think you can make it yourself?"

Gage had been to very few places in the last forty years that were not the Cannonball III, but the one place he was familiar with was launching pads. "I think I can make it without a guide, but I will take you up on your offer for a cart."

The receptionist grabbed a flat piece of cardboard and placed it in the bottom of the steel-framed cart she provided him with. She did it so smoothly, Heretic didn't seem to notice that the action was unusual, but it was clearly for Iona so that she had something mildly more comfortable to sit on than the metal frame. It was going to be a bumpy ride.

“Someone will meet you on the other end and show you to your cryochambers. Look for a man called Marker.” The receptionist pointed down the hall and repeated her instructions before giving them a little farewell wave.

“I’m dying of curiosity,” Heretic said, bumping shoulders with Gage as they walked down the long corridor. “What’s in your backpack?”

“My merchandise,” Gage repeated.

“But what kind? I can’t think of what merchandise is worth paying for an extra seat in a cryochamber. You wouldn’t have had to pay anything extra if you’d just let them stuff it in the luggage compartment at the bottom.”

“Agreed. But this way, no one can lift the lid of my cryochamber to take it without waking me and I’m pretty into that. Don’t ask me any more questions. I’m a bit bushed after everything that’s happened. The last time I got to sleep was when I was at Sleeping Beauty Inc. and Benediction burst in. And being awake is so hard for me,” Gage yawned.

At the end of the second hallway, Gage saw the ship they were about to board. It was a Tank VII. Gage had never ridden in anything so massive. He’d always been on smaller vessels and he was very interested in it as they got closer. He stopped just inside the doors and looked at the map detailing the different sectors.

“Gage and Heretic,” a crew member with a name tag that read Marker greeted them. “I’m here to take you to your cryochambers. This way.”

They followed him.

“Unfortunately, this is not a pleasure vessel, so if you’re interested in eating or drinking before entering cryostasis, there are only vending machines in the cafeteria. Would you like to stop there before going to sleep?”

Gage yawned again. “I’d rather head to my cryochamber. I was thinking I’d get locked down and have a nap while I waited for your crew to finish preparations and lift off. Could your pilot fill my cryochamber with gas when you lift off?”

“I’m sure that could be arranged,” Marker agreed. He turned to Heretic for his preference.

“I ate at Benediction’s Tranquility Mansion. I’ll stay with Gage.”

Marker nodded and took them on an elevator and then down a corridor that led to a room that was nothing but cryochambers.

“Most of these are for the crew and some of them are broken, but there are these six available for travelers. I’ll put you two together.” He brought them to an oversized cryochamber at the end of the line with a smaller one next to it. “Would you like me to put you to sleep now, Heretic?” Marker offered.

“I want exactly what Gage is having. Lock me in, but let me get some sleep before you lift off.”

“Sure thing.”

“Wait. Can I unlock it myself if I need to?”

“I recommend going to the bathroom now if you think you’ll need to get out,” Marker advised. “There’s one right over there.”

Heretic looked at Gage with a ‘go to the bathroom with me?’ look on his face.

“I already used the bathroom at the Tranquility Mansion,” Gage reminded him. “Go without me.”

“But I’m scared,” Heretic said in a whiny tone.

"I can see the toilet from here. Nothing is going to happen that wouldn't happen anyway," Gage said firmly. "Be a man."

Heretic gave Gage a sorry look before meandering toward the toilet.

As soon as he was out of earshot, Marker took a handheld machine out of his pocket. It was a white box with two red screens. "Chitta, the receptionist who booked you, got in touch with me and told me of your situation. Gage, I have to tell you that it is illegal to be shot into space in the same cryochamber as a person who is not legally a part of your family."

Gage pulled the backpack out of the cart and set it on the floor. "What are you saying?"

"I'm saying that double-wide cryochambers are reserved for parents and children and married couples. Due to legal restrictions and liability errors, you can't ride double unless you're legally wed."

Gage was familiar with the regulation. It was because of the possibility that the chamber would have to be ejected. Most often, a collection of cryochambers that were ejected at once in the same direction did not all make it to the same crash site. All of that meant that priority for larger cryochambers was always given to families so they could stay together in case of an emergency. He'd just forgotten all about the regulation because it never applied to his work.

"If you want to ride with a woman, you need to marry her." Marker put the machine forward. "All the forms have already been filled out with the information you provided at the front desk. All you have to do is voluntarily put your thumb on this red pad, have her do it too and you'll be married."

Gage looked at him oddly. "This is such a regular occurrence that you carry a machine to do it on your body?"

Marker rolled his eyes. "No. I went and got it because Chitta called me. Look, this doesn't have to be a big deal. We're unlikely to need the doublewide cryochamber for this flight and we're happy for you to take it. There's a divorce kiosk at the landing zone on Ganymede if you don't want to marry each other. And if you want to keep your girl a secret from the guy you're traveling with, you'd better sign quickly before he finishes using the toilet."

Gage took the machine, bent down, and opened the backpack. "Did you hear all that?"

"Yes," Iona said.

Gage looked into her honey eyes that peeked through the crack in the backpack. He swallowed and slid the machine into the opening.

A second later, she pushed it up through the crack and Gage took it.

She'd given her thumbprint on the bride's side. He looked at the machine for a moment before putting his thumbprint down beside hers.

"Congratulations," Marker said, his voice neither sarcastic nor celebratory. He probably didn't know who Iona was or why Gage was smuggling her around in a backpack. He probably didn't care. "Do you need me to lock you in or have you handled a cryochamber before?"

"I'm a pilot," Gage said, handing the handheld chapel back to Marker. "I could fly this ship if needed."

"That's what they all say. Can I leave you to lock down your buddy?"

"Yeah," Gage said and Marker walked away.

Gage leaned against the cryochamber and saw Iona still looking at him through the crack he'd left open in the backpack. "How are you hanging in there?"

"I'm a little excited," she whispered back.

“I bet.”

“You won’t be able to divorce me on Ganymede.”

Gage scratched his chin. “I know. And you’ll never be able to sell yourself again because married women can’t sign those kinds of contracts.”

She gasped, having not thought of that angle. “I wasn’t going to.”

Gage chuckled.

Heretic came out of the bathroom. “Okay, there was nothing to worry about in there,” he said, waving his hands dry.

“Well, get in,” Gage said. “I’ll do the lock up for you.”

Heretic leaned in and lowered his voice. “You don’t think anything weird will happen when we’re asleep, do you?”

Gage clenched his jaw for a second and then said again, “If anything does happen, it would have happened anyway. If we get to Ganymede alright, wanna go get our noses done together? A little cosmetic surgery will probably lower everyone’s interest in us.”

“But I like my nose,” Heretic said.

Gage opened the cryochamber. “You could slip in the shower. The doctor operating on you could have a stroke. Someone could crash into you. One of your kids could decide to turn on you. Any number of things could go wrong at any minute. Don’t think about them. Think about how you are out of that hole and soon you’ll be among the stars, with me.”

Heretic got into the cryochamber. “Hey Gage, do you know the order we were born?”

“There wasn’t any order,” Gage said. “We all came out of our tubes at once.”

“That’s not true. There was an order. The scientists tried to have us all come out at the same time, but we didn’t.”

Gage leaned on the lid of the cryochamber. “Okay, I’ll play this game. Who was first?”

“No one. A bunch of us did come out at first. In fact, all of us did, except you. You came out seven hours and seventeen minutes later.”

Gage stared. “What do you think that means?”

“That you’re slow as fuck.”

Gage closed the lid on him.

If Heretic was peering through the glass lid of his cryochamber, he would have seen something odd. He would have seen Gage put his backpack in the bottom of his double-wide cryochamber before he got in himself. The lid came down. The locks clicked into place.

If he had looked through his window without fogging it up, he would have seen slim hands press pink palms inside the glass of Gage’s chamber. He would have seen ankles and toes up in windows as Iona unfolded herself like a flower. A mass of pink tendrils would have appeared as a woman who was pink all over put her profile in view and showed the shadow of her upturned nose line against the glass, against the wall, making it look like there was more than one Iona. She stretched and stripped, sliding out of her sweater-jacket. In a moment, Gage’s outlines were mixed up with hers as body parts bumped the sides of the cryochamber.

If Heretic had got annoyed, or curious, and loomed over them to have a look, he wouldn’t have seen anything other than hazy dark shapes as the windows had entirely fogged up.

If he had been able to wipe the condensation clean, he would have seen their kiss that was still happening when the chamber filled with gas and they were frozen in that moment.

If Heretic had seen all that, he wouldn't have stayed to see more.

Chapter Thirty Three

Gage carried Iona on his back with her bare feet dangling off the ground through the recycling depot's main hall on Ganymede. She bounced on his back, much happier to be straddling him than riding in the box or the backpack.

"I still don't know why you bothered to keep it a secret from me," Heretic complained as they walked. "I wouldn't have snitched. I don't care if Benediction gets laid or not."

"This guy's prattle is worse than Leviticus'," Iona accused as they walked.

"Where are you going from here?" Gage asked Heretic. "I just had my wedding, so I'm on my way to my honeymoon."

"Really? You got married aboard the recycling vessel like a couple of spotters?"

"Yes, but now, we get a honeymoon!" Gage said jubilantly, except it was a bit too noisy and a few people turned their heads.

Actually, a lot of people turned their heads.

Iona clamped her hands over his mouth. "Don't be so noisy. We'll draw a crowd. I need shoes." She let go of his mouth. "I wanna go to my storage banks. If it's on the way, we'll take you with us, but we have to part ways after I get some fresh panties and some shoes. You get it? Right, Heretic?"

"I get it," he said, searching for the exit with his eyes. "How do we get out of here?"

"Did I just hear someone say they needed fresh panties?"

Gage stopped. Someone had stepped out in front of him. It was someone he felt he should have recognized but didn't. Iona slapped Gage on the shoulder and hissed for him to put her down.

"Sorry about that," she said, extending her hand like she wasn't pink as a bubblegum ball. "Please excuse us. We've just come from the wildest adventure on Io, Mr. Fox, and we need provisions."

"I can see that," Harrison Fox, the CEO of Excalibur Helocarriers, said as he noticed Iona's bare feet.

"What time is it, Mr. Fox?" Heretic smirked.

Iona elbowed him and returned a professional smile to her lips.

"Yes, I know," Harrison said, flicking his dark hair out of his face. "I'm actually here to meet you."

"You came to Ganymede to meet me?" Iona asked incredulously.

"I was here anyway, working out a deal at this recycling plant and when I found out that you would be landing here, I came to greet you... both of you."

"Both of us?" Gage asked.

"Yes. Several months ago, I was contacted by Madam Damsel from Sleeping Beauty Inc. Europa. She wanted to know if I was interested in buying out your contract with them, Gage. Shortly after you arrived on Io, your contract was canceled, and my opportunity to buy you from them was gone, but I am still interested in hiring you as an independent contractor."

Gage looked around like he didn't know where this was going. "Why?"

Harrison smiled. "I'm looking for a pilot to take shipments of helocarriers to Mars. It's a tough gig. Not too many pilots want to take on that kind of work because they need to be awake to navigate the asteroid field, but I thought you might be willing to do a few runs."

"I can't," Gage said immediately. "I just got married and..."

"If I can go along with him, we can do it," Iona intervened. "We did just get married, but we're looking for some alone time and outer space is a wonderful place for some peace and quiet."

Harrison looked quite stunned by Iona's request. "T-that would be fine," he stuttered. "Why don't you two get yourselves sorted and we'll talk about the necessary arrangements later? I know Iona has my contact info."

Harrison shook both their hands, gave Heretic a weird nod, and went to leave.

"Wait," Gage asked.

Harrison turned back.

"What kind of ship would I be piloting?"

"A Juggernaut III," Harrison replied.

Gage felt a weird glow spread over his body. It was an even more exciting ship than a Tank VII.

"Does that suit you?" the helocarrier designer asked.

"Yes. It suits me just fine." Gage nodded in pleasant delirium.

"Good. Iona, I would offer you a job, but you asked me not to, so I'll give you a little more time to recover before we put your talents to work. In the future, maybe we can find a way for the two of you to work together. Working with my wife was a really good fit for me. Maybe it will also be a good fit for the two of you."

Iona and Gage eyed each other suspiciously.

"I guess we have been working together," Iona said sheepishly.

"I guess we have," Gage replied.

"Well, we'll see how this first job works out. I look forward to hearing from you both."

Harrison smiled and went back to the cluster of coworkers who were waiting for him. Unless Iona was completely mistaken, she thought she saw his wife, Paige, standing among them.

Chapter Thirty Four

Deep in space, Iona sat by a window and looked out at the stars. She wore a thin cotton robe and a different pair of wooden sandals. She could see the asteroid belt ahead. They would reach it in a few hours. Actually, she hadn't been awake that long.

Harrison had fixed up the Juggernaut III to be a little more honeymoon worthy than it had previously been, so a bedroom had been added. Apparently, Paige had gotten involved too. Who knew the two of them had such an interest in interior decorating? What they put together was much nicer than what had been aboard the Cannonball III and that place was supposed to make a girl feel like a princess. All that place did was leave Iona with this crushing pressure to be as perfect as she could be like it was her duty. The accommodations aboard the Juggernaut III didn't make her feel like a princess. Instead, she felt like relaxing. Like there was no duty that needed her attention, no one she needed to escape or hide from, and she didn't need to be pretty for anyone (though that would have been tough to accomplish if they didn't think pink girls were cute).

It turned out that Gage was not a fan of common seduction tactics or the stuff that most men liked in the bedroom. All the things that traditionally turned men on, turned him off. All Iona had to do for him was roll over and kiss him softly and he was raring to go.

Iona remembered all the fuss that had been put into her appearance to make her good enough for rich men and she felt like she had been a hamster running on a wheel. It felt like she had to put a lot of effort into it, but all that work got her nowhere.

When the truth was that real love didn't require any effort at all.

She sent a letter to Sleeping Beauty Inc. explaining that she would not be back and received a form letter in reply. Ninth most expensive model in the Jovian region and they sent her a form letter?

She shook it off. It didn't matter. There was still so much life to live.

And there was Gage. He had just had a shower and he was walking from the bathroom to the closet to get some clothes. He had to navigate the asteroid belt soon, but as he made that walk, aside from the towel across his shoulders, he was completely naked.

It turned out that he was just as perfect under his pants as she'd imagined.

Gage saw Iona looking at him across the room. She was sitting in a wide window seat that had obviously once been nothing but steel and bolts, but now had a plush cushion fitted to the area. She wore a thin cotton robe that she didn't seem to realize was see-through. It hung open with a wide slit showing her white leg all the way to the curve of her hip bone and gaped a little at her chest.

Seeing her there, he had never been more satisfied. He could never be more satisfied, except maybe if...

"Have I ever made love to you against a window?"

She shook her head.

He dropped the towel he had around his neck and for once, he was glad he was awake. "I think there's time."

THE END

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