

# Beauty of Ares

A model from Sleeping Beauty Inc. will do anything.



Stephanie Van Orman

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# **BEAUTY OF ARES**

**SLEEPING BEAUTY INC. BOOK 3**

Stephanie Van Orman

## WELCOME TO SLEEPING BEAUTY INC.

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

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

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

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## Chapter One

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

No event came.

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

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

Her friend scrolled to the next picture.

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

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

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

It wasn't personal.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The tables had turned.

She was a parasite.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Then the truth came out.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The man was Vantz Bloomberg.

Lisbet covered her mouth.

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

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

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

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

Vantz was in the newsreels fighting about it every day.

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“How old is he?”

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

Name: Vantz Bloomburg

Age: 32

Eye Color: N/A

Hair Color: N/A

Height: N/A

Weight: N/A

Profession: Head Terratologist on Mars

Previous Marriages: None.

Sexual History: N/A

Sexual Preference: N/A

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Why had they never told her?

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

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

That was when the bile bubbled in her throat.

She was kidding herself.

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

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

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

## Chapter Two

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

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

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

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

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

“I’ve got you,” a woman called from behind the counter.

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

“I’ve got something good,” Veronica yelled back.

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

From behind the curtain, she heard Quincy and Veronica.

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

“But... she needs to feel special,” Quincy hissed back.

“She’s not going to feel special. She’s the excuse we need, and she has to hurry.”

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

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

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

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

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

Every dress has a purpose. Its job is to highlight a particular part of a woman’s body. A dress with a slit gives away the leg. A dress with an empire waist gives away the solar plexus. Many dresses give away the shoulders. A dress that gives away everything is not a dress, it is lingerie.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Can Vantz wait that long?" Lisbet asked.

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

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

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

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

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

"No. Vantz may be a public figure, but he's not a *public* public figure. You'll have a marriage certificate to sign on your arrival in order to keep his end of the deal with your father. It should

be an occasion almost identical to the one we had today, except you'll be able to see the real Vantz Bloomberg. I envy you. Anyone who has seen him has had to sign a non-disclosure agreement vowing to never tell a soul what they've seen. And you get to meet him!"

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

"How is that?" the makeup artist asked.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

She clenched her jaw.

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

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

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

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

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

The lid fell closed.

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

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

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

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

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

Time passed.

She breathed in hard.

Warm lips were on hers.

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

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

The feeling lasted thirty seconds before the kiss ended.

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

He was long gone.

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



## Chapter Three

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

Lisbet accepted it gratefully.

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Exactly,” he said, wanting to sound positive. “But it’s always a good idea to keep his exact location a secret. A lot of people want to kill him. You arrived at a perfect time to give him an alibi and this castle is well protected. It’s helpful if everyone thinks he’s here with you. He left you a marriage certificate and we’ll take your wedding pictures to include in a press release.”

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